

Introduction to Dutch folk tales

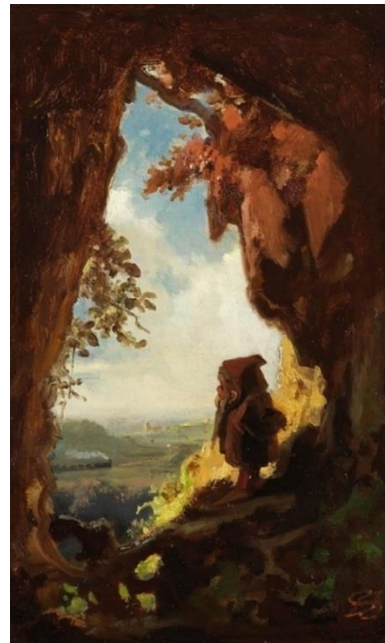


Welcome, my name is Jack Stoop and I am a storyteller. Tonight I will tell you some Dutch folktales and give you some background information about them.

Every country in the world has its own stock of myths, legends, fairy tales and folktales and most of them are centuries old. They have been passed on from generation to generation and are embedded in the soul of the country and its people. With the ongoing urbanisation and the coming of radio and later TV it was feared that these tales would be lost for ever and therefore in the late 19th and early 20th century they were collected and recorded by folklorists and written down. It is thanks to them that these tales are still available to us nowadays. We even see nowadays that there is an increase of interest in these old tales and that the art of storytelling is becoming more and more popular, in spite of internet and Netflix.

I will now tell you some folktales of The Netherlands that will show you the richness and variety of the culture of the Dutch peasantry that told these stories by the hearthfire during long, cold and dark winter evenings.

Let me begin with some stories that are situated in the province of Noord Brabant, the very area we are in right now. Long ago this was a rural area with a lot of heath and forest. Scattered in the landscape are lots of burial mounds, little hills where people buried their dead thousands of years ago. To the people living here these little hills were strange and frightening features in the landscape which they tried to avoid. According to legends they were inhabited by little creatures called 'kabouters', goblins in English. They looked just like humans but were only about half a meter big, they liked to smoke pipe, drink beer and peas were their favourite food. The word 'kabouter' means 'house protector' and overall they were a friendly lot.



Kabouters used to help the local farmers with their work. If there was some unfinished work the farmers used to put a dish of cooked peas outside the door at night and then the kabouters would finish the job during the night. And they didn't care whether they had to plow a complete field, to milk the cows or repair some broken tools, they could do it all. The only condition was that they were able to work uninterrupted and without somebody watching.

But there are always people that are more curious than is good for them and so a farmer from Nunen decided that he wanted to see the kabouters working. He left some unfinished work outside his front door and placed a plate of pea soup there as well. Then he waited behind the door until he heard a lot of rumour outside. He was sure that the kabouters were working and he started to peep through the keyhole of his door. And indeed, he saw the kabouters working.

But after several minutes he heard a kabouter saying: someone is watching as, put out is his light. And at that same moment a kabouter stuck a long straw in the keyhole and blinded the curious farmer in his left eye. After that they never helped on his farm again.

Not every farmer was punished for disturbing the kabouters at their work though. In Oerle kabouters were doing odd jobs on a farm at night when the farmer smelt smoke and ran outside to put out the fire when he discovered that kabouters were cooking a cat at his haystack. He panicked and yelled at the kabouters that they were putting his farm at risk. One of the kabouters calmed him down and showed him that their fire did no damage to the haystack and would also do no harm to his farm. The farmer was at ease after that and returned inside with both his eyes still working.

It also happened sometimes that people would meet kabouters on the heath or in the woods. One day a traveling salesman did meet a kabouter near a burial mound and the little creature asked him a bit of tobacco for his pipe. The salesman shared his last tobacco with him and the kabouter thanked him and said that he from now on always would have enough to smoke as much as he wanted. And indeed, the tobaccosack of the salesman never emptied since and was always filled with tobacco of the finest quality from a factory in Eindhoven.

But alas, nowadays there are no kabouters left in Brabant. One evil day a hunter from Hoogeloon was hunting rabbits on the heath near the kabouterberg, the Goblin Hill, a large burial mound in which the king of kabouters lived, Kyrië he was called. The hunter was on the heath when in the distance he saw something moving behind a bush, he thought it was a rabbit and took a shot. But instead of a rabbit he did shoot Kyrië, the king of kabouters. That night there were a lot of people, hunters, poachers, traveling salesman and farmers who heard a calling "Kyrië is dead" and they saw large groups of kabouters traveling crying to the east. And after that night nobody ever saw a kabouter in Brabant again.

Stories about kabouters living in burial mounds are typical for Brabant, in other provinces they are less common. In the provinces of Drenthe and Overijssel burial mounds are the living space of 'witte wieven', white women in English. They are mentioned from the 16th century onwards and a reverend Picard writes in 1660 that people from his flock visit them at burial mounds to consult them about the future, for healing and to solve fertility problems.

The witte wieven were less likeable than kabouters and people were scared of them. Once, a farmmaid from a small farm outside Oldenzaal went to the meadows to milk the cows but she never returned. People went searching for her but without success. She was captured by the witte wieven and had to work for them in their home inside a burial mound. There she did all the housekeeping, cleaning and cooking for the witte wieven. Never was she allowed outside until one day the food was running out and one of the witte wieven wanted a piece of cheese. They told the maid to get some on the market of Oldenzaal but warned her not to tell any human being what had happened to her because she would die if she did. The girl went to the market in Oldenzaal and talked to no one but then she saw a big stone lying on the market square. She went to the stone and told it her full story. So did she break the magic of the witte wieven and was able to break free and go home to the farm she came from.



Another story tells how a young lad from somewhere in Overijssel was bragging to his mates that he was not afraid of the witte wieven. They dared him to visit them that night and to throw a roasting spit to them. That night, scared as he was, he mounted his horse, took a roasting spit and went to the hill where the witte wieven lived. Carefully he approached them and then threw the roasting spit towards them and actually hitting one. "Witte wieven, here you have a roasting spit, try to catch something to roast with it." He yelled, turned his horse and fled as fast as he could.

The witte wieven followed him off course and nearly got him. He was just able to enter the stable of his farm and close the gate when he heard a loud bang on the gate. The next day he saw his roasting spit stuck in the middle of the gate causing a big crack in it. Ever since, the farms of that region have mark on the middle of their gates that protect them against the witte wieven.

So far, I have told stories about magical creatures that live in strange, manmade landscape elements as burial mounds, but there are also lots of stories connected with natural features of the landscape like lakes, hills and trees. So is it said that the Uddelermeer, lake Uddel, came into existence because the Germanic thundergod Thor threw his hammer there from high in the sky. The Broerdijk, a small hill in the city of Nijmegen is made by a giant that emptied his wooden shoes of sand. And so there are many stories about features in the landscape. Now I will tell you some stories about trees because trees always had a special meaning to humans, think only of the trees of life or world trees from different mythologies.

In the wood near Bladel stand a beech tree called the heksenboom, the witches tree. It has large branches that are wildly twisted as if it is angry or trying to get rid of an annoying wasp. This tree is said to be planted on the grave of Zwarte Kaat, Black Kate, a witch and leader of a gang of robbers who terrorised the region around 1700. With her gang she attacked, plundered and burned lone farms and monasteries and at one time she even kidnapped the newborn child of the landlord Dirk ten Vorsel for ransom. He gathered his man and hunted her down and eventually caught her and had her executed. During her trail and execution she acted very angry and aggressive and the people of Bladel buried her in the forest and planted the tree on top of her grave to prevent her spirit from rising from the grave.

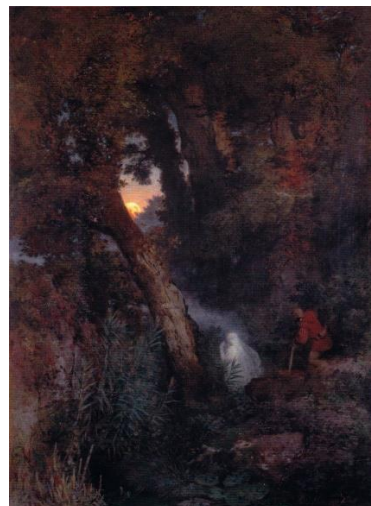


The next story is about a place in the forest near Drie, a small village on the Veluwe; a large wooded area in the province of Gelderland. At that specific place in the forest are the trees different from other places, their trunks are not straight but twisted and twirling around each other as if they were dancing. The story goes that on that very spot there used to be a farm on which a very greedy farmer lived with his daughter. This farmer decided that his daughter should marry the son of a rich farmer from a village nearby and to celebrate the engagement he gave a big feast. All the food and drinks came from his own farm so it did not cost him much money, but for the music he needed somebody so he promised a poor minstrel some small cash if he would play on his violin. The minstrel did so but afterwards the greedy farmer refused to pay him and said that he first should play at the actual wedding in order to get his wages. The minstrel was angry off course and left the farm. A little further on the road he met an old woman who asked him why he was so angry and he told her what happened. The old woman told him to come to her first before he went to play at the weddingfeast and so he did. She asked his violin and mumbled some magical spells over it and gave it back to the minstrel. She told him that he must keep playing until dawn without stopping and he went to the wedding and started playing. All the guests went on the dancefloor and the minstrel kept playing and as long as he played the dancers could not stop dancing. After hours and hours when the first rays of sunlight came through the trees they all changed into trees. And so they came to be known as the dancing trees of Drie.

As we have seen folktales connect you with the landscape and nature of a country, but they also relate to its history. The next story is about a battle that was fought in 1574 during the 80 year war in which The Netherlands broke free from the Spanish king. It was fought on the Mookerheide, a big heath area near Mook in the north of the province Limburg between the Spanish army and the army of the Dutch dukes of Nassau. It was a big defeat for the dukes, they lost about 3000 soldiers while the Spanish only lost about 300 men.

According to local legend this was because the dukes of Nassau committed a terrible blasphemy a few weeks before the battle. Their protestant army claimed a catholic monastery as their headquarters and there they held counsel about tactics and strategy. During this counsel they ate all food and drank all wine of the monastery and then demanded that they were served the wine and bread that the monks used during holy mass. The abbot refused and told the dukes and generals that it would be blasphemy to eat that but they forced him and ate the lot of it. When during battle the dukes and generals saw how their troops were butchered by the Spanish army they regretted their sacrilege but it was too late. They gave the command to withdraw to the west without knowing that there was a big swamp in that direction and as much of their men lost their lives in there as in battle.

After the battle peace returned to the Mookerheide, but only during daytime. At night the shepherds and a traveling salesman reported to hear strange noises and to see strange lights moving above the heath. These were of course the restless souls of fallen soldiers. After a while people did not dare to go on the heath anymore and they went to the local vicar for advice.



He went on the heath on a full moon night to see for himself what was happening. And after a while he start hearing strange noises and seeing strange lights and then he also saw a big white human shape with a big sword coming towards him. He fell on his knees and started praying to the virgin Mary and to his big surprise (and relief) she appeared. With a bucket of holy water and a big brush she went to the white shape with the sword and she blessed it. The shape disappeared and so did the holy virgin. The vicar said a prayer of thanks and went home. The next day he ordered the local sculptor and described how the holy virgin appeared to him and ordered to make a statue of her. When the statue was finished the vicar had a small chapel build on the heath and placed the statue in it. And since there are no more strange sounds, no wandering lights or ghosts on the Mookerheide.

Folktales are also used to teach people ethics and morals and warn them for the consequences of bad behaviour. In the story about the dancing trees of Drie we saw that the greedy farmer was punished for his refusal to pay the minstrel for his music by being changed into a tree. This next story is about three brothers that cheated with diceplaying and lose their souls as punishment. The original story is from the province of Groningen, in the very north of our country, but it could have happened anywhere.

Once upon a time there were three brothers that were very lazy, they hated to work and preferred to drink beer and play dice in pubs and inns. And that was how they made their living. They all had two dices that were manipulated in a way that the brothers could throw any amount of points they wished. If they wanted to throw a 2 they did throw 2 and if they wanted to throw a 6 they just threw a 6.

With their false dices they travelled from pub to pub and from inn to inn and they allways found someone to play with them and after a night of playing their victim had lost all his money. One night, it was all hallows eve, they had just won all the money from such local lad who had just received his wages and they were celebrating their spoils when a strange gentlemen entered the inn. He was tall, wore a long black coat with silver buttons and a big hat. This gentleman ordered a beer and paid the innkeeper with a golden coin. Then he went to the table where the three brothers were sitting with their dice still on the table and asked if they would like to play dice with him. The brothers agreed off course and the four of them started to play. After a couple of hours the strange gentlemen had lost all his money to the brothers and they wanted to stop playing with him.

But the gentleman said that he would like to play a last game and that if he would lose the brothers would get his coat with the silver buttons and that if he should win he could ask one thing of all three of them. The brothers agreed and threw their dice, they all threw a six. But then the strange gentleman also threw a six. The brothers started to get a bit nervous but again threw their dice and again the all three threw six. The oldes brother said to the gentlemen: "you cant throw better than this, we all have twelve points". But the gentleman just smiled, took his dice in his hand and said, "thirteen it must be, thirteen it will be" and he threw his dice with a lot of force on the table. Winth such force that the dice broke and there were to parts of the dice on the table, one part showing six and one part showing one. "Thirteen it is" said the strange gentleman and the brothers were flabbergasted. The gentleman stood up from the table and the brothers saw that underneath his long coat there were no shoes but hoofs, het took of his hat and between his black hair there were some horns visible. "And now I demand your souls" he said. At the very moment the three brothers dropped dead at the table and the gentleman left the inn.

There are a lot of folktales in which the devil punishes wrongdoers but fortunately there are also a lot of stories in which the devil is outsmarted by devout people with the help of god.

So far we have seen that folktales can relate to the landscape of a country, to non human beings living there, to history and to ethics and morale; but folktales can also reflect the deepest fear of people. In the case of The Netherlands that fear is the water. This country lies for a big part below sealevel and other parts have a permanent threat of being flooded by rivers. So my last story is about het Verdrongen Land van Saeftinghe, the drowned land of Saeftinghe, that you will be visiting tomorrow. This land was drowned with a big flood in November 1570 and only the tower of the village Namen did stay above waterlevel.

This happened because some fishermen from Namen captured a mermaid in their fishingnets once. They found this mermaid very beautiful and wanted to bring her to land. She begged them not to do this and to let her go but they refused. The fisherman did allways spend long times in their boats away from their wives and they had their way with the poor screaming mermaid. And when they were ashore again they sold her to a circus that locked her in a cage and put her on show, everybody could pay some money to see a real mermaid. After a couple of months the poor thing died. But that is not the end of the story because after her death another mermaid, a male one this time, appeared in the water of the Namen harbour and he shouted "Namen, het zal je berouwe dat je geroofd hebt mijne vrouwe. Namen zal vergaan en alleen de toren blijft staan!" In English: namen, you will be sorry that you took my wife, Namen will go down and only the tower will remain. After these words the mermaidman left and indeed, during a big storm a couple of weeks later the town of namen and its surroundings were flooded and only the churchtower remained above water.



With this story I end my introduction to Dutch folktales. I have tried to give you a glimpse of the diversity and richness of the stories The Netherlands have to offer and I hope you will read and hear a lot more of them while you are here. For now, my storytelling is done and I am very curious about yours!

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