# FUNERARY PRACTICES IN THE NETHERLANDS

**Funerary International Series**

**Series Editor: Julie Rugg, University of York, UK**

The study of mortality is now an established academic endeavour which is rapidly expanding in scale and in disciplinary reach. One missing element is a repository of basic facts about funerary practice in each country and the broader legal, governance and denominational frameworks for those practices which might serve to set more detailed research in context.

This book series remedies this absence by producing country-specific monographs, with texts providing a standard framework of questions, which ensures even coverage, aids international comparison, fosters international linkages across the academic community and inspires new research directions. These texts will be a valuable resource for researchers across the humanities and social sciences concerned with death and funerary customs.

**Previous titles in this series**

Julie Rugg and Brian Parsons, *Funerary Practices in England and Wales*

**Forthcoming in this series**

Olga Nešporová, *Funerary Practices in the Czech Republic*
Christoph Streb, *Funerary Practices in Germany*
Aleksandra Pavićević, *Funerary Practices in Serbia*
Maija Butters and Ilona Pajari, *Funerary Practices in Finland*

# FUNERARY PRACTICES IN THE NETHERLANDS

BY

BRENDA MATHIJSSEN
*University of Groningen, The Netherlands*

CLAUDIA VENHORST
*Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands*


United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2019



**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78769-876-5 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-78769-873-4 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-78769-875-8 (Epub)


ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank

# LIST OF IMAGES

Chapter 8

# LIST OF TABLES AND CHARTS

This page intentionally left blank

# PREFACE

Death is inevitable to each of us and to those we hold dear. It is a matter of existential concern. People's experiences with death are highly diverse, and so are their funerary practices. They are influenced by regional customs, legal frameworks and personal preferences. Moreover, our responses to loss are shaped by our age, ethnicity, class, gender and religion, as well as by the type and time of a death, and our relationship to the deceased.

People's varied experiences with death challenge researchers who want to study funerary repertoires. How does one describe a miscellaneous field of practices, beliefs and experiences? How can one grasp its changes over time? Many researchers, including us, solve this difficulty by bypassing it. We situate our specific (Dutch) context in a larger, seemingly homogeneous one: Europe or the West. Rather than unpicking the notion of 'Western' death practices and its political implications, we have created a myth of Western funerary culture.

In the writing and structuring of this book, the notion of Western death ways proved problematic. It has, for instance, been impossible to translate some funerary practices and legislations to a (partially) non-Dutch and English-speaking audience, without compromising on the cultural aspects and meanings. At many occasions we discussed whether we should refer to the 'Dutch Burial and Cremation Act' or the

'Corpse Disposal Act', and whether we should speak of autopsies and sections while the Dutch word *lijkschouwing* clearly indicates that the coroner primarily observes the corpse, rather than dissecting it.

The Funerary International Series provides accessible information on funerary practices in different (European) countries, and thereby aims to modestly unpick the notion of 'Western' funerary culture. This book does so for the Netherlands. It provides a concise introduction to contemporary funerary practices, and their historic, geographic, demographic, (multi)cultural and political context.

Although we have made a selection of funerary practices, as well as some simplifications to provide a clear and manageable overview, we want to emphasise the dynamics of funerary practices and the diversity of society. The Dutch funerary landscapes have been shaped by a Protestant majority in the North and a Roman Catholic majority in the South, by the segregation of society in pillars, by the arrival of migrants from the former colonies of Surinam and Indonesia, and from the Caribbean territories, as well as by the arrival of guest workers and refugees from the peripheries of Europe and elsewhere, by individualisation and secularisation, by emancipation movements, and by technical innovation. Thus although 'the' Dutch funerary culture does not exist, we look forward to offering you some insight into it.

Brenda Mathijssen and Claudia Venhorst

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been written with the support of many. We are especially grateful to all of our research participants. Many of you have shared your personal stories of loss, of conducting funerals and of experiencing bereavement. You have taught us about funerary practices and frameworks, and more importantly, about the associated emotions, creativity and resilience. Some of you have invited us to conduct fieldwork at funeral homes, cemeteries and crematoria, and have shown what it means to work in this field. Thank you for your openness. We hope that this book resonates with your own professional experiences, and provides a useful source in your future practice.

We are also deeply indebted to our current and former colleagues at the Department of Comparative Religion and the Centre for Thanatology at Radboud University Nijmegen; the Department of Comparative Study of Religion at the University of Groningen; the Centre for Death and Life Studies at Durham University; and the Department of Human Geography at the University of Reading. We especially like to thank Eric Venbrux, Peter Nissen and Thomas Quartier for supporting us from the very start and for introducing us to the fields of Death Studies and Religious Studies. Julie, a special thanks to you for sticking to the plan of

making a Funerary International Series, and for entrusting the Dutch volume to us.

Finally, our deep gratitude is extended to Philippa Grand, Sophie Darling and Rachel Ward for their support and patience throughout the writing and editing process.

# MAP OF THE NETHERLANDS

This page intentionally left blank

# CHAPTER 1

# THE NETHERLANDS: AN INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. OVERVIEW

The Netherlands, called *Nederland* in Dutch, is a rather small and densely populated country in North Western Europe. It borders Germany at the east and Belgium to the south. The country is often (incorrectly) referred to as 'Holland', the historic name of just two of the current 12 provinces: Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland, Utrecht, Zeeland, Brabant, Limburg, Gelderland, Overijssel, Flevoland, Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen. Within the provinces 355 municipalities can be found, forming the lowest level of governance. The municipality provides services and policy at a local level. Together with three island territories in the Caribbean (Bonaire, Saint Eustatius and Saba), these provinces make up the Kingdom of the Netherlands (see map on page xxi).

The Netherlands is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. Its central government is seated in The Hague and Amsterdam is its capital city. It is part of the European Union, the Euro-zone and the Schengen Area. It qualifies as a

welfare state which provides universal healthcare, public education, infrastructure and social benefits. *Nederland* or 'lower land' refers to the fact that more than a quarter of the country is situated below sea level, and the rest a mere metre above. The landscape is moulded by canals, rivers and lakes. The fight against water is of all times and ongoing, influencing many day-to-day practices. High groundwater levels often complicate the burying of the dead, demanding innovative and costly solutions and putting pressure on available burial space in certain areas.

With 17.2 million inhabitants on 41,500 $km^2$ (of which 33,700 $km^2$ actual land), the Netherlands is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Well over 90% of the population is living in cities. The four largest cities – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht – and their surrounding areas form the so-called *Randstad* metropolis: the densely populated (8.2 million inhabitants in 2018) economic heart of the country. The mixed-market economy is among the top economies in the world, and the Netherlands is the world's second largest exporter of food and agricultural products due to intensive and innovative agriculture.

## 1.2. PILLARS AND POLDERS

The Netherlands was long deeply divided along religious lines. From the nineteenth century onwards, this led to a policy of pillarisation, causing and facilitating a politico-denominational segregation of society. Each segment or pillar – Protestant, Roman Catholic, Social Democratic – could clearly be differentiated by means of their own media, political parties, leisure clubs, schools, healthcare providers and funerary services. The institutional segregation emancipated the various groups and also reduced personal contacts between the members of

different pillars to a minimum. The liberals who fundamentally opposed the segmentation ironically ended up in a (rather small) pillar of their own. As the government accommodated the pillarised system, they also (probably unintentionally) helped to emancipate the working and lower middle classes from elite control.

The particular experience of the Second World War – the Dutch stayed neutral during the First World War, and the last 'war' they were involved with was the so-called Ten Day's Campaign against Belgium in 1831 – instigated a desire to renew the political system and break down the segmentation. The process of 'depillarisation' began, and turned on steam from the 1960s onwards. Today remnants of the former policy are still visible, particularly in the media and in education. Public television, for example, is organised through pillarised broadcasting companies, as are several newspapers. Also, the historic patchwork of political parties and the consequent multiple party coalition governments has become common practice in the Netherlands. The desire to break down the segmentation has also grounded the Dutch socio-economic model of consensus decision-making, the so-called *poldermodel*, common good throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

## 1.3. MIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Netherlands further diversified. As the pillars crumbled, church membership dropped and individualisation processes accelerated. Moreover, a variety of religious and cultural groups arrived in the Netherlands, for example, through guest worker programmes or after the dismantling of colonial administrative services, for example, in Indonesia. These migrants brought

with them a variety of customs and practices, including funeral repertoires that had to be reinvented in view of this new context, where they found themselves in a minority position.

Migration has always been part of Dutch history.[1] Immigration spiked from the sixteenth century onwards, when tens of thousands of Protestants (from the Southern Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe) found a safe haven in the Northern Netherlands. Portuguese and Spanish Jews, fleeing the Spanish inquisition, were followed by German- or Yiddish-speaking Jews and French Huguenots in the seventeenth century. These were highly prosperous times in the Netherlands, making it attractive for large numbers of labour migrants from (what is now) Germany and Eastern Europe. Emigration was rather low. Certain Protestant groups, like the Mennonites, were in open conflict with the rather strict Calvinists and searched for a new home elsewhere. Sailors and soldiers were recruited to support the trade activities of the Dutch West India Company, a company that was instrumental in the short-lived Dutch colonisation of the Americas, and the Dutch East India Company that developed commercial and industrial activities in South East Asia.

Whereas there was little immigration in the nineteenth century, numbers gradually increased in the twentieth century as people became richer, travel became faster and more affordable, and international trade expanded. Between 1946 and 1963 about 400,000 people arrived from the Dutch East Indies, as they were unable to stay after the proclamation of Indonesian Independence in 1945 and its recognition by the

[1]For detailed information on five centuries of migration to and from the Netherlands: Obdeijn, H., & Schrover, M. (2008). *Komen en gaan. Immigratie en emigratie in Nederland vanaf 1550*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker.

Dutch government and the UN in 1949.[2] At about the same time, about half a million people left the Netherlands to find a better (and safer) future in Canada and Australia, but also in New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil and the United States. Between 1960 and 1974, 150,000 'guest workers', mainly from Turkey and Morocco, were recruited for industrial labour to support the rapidly growing Dutch economy.[3] Due to family reunification their number continued to increase after 1974.

In anticipation of the independence of Surinam in 1975, many – mainly Hindustani and Javanese – migrated to the Netherlands. Inhabitants of Suriname and the Dutch Antilles were granted Dutch nationality in 1954 and were free to relocate within the Dutch Kingdom. Also after independence large numbers of Surinamese (predominantly Afro-Surinamese) continued to immigrate to attend higher education and to reunite with family. Today, Suriname has a population of 556,485 and 351,681 people of Suriname descent are living in the Netherlands.[4]

From the 1990s onwards, war and famine caused a rising number of refugees to settle in the Netherlands, for example, from (former) Yugoslavia, Congo, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and more recently from Syria.[5] They do share migration motives and experiences but are of diverse national, cultural and religious backgrounds. In 2018, 23% of the Dutch population has a so-called migration

[2]Obdeijn and Schrover (2008), pp. 229–248.
[3]Obdeijn and Schrover (2008), p. 284.
[4]Obdeijn and Schrover (2008), p. 255; CBS. (2018). Retrieved from https://statline.cbs.nl/Statweb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=71090NED&D1=0&D2=0&D3=0&D4=7&D5=1-2&D6=96%2c108&VW=T
[5]Obdeijn and Schrover (2008), p. 328.

background (see Table 1.1).[6] The migration balance – the number of people who settled in the Netherlands minus residents who left the Netherlands to settle elsewhere – was 80,665 in 2017.

## 1.4. RELIGION IN NUMBERS

In 2015, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) found that 50.1% of the adult population declared to be not religiously affiliated. Christians comprised 43.8% of the total population and were divided between Catholics with 23.7% and the members of the Protestant Church of the Netherlands with 15.5%, members of other Christian denominations were 4.6%. Muslims comprised 4.9% of the total population, Hindus 0.6%, Buddhists 0.4% and Jews 0.1% (see Table 1.2).[7]

As Dutch society has become super-diverse, a wide variety of ideas and practices have emerged both in- and outside religious and ideological movements. These include 'new' perspectives on dying, death and grief. People actively look for funerary practices that suit the current time and circumstances.

[6]Retrieved from https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/background/2018/47/population. Accessed on March 30, 2019; the CBS defines a person with a migration background as a 'person of whom at least one parent was born abroad. A distinction is made between persons born abroad (first-generation) and persons born in the Netherlands (second-generation)'. See https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/our-services/methods/definitions?tab=p#id=person-with-a-migration-background. Accessed on March 30, 2019.

[7]Schmeets, H. (2016). *De religieuze kaart van Nederland, 2010-2015*. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. Retrieved from https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2016/51/de-religieuze-kaart-van-nederland-2010-2015.

**Table 1.1. Migration in the Netherlands, 2018.**

| | Migration Background[a] | First Generation | Second Generation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total population | 17,181,084 | | |
| With migration background | 3,971,859 | 2,079,329 | 1,892,530 |
| Western[b] | 1,729,016 | 836,178 | 892,838 |
| Non-Western[c] | 2,242,843 | 1,243,151 | 999,692 |
| **Country of origin** | | | |
| Turkey | 404,459 | 191,513 | 212,946 |
| Morocco | 396,539 | 169,018 | 227,521 |
| Indonesia | 361,594 | 100,922 | 260,672 |
| Germany | 354,136 | 105,355 | 248,781 |
| Surinam | 351,681 | 176,412 | 175,269 |
| Belgium | 118,725 | 45,492 | 73,233 |
| Poland | 173,050 | 134,999 | 38,051 |
| United Kingdom | 88,390 | 49,358 | 39,032 |
| Iraq | 61,255 | 43,864 | 17,391 |
| Italy | 53,703 | 31,375 | 22,328 |

*Sources*: CBS. (2019). *Population and population dynamics by month, 1995-2018.* Retrieved from https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/en/dataset/37943eng/table?dl=1ECD4; CBS. (2019). *Immi- en emigratie; leeftijd (31 dec.), burgerlijke staat, geboorteland.* Retrieved from https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/03742/table?ts=1554047997040

*Notes:* [a]Migration background refers to the country with which a person has the closest ties, based on his/her parents' country of birth or his/her own country of birth. [b]Person originating from a country in Europe (excluding Turkey), North America and Oceania, or from Indonesia or Japan. [c]Person originating from a country in Africa, South America or Asia (excl. Indonesia and Japan) or from Turkey.

**Table 1.2. Religious Affiliation in the Netherlands: Historical Development, 1830–2015.**

| Year | Protestants[a] | Roman Catholics | Jews | Muslims | Other Christians/ Other Denominations | No Religious Affiliation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1830 | 59.1 | 40.8 | 1.8 | – | 0.1 | – |
| 1869 | 61.3 | 36.6 | 1.9 | – | 0.1 | – |
| 1899 | 60.0 | 35.3 | 2.0 | – | 0.4 | 2.3 |
| 1920 | 53.8 | 35.8 | 1.7 | – | 1.0 | 7.8 |
| 1930 | 46.3 | 36.5 | 1.4 | – | 1.4 | 14.4 |
| 1947 | 42.3 | 38.6 | 0.1 | – | 1.9 | 17.1 |
| 1960 | 40.7 | 40.5 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 18.3 |
| 1971 | 35.9 | 40.5 | 0.1 | 0.4 | 0.3 | 23.6 |
| 1980 | 30 | 38 | – | 1.7[b] | 5 | 26 |
| 1990 | 26 | 33 | – | 3.1[b] | 6 | 38 |
| 2000 | 21 | 32 | – | 4.4[b] | 8 | 40 |
| 2010 | 17.9 | 27.3 | 0.1 | 4.5 | 5.1 | 45.3 |
| 2015 | 15.5 | 23.7 | 0.1 | 4.9 | 5.6 | 50.1 |

*Sources:* Schmeets, H. (2016). *De religieuze kaart van Nederland, 2010-2015*. Den Haag: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. Retrieved from https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/publicatie/2016/51/de-religieuze-kaart-van-nederland-2010-2015; Volkstellingen (1795–1971), www.volkstellingen.nl; CBS. (2015). *Kerkelijke gezindte en kerkbezoek 18492017*, retrieved from https://statline.cbs.nl/Statweb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=37944&D1=0-5&D2=a&HDR=T&STB=G1&VW=T; Buijs, F., & Rath, J. (2002). *Muslims in Europe: The state of research. IMISCOE Working Paper.* Amsterdam: IMES; Stoffels, H. & Walinga, P. (2005). 'Ontwikkelingen in de ledenaantallen van een aantal Nederlandse kerkgenootschappen (tabel)'. In: SCP (Ed.). *De sociale staat van Nederland.* Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
*Notes*: Numbers indicate percentages. [a]People identified with the Nederlands Hervormde Kerk, Gereformeerde Kerk Nederland or Protestantse Kerk Nederland; all are members of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. [b]These estimates are based on census data focusing on migration background rather than religion. Therefore, they have limitations. In 2006, the CSB adopted a new approach to calculate religious affiliations.