

WITCHCRAFT IN THE NETHERLANDS

from the fourteenth to the twentieth century

Edited by Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Willem Frijhoff
Translation Rachel M.J. van der Wilden-Fall

 Universitaire Pers Rotterdam

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FOUR CENTURIES OF FRISIAN WITCH DOCTORS

Willem de Blécourt

Witchcraft attributions can be traced in European societies from the Middle Ages into the twentieth century. The witch doctor played an important role in diagnosing illness as the result of witchcraft and in implicating the culprits. In the Netherlands most witch doctors were men. They confirmed existing suspicions about a witch's identity, even identifying them by name, and provided remedies against bewitchments. Thus, understanding how they operated and what their impact was provides important insight into the tradition of witchcraft as an explanation of illness and other adversities. A comprehensive study of this nature has not yet been done.¹

The history of witch doctors entails a variety of perspectives. A hint of this is already apparent in the terminology. Disenchantment specialists were normally called *duivelbanner*, or exorcist, although during the period under discussion here they rarely drove out any devils. Once in a rare while they were called *toverdokter*, i.e., witch doctor. When priests acted as disenchantment specialists, from the bewitched person's point of view, they were witch doctors, while they viewed themselves as exorcists (see Chapter 12).

Over the centuries Frisian witch doctors have played an important role in witchcraft in the Northern Netherlands. The current picture of them derives mainly from published material and is still incomplete; a more thorough and systematic study of existing sources might supplement and modify this image. The material on Frisian witch doctors spans four centuries.² The following study deals with 100-year periods, beginning with 1530 and ending with 1930. Dividing the century at the third decade is done mainly for practical reasons and does not denote specific periods. The earliest known mention of a witch doctor dates from 1531 or 1532; the last important Frisian witch doctor died in 1927.

1530-1630

In the second half of the sixteenth century Frisian witch doctors were widely

known not only in Friesland but also in the neighboring provinces of Groningen, Drenthe, Overijssel, and across the Zuiderzee in Holland. If they were apprehended in Friesland, display on the pillory and several years banishment were their fate. This form of punishment first occurred in the 1540s. In the case against Jheronimus Rithamer in 1531-1532, the Frisian Court was still satisfied with composition. As punishment for using witchcraft to find stolen property, a woman from Sneek was banished in 1544 for life and a man called Van Amsterdam was banished in 1546 for 40 years. The books and papers that were used by another man to remove bewitchments on cattle and milk were burned and he was banished for six years in 1548. And while witches were certainly prosecuted in Friesland during this period – at least the Court gathered information on them – they were not convicted.

At the urging of the newly created Reformed synod in 1584, the States of Friesland reinforced a resolution forbidding the practices of witch doctors and 'butter blessers.' The Frisian Court's interest in witch doctors fluctuated over the centuries. In addition to some cases around 1545, there was a slight concentration of convictions around 1600, and two more witch doctors were convicted in 1627 and 1632. From then until 1810 there were only four convictions.

The Court's increased attention at the turn of the century coincided with pressure from the Reformed Church, which is evident in the way the sentences were prescribed and in ecclesiastical sources. Anthonis Jans was convicted in 1594 because he exorcised devils, provided counter-charms against bewitched butter, and helped bewitched people by giving them pieces of the Gospel of St. John to hang on their chest. Gale Wybes, who was convicted in 1598 and again in 1605, and Wyger Frismoed, who was called a 'papist devil' and convicted in 1598, used similar methods to ward off evil spirits. The Franciscan Pieter Jans, who was sentenced in 1608 to three years' exile, possessed a small book containing counter-charms against bewitched butter that he had written down himself. In 1627 Adriaan Cornelis Const used exorcism formulas and hung warrants and beads around the necks of those bewitched; after he was banished he pursued his practice in the vicinity of Eenrum in Groningen. According to the judges all these people had misused God's holy name, an assertion that is not found in later sentences of witch doctors.

The measures taken by the ecclesiastical authorities did not all meet with equal success. The records of the synod and the classis of that period mention the names of witch doctors and exorcists not found in the Court's records of criminal sentences. In 1583, for example, the classis of Sneek was concerned about a priest, master Douwe van Goëngarijp, who acted as an exorcist. In 1598 they dealt with Jacob Aukes, minister in IJlst, who had hung the Gospel of St. John on the chest of a sick woman – presumably he was a former Catholic priest who had not yet completely attuned his practices to Reformed teachings. Such cases led the ministers in 1603 to adopt a synodical resolution that once

again urged getting rid of blessers, exorcists and witch doctors, palmists, and similar delinquents. Three were mentioned by name, only one of whom was banished; another man, One-Eyed Jan, transferred his practice to Holland. In 1610 and 1611 ministers were again urged to report such people to the secular authorities. Church and State acted jointly (albeit somewhat laboriously) against the practices of Catholic priests and others who used 'superstitious' methods. After a few decades, however, this offensive gradually faded away.

1630-1730

After 1630 the Court was concerned about witch doctors only insofar as they posed a threat to civic order, not for any religious reasons. For example, a weaver in Franeker, Andries Claesz, used the same methods as his predecessors, but he also accused specific people – both men and women. In 1632 he was banished for two years, and there is no reference in the verdict about a crime against religion. This change of attitude is also evident in a comparison between records of the Catholic mission reports and the Reformed classis.

Mission reports reveal that a Franciscan, Simon de Coninck, had driven the torments of an evil spirit out of a sergeant's daughter. And in 1658, a Jesuit used holy water to heal a small boy's bewitchment. The boy had been given an apple that had changed into a toad in his intestines; after the boy drank the holy water, the toad came out with its belly split open and its entrails hanging out. The activities of these priests can be designated as exorcism, which is undoubtedly what they would have considered it. But in the latter case especially, those who sought the help would have viewed it as disenchantment. At any rate, the clergy no longer showed any appreciable reaction. The oldest classis record from Franeker, which covers 1636 to 1658, has no references to witch doctors.

On several occasions in the second half of the seventeenth century, however, the synod registered concern about the activities of a female witch doctor and cunning woman named Anneke Doedens. Although she was very well known in the northern provinces, the records of the Frisian Court reveal no trace of her. And while witch doctors still made sporadic appearances on the agenda of classis meetings, it was no longer customary to report them to the Court. In 1679, when the minister of Bergum asked what should be done about a member of his congregation who had been accused of witch doctoring, a special committee was appointed to investigate what had been done in the past. The classis did not come back to the matter.

It seems, however, that it was this witch doctor about whom Franeker minister Balthasar Bekker wrote in his book *De Betoverde Weereld* (*The Enchanted World*). A man from Franeker, who had suffered from an affliction for a long

time and thought himself bewitched, consulted this witch doctor from Bergum, who confirmed the sick man's suspicions and pointed out people the man was close to – a neighbor and his wife (whose parents also had such a reputation) – as the witches. According to Bekker, common people were likely to ascribe an uncommon illness to witchcraft. Witch doctors reinforced their feeling that *medical doctors knew nothing about witchcraft and thus prevented expert help from being called in*. The author of *De Betoverde Weereld* also mentioned another famous Frisian witch doctor, Klaas de Oude, who lived in the vicinity of Joure. De Oude diagnosed ailments caused by 'evil people' from his patients' urine and prescribed herbs in alcohol as a cure. Other sources indicate that he also helped to recover stolen property and that he was consulted by people from the Overijssel village of Kuinre (see Chapter 8).

In 1686 the Court sentenced Hylk Jans from the neighboring province of Groningen to display on the pillory and three years in a house of correction. She had been roving through the northern provinces for several years and on several occasions had claimed that she could see ghosts who caused people's illness. In 1699 the German trader Hendrick Jurgens, to whom people resorted when physicians were no longer able to help, was flogged and banished. He had duped a cobbler's helper into thinking that a huckster had bewitched him, inciting him to assault.

In the early eighteenth century the Court also convicted those who gave advice in case of bewitchment, although they were not traditional witch doctors, but so-called 'Egyptians' – gypsies or people who posed as such – who were drifters who also committed other crimes. One of them was Ariaantje Jurjens from Sloterdijk (near Amsterdam), who roamed around with her husband, brother, and sister-in-law selling ointments, oil, and other remedies. In late 1704 she convinced a woman from the vicinity of Harlingen that witches were tormenting her and tried to make off with some of her belongings. A similar incident occurred in 1713.

The Court records from this period also contain several cases against vagabonds who claimed to be able to drive out ghosts that guarded treasures. They persuaded people to bury their valuables in order to assuage the spirits and make them amenable to being driven out, whereupon the treasure could be dug up. All that happened, however, was that the valuables vanished and the vagabonds were apprehended and convicted of fraud. While these cases have very little to do with counter-magic, they are mainly important for the comparison they provide with similar trials taking place in Southern Germany during the same period. Unlike the lawyers in Friesland, the lawyers there interpreted the treasure-digging ruse in the demonological sense.³

After Bekker's argument in *De Betoverde Weereld*, if the ministers at that time were at all concerned about witchcraft, it was mainly with regard to members of their own congregation. In 1710 the church council of St. Jacobiparochie

excluded Tiets Jans from Communion because he had consulted a witch doctor. The same punishment was meted out to Focke Smid, a member of the congregation in Kollum, who in 1728 had resorted to witchcraft and blessing to cure his ailing cow.

1730-1830

Two cases from 1750 and 1754 demonstrate the difference between vagabonds and local witch doctors. In the first case, the quack Daniëls and his wife informed a patient from Langweer after having examined his urine that he was bewitched by two souls who were haunting his house. This couple did not seem intent on establishing a regular practice because their treatment involved the burial of the patient's valuables, with which they fled a few days later. Their method contrasted considerably with that of Gosse Johannes, the famous witch doctor of Oldeboorn whose practice was taken over in 1754 by his daughter Ymk Gosses, then living in Sneek. She even drew clients from Amsterdam.

Geertje Arents' case fits somewhere in between these two extremes. Originally from German East Friesland, she spent a number of years in Groningen and settled with her family in Surhuisterveen in Friesland around 1760, although some of her family continued to work as itinerant scissors grinders in the northern provinces. In 1767 the Court sentenced her to a year in a house of correction because she had healed people in Ureterp of a bewitchment, and in so doing had put the neighbors at each other's throats, among other things. Her son, Pieter Jacobs (Bekkema), a veterinary surgeon, was banned for life from Drenthe in 1808. He had led people in Smilde to believe that they were bewitched, and both he and his mother made urine diagnoses and told the bewitched that they had snakes in their stomachs. Their descendants may also have tried to counteract witchcraft. In any case, according to a local minister, there were still three witch doctors in Surhuisterveen around the mid-nineteenth century.

The Court tried its last witch doctor case in 1785 – that of Lieuwe Christoffels from Bolsward. This man had cured cattle by smoking out bewitched barns with devil's dung (asafetida), both in his own home town as well as in the small town of Stavoren. He also advised people from Harlingen concerning the whereabouts of their stolen property. The eighteenth century Frisian historian Foeke Sjoerds considered this kind of practice to be deceptive, with the main purpose being that of lining the pockets of the witch doctors, who often accused the most respectable people of witchcraft. The final analysis, however, should be more balanced. Most of the patients had great confidence in the local witch doctors. Fraudulent practices were mainly confined to vagabonds with larcenous intent. Not only did established witch doctors fulfill a need, they could not afford to have a bad reputation.

In 1804, the local authorities did not consider the practice of the Workum witch doctor Sietse Hendriks to be much of a problem, although witch doctoring was not at all on the wane. Sailing on the tow barge from Harlingen to Franeker in 1808, the German traveler Niebuhr heard many stories about the miraculous powers of a witch doctor who lived in the area and he met numerous people who were on their way to consult him. The newspapers reported on a successor to this specialist, Johannes Gongrijp, who died in 1865, that he was known, revered, and visited by people who came from distances as far as several hours away from Harlingen. And while witch doctors were still tried in court and sentenced in the nineteenth century, it was no longer because of their disenchantment activities, but because of their unlicensed practice of medicine. And it is only from other sources that it can be determined that such people were witch doctors; the official reports no longer make any reference to witchcraft.

1830-1930

In the mid-nineteenth century there were witch doctors throughout Friesland. Marten Douwes Teenstra, a gentleman farmer who lived in Ulrum in Groningen, just across the Frisian border, was an opponent of superstition and knew of a number of them. In 1846 he reported witch doctors in Munnekezijl, Warfstermolen, Kollumerpomp, Oldeboorn, and Gorredijk. Teenstra also described the weekly sessions of two witch doctors in the Red Heart tavern in Leeuwarden. The men in question were members of the Wartena family, well-to-do farmers who were said to possess a secret cure. A charm written by one of them, Ruurd Wybrens (1747-1805), is preserved in the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden; the others mainly used dried herbs and potions. Up to approximately 1920 at least four generations of this family practiced as witch doctors in Roorahuizum, Rijperkerk, and the village bearing their family name Wartena. Some of them even became surgeons.

In Oldeboorn and De Knijpe (near Heerenveen) there was another line of witch doctors, the Brouwer family. During the nineteenth century, five of them – the father, two sons, and two grandsons – were convicted for the unlicensed practice of medicine. Sjoerd Brouwer, who had a cooperage in De Knijpe, was the most famous witch doctor of Friesland from 1860 to 1889. People came to him not only from Friesland and the neighboring provinces but from German East Friesland and Bentheim.

The nineteenth century witnessed the next attempt at disciplining the 'superstitious.' Enlightened ministers, physicians, and journalists denounced the healing activities of witch doctors and never missed a chance to expose their magic knowledge as cheap tricks. A witch doctor in Wolsum eavesdropped on his

clients when they came to tell his supposedly deaf wife about their ills. After making a dramatic entrance he proceeded to tell them exactly why they had come. The physician Greidanus told a similar story about the witch doctor Sierd Harmens Schaafsma of Veenwouden, who died in 1874. This man earned a good living as a cooper and dabbled in medicine as a hobby and for the renown it brought him. In his cooperage he had devised a cubby-hole from which he could hear everything his clients confided to his assistants beforehand. Lolke and Murk Brouwer, the witch doctors from De Knijpe, also eavesdropped on their patients through a grating in the ceiling.

The hostile attitude of doctors and ministers is understandable when looked at in competitive terms. After all, illnesses caused by witchcraft called for disenchantment specialists, and witch doctors cut both into ministers' domains with their interpretations and doctors' domains with their medicines. The minister Van Berkum described these illnesses as uncommon and protracted ailments that conventional healers were unable to cure. Thus, little had changed since Bekker's time. As the minister of Surhuisterveen, Van Duinen, cynically put it, the best one could do in a case of bewitchment was to throw the doctor's potions away and bottle the patient's urine and send it to the witch doctor. In 1899 a newspaper reported that a patient from Witveen who had first gone to a physician and then to a specialist at the University of Groningen – without results – had finally gone to a witch doctor. Consulting a witch doctor was not related to a dearth of licensed doctors as much as it was to the image of established medical science, particularly in terms of its efficacy. Physicians and witch doctors had overlapping circles of patients. The patients' own diagnoses and expectations for a cure determined which specialist would be consulted.

It was not always the witch doctor who was the first to identify a bewitchment and its perpetrator; relatives or neighbors of the person afflicted might do so. In addition to treating illnesses, especially in children and to a lesser extent adults and animals, witch doctors also dispensed advice on preventing butter-making failure, ghosts, nightmares, and sometimes they knew where to find stolen property. Witch doctors' clients linked the witch doctors' actions with the disappearance of ailments and adversities – even Van Berkum could endorse witch doctors' advice on cleaning milk churns. In fact, it seems that much of the advice given by witch doctors cannot be dismissed as altogether unrealistic and unworkable, although there are sensational cases where skepticism is clearly in order, such as the bizarre advice that Sjoerd Brouwer, the witch doctor from De Knijpe, supposedly gave to cure a sick girl in 1861. A decapitated rooster had to be cooked in pig's blood at midnight, her toes were to be rubbed with the mixture, and then she had to be ridden around the house three times in a wheelbarrow.

The witch doctor's somewhat mysterious manner of approaching visitors combined with his seeming omniscience helped to enhance his reputation.

Once a witch doctor became known, his cures did not always have to work. His help may have been called in too late. In 1891 in Idskenhuizen, Lolke Brouwer, Sjoerd's brother and successor, made the excuse that the feather crown from the bewitched child's pillow had already been completed. And the fact that witch doctors were less specialized also gave them an advantage over recognized doctors. A number of witch doctors, such as the De Boers, a father and son in Zwartveen near Drachten, or Abe Wartena of Rijperkerk, combined treating people with a veterinary surgical practice (whether officially licensed or not). Moreover, witch doctors did not always have direct contact with patients: it was quite common to make diagnoses through urine or items of clothing.

At this point little is known about the exact substances the witch doctors used in their therapies. Devil's dung (*asafetida*) was a common medicament and was available from a number of apothecaries. On the advice of the witch doctor Douwe Doorenbos in Appelscha one woman even rubbed herself all over with devil's dung. After she died, she stank so badly that the doctor who was supposed to perform the autopsy (which was called for because it was suspected that the witch doctor's medicines caused her death) refused to do so. But individual witch doctors' specific ingredients and methods for preparing medicines are still unknown. Wopke de Vries from Kuikhorne (near Zwaagwesteinde) supposedly once said to a patient: 'I think that Dr. Dons gives you the same medicine as I do. But I gather the herbs in the early morning mist and the doctor during the daytime.'

Wopke Harms de Vries was one of the most popular witch doctors in the Frisian district of De Wouden in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He started healing animals when he was quite young and ultimately people came to consult him about their own ailments as well. There were a lot of stories told about him, which he did not dispute but instead encouraged because they added to his notoriety. His patients came from the furthest corners of Groningen and Friesland, especially for treatment of bewitched children. They were always given a potion, along with part magic, part sound advice to be careful with it on the way home, not to let any strangers look at it, and to safely store it away at home. For Wopke's potion bottles were known to burst open at times if sunlight fell on the mixture, even while he was preparing it. Upon his death in 1893 his daughter Minke succeeded him, although she did not do as well as he did because she had not achieved his level of mastery.

Witch doctors remained active the longest in the Friese Wouden, a peat district in the eastern part of the province. Hinke Roelofs de Vries was one of the last popular witch doctors there. In addition to people from the region around her home in Rottevalle, she was visited by patients from Groningen and Drenthe, and was known chiefly for her success in healing children. She died in 1908. Most of the popular Frisian witch doctors had died by the end

of the nineteenth century. Heinze de Boer died in 1873, Sierd Schaafsma in 1874, Sjoerd Brouwer in 1889, and Wopke de Vries in 1893. As a rule their practices were carried on by members of their family. Johannes de Boer succeeded his father and vanished in 1906. Sjoerd Brouwer's brothers, Jelle and Lolke, practiced as witch doctors until 1910 and 1921, respectively. In 1921, when Lolke was already in an old people's home, he received a request from a farmer in Oudehaske to come and help his bewitched wife. The treatment took the witch doctor four days and nights. The case caused such a stir that patients came pouring in, even from as far away as Twente, although the wardens of the home refused to receive them. Lolke died in 1927.

Four Centuries

The accounts of witch doctors that have been passed down were mainly recorded in connection with action taken against them. When folklorists and journalists began to document things in the nineteenth century, there was a quantitative increase in information, including a little more material about the views of those who had sought help from witch doctors. The few eighteenth century files were succeeded by a mass of usually rather short reports. The judgmental tone of the sentences and even of the later newspaper articles was replaced by the more neutral texts of the folklorists, although they are equally limited. More than anything, the older, more official reports clearly reveal the contrast between the reporters and the subjects of their reports. These antitheses were not only responsible for defining the tradition, but they shaped the conditions under which witch doctors practiced.

The combined efforts of the Church and the secular authorities to suppress the activities of witch doctors around 1600 gave way to cooperation between the authorities and the medical profession 200 years later. In the early seventeenth century practicing as a witch doctor was officially labeled a crime against religion; from 1800 on it was considered the unlicensed practice of medicine.

It seems as though in the intervening period, with the exception of vagabonds, proceedings taken against witch doctors involved only those who overstepped the boundaries of the social order. For the most part established witch doctors were left alone. While the number and seriousness of witchcraft attributions that may have been initiated or confirmed by witch doctors undoubtedly fluctuated over time, it is debatable whether these fluctuations were influenced by the Court and later on by the adversaries of 'superstition.' Economical and demographical factors probably played a greater role. In any case, the effects of the various attempts to 'civilize' or reform culture have been negligible. The role of Catholicism in this process deserves more detailed study; although the term *duivelbanner* originates from Catholic usage, it was neverthe-

less retained when witch doctors replaced Catholic-tinged methods with other kinds of treatment.

Why the interpretation of sickness in terms of witchcraft declined so much after 1900 is still open to discussion, although it did not disappear entirely. There was an occasional quack who would advise patients who thought they were bewitched and there were even a few such cases in the 1950s in Sneek and in the Friese Wouden. But generally the popularity of witch doctors declined sharply – first among the most famous witch doctors who drew patients from very far away, and then later among those who operated on a much smaller scale. This does not mean that their function was assumed by regular health care. To the contrary, from the early twentieth century on there was a great increase in the popularity of miracle doctors (*wonderdokters*) – unofficial healers who mainly made use of herbs, but no longer performed disenchantments. Witchcraft may have disappeared as an explanation for sickness, but as far as the healers and their patients were concerned, it was never replaced by a fully scientific model.

At any rate, this survey of four centuries of Frisian witch doctors clearly shows that witchcraft and professional – although not officially recognized – witch doctoring coexisted for a long time. Although various shifts in disenchantment methods are apparent during this period, it is not possible to pinpoint specific reasons for these changes. New, systematic research may shed more light on these changes.

NOTES

1. For a survey of the situation in Great Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see the chapter on diviners in Thomas (1971) and see Smith (1977) for a description of Yorkshire 'wise men.' German research has been confined to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cf. Baumhauer (1985) and Schöck (1978). See also Favret-Saada (1977) for a description of French 'unwitchment' experts around 1970.
2. For more detailed descriptions, as well as the extra sources used for this slightly revised contribution, see: Willem de Blécourt, 'Undersyk nei tsoenderij yn Fryslan. Beskriuwing en evaluaasje fan Ondersyk nei tsoenderij yn de sechstjinde oant en mei de achttjinde ieu,' *It Beaken* 49 (1987)105-120. Willem de Blécourt, 'Duivelbanners in de Noardelijke Friese Wouden, 1860-1930,' *Volkskundig Bulletin* 14 (1988) 159-187.
3. Behringer (1987b) 348-350.