Group cultures: on the usefulness of a historical-anthropological concept

Adaptation of a paper for the workshop Sociale geschiedenis en de Middeleeuwen, December 13-14, 2001.[1]

The value of the concept of 'group cultures' lies in its close connection to social reality, while also giving a voice to aspects that might otherwise go unheard: namely, the thoughts and feelings of those who shaped history.

The framework I use in this contribution is shaped by the concepts of 'historical anthropology' and 'culture.' By historical anthropology, I mean the branch of historical science that focuses on culture.[2] In line with a definition by cultural Anthropologist Kloos, I attribute the following qualities to culture: it is not part of humanity's biological makeup, but is passed down and learned, primarily through language; culture belongs to groups, to an entire society or smaller communities within it; and there is a certain coherence to culture.[3]

Whether you consider historical anthropology to be a distinct subfield of history, or simply a particular perspective within historical studies, it undeniably has the power to influence and enrich the entire discipline, even those areas that are already well established.[4] For social history, taking a systematic approach to exploring mental and cultural phenomena that are connected to social developments can offer valuable new insights.

The research perspective being discussed here, that of Group Cultures, could prove useful for this context. Conversely, historical anthropology needs to stay closely connected to social history; otherwise, its main focus – culture – risks losing its grounding. People always form ideas about the society they live in based on their

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[1] I would like to thank Bas van Bavel, Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld, Petra Dam, Mathilde van Dijk, Leo Lucassen, and Anton Schuurman for sharing their thoughts on this paper during the symposium. This article was written for an audience not regularly engaged with medieval historical anthropology, so it opens with a summary of the introduction to my book, *Beelden en zelfbeelden van middeleeuwse mensen*. The section discussing research methods and topics was prepared specifically for that symposium.

[2] See W. Frijhoff, 'Inleiding: historische antropologie', in: P. te Boekhorst, P. Burke, and W. Frijhoff (eds.), *Cultuur en maatschappij in Nederland (1500–1850): een historisch-antropologisch perspectief* (Meppel, etc., 1992), pp. 11–38, and P. Burke, Varieties of Cultural History (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 183–212, 'Unity and Variety in Cultural History.' Both works are rich in ideas and bibliography.

[3] P. Kloos, *Culturele antropologie, Een inleading* (Assen, 1995), pp. 16-19. The final trait – a certain degree of coherence – remains open for debate. For more on this, see the later note regarding internally conflicting value systems.

[4] A. Gurevich, 'Marc Bloch and Historical Anthropology,' in: H. Atsma and A. Burguière (eds.), *Marc Bloch aujour d'hui. Histoire compare et sciences sociales* (Paris, 1990), pp. 403-406.

own unique *social* positions. Every text that describes social and cultural phenomena is written from a particular social standpoint in relation to those phenomena.

For the early pioneers in historical anthropology, blending social history with the study of mentalities was second nature. This is clear, for instance, from Marc Bloch's still-relevant reflections on aristocratic attitudes in *La société féodale*.[5] Huizinga, the other pioneer, devoted the opening chapter of his work *Herfsttij* to brilliant reflections on pride and greed, the cardinal sins of the rural-feudal and urban-commercial societal forms in the Middle Ages.[6] Likewise, the second wave of research on mentalities that began in the 1960s was marked by a strong focus on social history, influenced in part by the Marxist trends of the era. The fact that what was then called history of mentality from around 1980, especially in France, increasingly came to be known as historical anthropology, has, as far as I can tell, not changed anything essential.

In historical anthropological research focused on medieval Western Europe, five main approaches are generally used:[7]

1. Viewing medieval culture as a unified whole - a monolithic image of a single, homogeneous Christian culture. This perspective is especially common among nineteenth-century and some twentieth-century Catholic historians, though today it is often presented with more nuance.[8]
2. The idea of two cultural 'blocks': the elite culture and the popular culture. This is most strongly articulated in the early work of Le Goff, who contrasted the Christian, literate culture of the clergy with the non-Christian, oral culture of the common people, describing how these cultures clashed and eventually influenced each other.[9]

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[5] M. Bloch, *La société féodale* (Paris, 1939-1940; 1968[4]) pp. 409-433, 'La vie noble'; English translation: *Feudal Society*, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1989[9]) II, pp. 293-311, 'The Life of the Nobility'.

[6] J. Huizinga, Herfsttij de Middeleeuwen. Studie over levens- en gedachtenvormen der veertiende en vijftiende eeuw in Frankrijk en de Nederlanden, in: Idem, Verzamelde werken 3 (Haarlem, 1949) pp. 5-33, ''s Levens felheid', at pp. 229-31. Huizinga's perspective has essentially been confirmed by later, more detailed research; see, for example, L.K. Little, 'Pride goes before avarice. Social change and the vices in Latin Christendom,' in: American Historical Review 76 (1971), pp. 16-49. For further reading in Herfsttij, see esp. chapters 4 and 5, 'De ridder-idee' and 'De droom van heldendaad en liefde', pp. 76-87 and pp. 88-97.

[7] Here I follow my book, *Beelden en zelfbeelden van middeleeuwse mensen. Historisch-antropologische studies over groepsculturen in de de Nederlanden, 7de-13e eeuw* (Nijmegen, 1997: Memoria), pp. 19-25. The English translation is *The Plow, the Pen and the Sword: Images and Self-Images of Medieval People in the Low Countries,* translated by Claire Weeda (London and New York, 2018: Routledge Research in Medieval Studies 12), pp. 8-13. It also includes an initial comparative analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the five approaches.

[8] A prime example of this is J. Van Engen, 'The Christian Middle Ages as a Historiographical Problem', in: *American Historical Review* 91 (1986) pp. 519-553.

[9] See esp. J. Le Goff, 'Peasants and the Rural World in Early Medieval Literature (5th–6th centuries),' in: Idem, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge. Temps, travail et culture en Occident* (Paris, 1977), pp. 131–144 (English translation: 'Peasants and the Rural World in the Literature of the Early Middle Ages (Fifth and Sixth Centuries),' in: Idem, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago and London, 1980), pp. 87–97), and J. Le Goff, 'Culture cléricale et traditions folkloriques dans la civilisation mérovingienne', in: Idem, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge*, pp. 223-235 (Eng. trans.: 'Clerical culture and folkloric traditions in Merovingian civilization', in: Idem *Time, work and culture*, pp. 153-158.

3. Group cultures, which will be discussed shortly;
4. Focusing on specific aspects of culture as research themes—such as the deep Christianization process, the rise of literacy, attitudes toward violence, or perspectives on work;
5. Case studies of individual examples; this type of research is particularly common in historical anthropology and has produced noteworthy books, some of which have reached a wider audience.

Group Cultures

A group culture refers to a set of shared customs and beliefs within a particular group of people a distinctive array of cultural expressions refers to a complex mix of values, behavioral patterns, and emotional responses shaped by location, era, and group identity.[10] This research perspective is widely used among scholars. It's common to divide culture into three groups: culture of the clerical elite, culture of the secular elite, and culture of the common people. Further distinctions are also made: for instance, within religious circles, one might differentiate between the culture of bishops, monks, and parish clergy; among the secular upper class, between high aristocracy and professional warriors with little property; and within the general populace, between urban dwellers and rural farmers.

Such social differentiation can be effectively paired with two biological variables: gender differences and generational differences.[11] These differences are present in every type of society, but the ways in which they are expressed depend on a range of social and cultural factors. In the context of medieval Western Europe, for example, we might ask to what extent different behaviors were expected from a nun, an aristocratic woman, or a peasant woman compared to a monk, an aristocratic man, or a peasant. Similarly, it is possible to examine how differences in habits and emotional experiences were shaped by generational distinctions within these various social groups.

If individuals are part of different social groups at the same time, they will ipso facto inevitably participate in different group cultures. This includes so-called cultural intermediaries.[12] They often represent the values of an elite, yet at the same time operate locally or regionally within other social groups. This is the case, for example, with parish priests.[13]

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[10] I prefer the term 'group culture' over 'sub-culture', because 'sub-culture' implies the existence of a hierarchy of cultures.

[11] On gender stereotypes, see: P. Freedman, *Images of the medieval peasant* (Stanford CA, 1999), pp. 157-173, 'Peasant bodies, male and female', esp. pp. 158-163. On generational distinctions, see for example: G. Duby, 'Les "jeunes" dans la société aristocratique dans la France du Nord-Ouest au XIIe siècle', in: Idem, *Hommes et structures du Moyen Âge. Recueil d'articles* (Paris and The Hague, 1973) pp. 213-225.

[12] M. Vovelle, 'Culturele tussenpersonen', in: Idem, *Mentaliteitsgeschiedenis. Essays over beeld- en leefwereld.* Met een voorwoord van W. Frijhoff (Nijmegen, 1985; orig. French edition *Idéologies etg mentalités* (Paris, 1984)) pp. 126-141; G. Rooijakkers, 'Opereren op het snijvlak van culturen: middelaars en media in Zuid-Nederland', in: P. te Boekhorst, P. Burke en W. Frijhoff (eds.), *Cultuur en maatschappij in Nederland (1500-1850). Een historisch-antropologisch perspectief* (Meppel etc., 1992) pp. 245-283.

[13] M.R. O'Neil, '*Sacerdote ovvero strione*: ecclesiastical and superstitious remedies in 16th

The benefits of using the group culture perspective in research are clear: it allows the researcher to identify as many cultural layers (group cultures) as they find necessary. Unlike the 'two blocks' approach, this method offers greater flexibility while still maintaining a key advantage of the previous model – the ability to capture cultural differences. In contrast to the fourth approach – where segments of culture are analyzed – the main focus here is on providing an overview of group cultures as a whole. Later on, I will discuss some productive ways to combine group culture research with studies of its individual segments (or specialized research topics). Regarding the fifth approach – research into 'individual cases' – anyone seeking to determine the scope of the conclusions drawn from such cases often relies on the group culture framework. For instance, Le Roy Ladurie compared the Cathar shepherds in Montaillou with other shepherds from a wider surrounding area.[14]

The term 'group culture' first appeared in my writings about the clergy, nobility, and peasantry in the first part of the new *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* from 1981[15] and later in my book *Beelden en zelfbeelden van middeleeuwse mensen*. While developing this concept, I was partly inspired by researchers with a Marxist or Marx-influenced approach, but also motivated by my dissatisfaction with what classic Marxism defines as the 'superstructure'. Terms like 'mentality' or 'culture' were not included.[16] That explains my preference for theories that focus strongly on cultural and mental phenomena, such as those of Gramsci. There was also the impact of 'mentalized' Marxism in the work of the cultural anthropologist Eric Wolf.[17] In medieval studies, Bloch and Le Goff were especially influential.[18] Le Goff's first collection of essays, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge*, from 1977, is probably the historical work I have read most thoroughly. A key point here is the recognition that medieval society wasn't just marked by differences and conflicts over power and property but also by cultural differences and cultural conflicts.

You do not have to follow the exact path described here to recognize – or become convinced of – the value of the concept of 'group cultures' and the research perspective it introduces. Next, in my view, the usefulness of 'group cultures' comes from how closely it reflects social reality, but, as mentioned before, it also aims to give a voice to what might otherwise go unheard: the thoughts and feelings of those

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century Italy', in: S.L. Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding popular culture. Europe from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century* (Berlin etc., 1984) pp. 53-83 and A.J.A. Bijsterveld, *Laverend tussen Kerk en wereld. De pastoors in in Noord-Brabant 1400-1570* (Amsterdam, 1993) pp. 321-368, 'Functioneren en levenswandel'.

[14] E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou. Village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris, 1975).

[15] R. Künzel, 'De geestelijken: hun zelfbeeld en ideologie', in: D.P. Blok and A. Verhuist (eds.), *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden* I (Haarlem, 1981) pp. 395-399. 'Beeld en zelfbeeld van de aristocratie', ibid., pp. 399-406; 'Kerkelijke visies op het volk; de wisselwerking tussen kerkelijke cultuur en volkscultuur', ibid., pp. 406-412.

[16] For instance, consider the classic formulations in K. Marx, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Erstes Heft* (Berlin, 1981[10]; first edition London, 1859) pp. 11-16, 'Vorwort', at pp. 13-14.

[17] E.R. Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth. The People of Mexico and Guatemala: Their Land, History, and Culture* (Chicago, 1959). Idem, *Peasants* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966: *Foundations of Modern Anthropology Series*); Idem, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley etc., 1990[2]).

[18] M. Bloch, *La Société Féodale* (Paris, 1939-1940; 1968[4]); J. Le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge. Temps, travail et culture* en Occident (Paris, 1977).

who shaped history. For example: prosopography, the thorough inventory of the members of a social class – which, incidentally, was possible almost exclusively for the church and secular elite well into the Middle Ages – reveals the size of groups, their internal structures, networks, and the continuity or shifts in social positions. Yet, it cannot uncover the mental forces that bound or divided these classes, their self-images, the values guiding group members' behavior, or the many cultural factors that are essential for any social life.

Research Methods

The most straightforward research method involves compiling the most comprehensive possible record of values, behavioral repertoires, emotional response patterns, and more within a specific social group, time period, and region, all based on a well-defined and limited set of sources in both time and place.

Exploring how medieval society was categorized in contemporary texts offers insight into how people of that era perceived 'social space.' For instance, documents from the twelfth century written in what is now the northern French city of Cambrai list the following series of social categories: *casati* - *cives*, *casati* - *clerici* - *cives*, *cives* - *milites* and *cives* - *rustici*[19] In these lists, you find distinctions between vassals (*casati*), mounted warriors (*milites*, a lower rank in the aristocracy than the *casati*), clergy members (*clerici*), farmers (*rustici*) and *cives*. The last group consists of those living in the city who are neither part of the clergy nor the mounted warriors or the landholding aristocracy (who, at that time, also sometimes lived in the city or stayed there periodically).

Another intriguing way to trace social divisions is by looking at how the personal pronoun 'we' is used. Whenever this word appears, it always marks out a group from which or on whose behalf the author is speaking, and sets them apart from others. Who is included in 'we' and who counts as 'the others' in these texts reveals a lot about how the author and their audience viewed social boundaries: for example, monks from a particular monastery might see themselves as a unified group in contrast to neighboring aristocratic families, or the residents of one city may distinguish themselves from those of another city or from the people living in the surrounding countryside.

Additionally, we can explore accounts that reveal how group culture directly shapes an individual's behavior. Heriger of Lobbes recounts that in the early seventh century, a man named Johannes devoted himself to managing his estate.

Heriger adds: 'He did not work the land himself, as he was of noble birth and drew a considerable income from his vast holdings.'[20] From the perspective of Heriger and the audience he addressed-high-ranking clergy who themselves were almost always of noble descent-noble status and performing farm labor were seen as mutually exclusive (Incidentally, this passage is also notable because the terminology is telling. Working the land is described as *laborare*, meaning to labor hard, with the sense of struggle and hardship.) When considering

[19] The texts can be found in Künzel, *Beelden en zelfbeelden van middeleeuwse mensen*, pp. 102-203, *The Plow, the Pen, and the Sword*, pp. 202-203.

[20] Herigerus Lobiensis, *Gesta episcoporum Tungrensium, Traiectensium et Leodiensium* c. 30, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores* 7, p. r 77. This work was created *ca*. 970-980.

accounts of group cultures, it is important to distinguish between 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives: it matters whether an author — or a quoted witness — participates in the group culture they're describing. Self-images are usually (though not always) positive, and can differ significantly from how outsiders see the group. Also, when looking at 'insider' accounts, it's crucial to compare the self-image presented by group members with their actual behavior; these self-images may be idealized and not reflect everyday reality. In addition, the value systems that underpin group cultures can sometimes conflict internally, leading to inconsistent self-images and differing views of other groups.

Diving into conflicts between members of different group cultures can be approached by studying clashing value systems and the resulting negative stereotypes of other groups. Take, for instance, the humility that monks hold as a core value in their way of life; they often contrast this with the pride, superbia, seen in secular aristocrats. In the monastic system, pride is considered a serious sin. Because of this, monks tend to condemn a reaction typical of aristocrats – assertiveness. Generosity, a virtue cherished by aristocrats, because it fosters a positive self-image within the group, can sometimes clash with the frugality valued by citizens, which in turn can fuel negative stereotypes on both sides – wastefulness versus stinginess. The drive for economic self-preservation often leads farmers to contribute as little as possible; when necessary, they may resort to cunning or even sabotage. From the perspective of the religious and secular elite, this is often viewed as a sign of unreliability. In this context, it's also worth considering the negative stereotypes that townspeople and farmers can hold about each other.

Research Topics

It is also possible to combine specific research topics (in my classification, this is the fourth approach) with the perspective of group cultures. Below, I will outline several of these themes. Most will be summarized briefly, but I will discuss a few in more detail.

Attitudes toward ownership. In this context, a range of questions comes up. For instance, how much did wealth contribute to higher status? And to what extent did poverty result in lower status? Was ownership viewed as a separate source of status apart from family background? To what degree did having property help people overcome barriers based on birth?

Consumption habits, material culture. Eating and drinking habits can serve as cultural vehicles through which a positive sense of identity in relation to others is expressed, for example through Choices like eating meat or not, having bread or porridge, white or dark bread – all of these marked social boundaries in medieval society. The same went for clothing. It is no surprise that in the High and Late Middle Ages, there were dress codes for farmers to stop them from dressing like the higher classes.[21] Even things like the size and design of homes, the materials used, the furniture and household items, and the living environment could be studied in this

[21] W. Rösener, *Bauern im Mittelalter* (Munich, 1987[3]) pp. 96-118, 'Kleidung und Nahrung'.

context.[22]

An intriguing topic that has recently been the focus of a lot of fresh research is the *gift*. Giving valuables or land as a way to build or keep social relationships could serve religious, cultural, social, and economic purposes at the same time.[23] This has sparked debate about whether our economic models fit the medieval society, or if they should be replaced or blended with other models that allow room for factors other than just economics.[24]

Attitudes toward the body and sexuality. Courtly love was re-served for aristocrats. Peasants were considered not refined enough for it. When it came to sexuality, a similar distinction was drawn, at least by writers for the aristocracy. The sexual self-image of male nobles – extremely potent - in some texts, is paired with the perception – from the outside – about the sexuality of farmers: that after all that digging in the dirt, they wouldn't be capable of much.[25]

Attitudes toward violence. Marc Bloch was already aware that socially determined, differing views on war existed: for the secular aristocracy, war was a chance for personal growth and material gain, while peasants and townspeople benefited more from peace.[26] The studies by Platelle, Cardini, and Brown offer plenty of material on how attitudes towards violence varied across social backgrounds.[27]

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[22] Rösener, *Bauern im Mittelalter*, pp. 73-95, 'Haus und Hof'. H.-W. Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistiek. Stand und Perspektiven der Mittelalterforschung* (Darmstadt, 1999) pp. 299-310, 'Mittelalterliche Alltagsgeschichte. Ziele und Entwicklung', rich in bibliographical references. Th. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, 'Vreemd en eigen: ontwikkelingen inde woon- en leefcultuur binnen de Hollandse steden van de zestiende tot de negentiende eeuw', in: Te Boekhorst, Burke, and Frijhoff (eds.), *Cultuur en mattschappij in Nederland (1500-1850)* pp. 79-107 and the literature cited there, esp. the works by Bourdieu and Goffman mentioned in notes 4 and 5.

[23] A.J.A. Bijsterveld, 'Middeleeuwse vrome schenkingen als instrument van sociale integratie en politieke machtsvorming. Een historiografisch overzicht', in: *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 109 (1996) pp. 438-459, trans. 'The medieval gift as agent of social bonding and power' in: Idem, *Do ut des. Gift giving, memoria, and conflict management in the medieval Low Countries* (Hilversum, 2007) pp. 17-50; L.S. Benkmann, 'Schenken als historisches Pänomenen. Gewandelte Sichtweisen zum mittelalterlichen Schenken im Gang der Forschung', in: Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistik*, pp. 206-212.

[24] Goerjewitsj notes in this context the burial of treasures by Vikings – permanently, not with the intention of digging them up later – a practice that cannot be explained by economic motives, but by religious motives. A Guurevich, 'Historical anthropology and the science of history', in: Idem, *Historical anthropology of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1990) pp. 3-20, at p. 14.

[25] Freedman, *Images of the medieval peasant,* pp. 157-173, 'Peasant bodies, male and female', esp. pp. 158-163.

[26] Bloch, *La société féodale*, pp. 415-416.

[27] H. Platelle, 'La violence et ses remèdes en Flandre au XIe siècle', in: *Sacris erudiri* 20 (1971) pp. 101-173 ; F. Cardini, *La culture de la guerre (Xe-XVIIIe siècle)* Paris, 1992; original Italian edition: *Quell' antica festa crudele. Guerra e cultura della guerra dall' età feudale alla Grande Rivoluzione* (Florence, 1982)) ; W.C. Brown, *Violence in medieval Europe* (Harlow, 2011).

Rituals practiced within different group cultures took on various forms. Patrick Geary described in his article on 'the humiliation of saints' a ritual in which the relics of a saint were placed on the ground or mistreated, meant to persuade the saint to act on behalf of 'his' people, the monks of a particular monastery or the serfs of an estate owned by that monastery. Geary argued that while monks and peasants carried out this ritual in different ways – the monks simply laid the relics on the church floor, whereas the peasants struck the saint's grave with sticks – the underlying idea remained the same: the saint had failed to protect his own and needed to atone for it.[28] Building on this, one could imagine the whole of medieval culture as a 'collection' of behavioural patterns, beliefs, and so on, from which different groups chose different combinations to make their own cultures.

Christianization in depth, viewed as a process that unfolds across different social layers at uneven speeds, leading to conflicting situations: a secular elite that had already embraced Christianity versus a peasant population still following pagan traditions, a Christian clergy facing a lay public that was scarcely or not yet Christianized.[29] This sparked a debate about whether medieval culture was truly Christian and just how powerful the influence of the different stages of Christianization in depth really were (early Middle Ages, Reformation and Counter-Reformation, nineteenth and twentieth centuries).[30]

I am going to take a closer look at two topics: attitudes toward farm work and the role of oral tradition.

Attitudes toward farm labor. Within medieval clerical society, there was a clash of values about the worth of farm work and farmers themselves. Farmers were often seen as lesser people, sometimes even compared to animals; yet they were Christians, and so still considered human. Some clerical writers thought that working the land was a less corrupt source of income than trade. By the late Middle Ages, clergy who were closer to the farming community began to promote the idea that working the land is considered the most morally upright kind of work, and it's something everyone ought to do.[31]

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[28] P. Geary, 'L'humiliation des saints', in : *Annales E.S.C.* 24 (1979) pp. 27-42, at pp. 37-39.
[29] See: 'Het christendom van boeren en stedelingen', at pp. 83-95.
[30] See for example: Van Engen, 'The christian Middle Ages as an historiographical problem'; J. Cl. Schmitt, 'Religion, folklore, and society in the medieval West', in: L.K. Little and B.H. Rosenwein (eds.), *Debating the Middle Ages. Issues and readings* (Malden MA and Oxford, 1998) pp. 376-387 (original Italian edition: *Religione, folklore e società nell'Occidente medieval* (Rome and Bari, 1988 pp. 1-27) and Schmitt, 'Préface', in: Idem, *Le corps, les rites, les rêves, le temps. Essais d'anhropologie médiévale* (Paris, 2001) pp 9-12; L.J.R. Milis, *Angelic monks and earthly men. Monasticism and its meaning to medieval society* (Woodbridge, 1992). Dutch translation: *Hemelse monniken, aardse mensen* (Baarn, 1995). Van Engen is a contemporary, nuanced advocate of the nineteenth-century 'Christian unity model'. Schmitt - together with Le Goff - champions the perspective that, alongside a Christianized religious culture, there existed a non-Christian popular religious culture. Milis greatly tempers the significance of medieval monasticism in various sectors of society at that time.
[31] Attitudes towards labour are a central theme in the early work of Le Goff (his articles on the topic have been reprinted in *Pour un autre Moyen Âge*).See also Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, K. Thomas (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Work* (Oxford, 1999) pp. 308-349,

Members of the secular aristocracy did not work the land – see the previously quoted passage from Heriger of Lobbes. This went hand in hand with a negative attitude toward this type of labor. This could be studied across cultures. Is the undervaluing of farm work something typical of all elites in complex societies? After all, in these societies, there is always a non-farming upper class contrasted with a majority of farmers.

In addition to the clergy and the aristocracy, there was another environment where outsiders formed stereotypes about farmers: the urban setting. In the texts from up to the twelfth century that I have read, there is no sign yet of city dwellers negatively stereotyping farmers. This may be because, at that time, narrative sources in cities were almost exclusively produced around bishops. When these texts express antagonism, it is typically directed toward other townspeople, often in the context of power struggles within the city. It is only later that urban authors start to depict farmers as uncivilized and backward. From what I have seen, these stereotypes focus less on the farmers' work and more on the supposed lack of refinement, backwardness, and superstition attributed to them.[32]

Oral tradition. There are at least three reasons why oral transmission is important for this research into group cultures in pre-industrial Western Europe.[33]

First of all, for a long time, pre-industrial society was mainly made up of farmers who could not read or write, and the essential knowledge and information they needed was passed down mostly by word of mouth. This is a key reason to focus on how culture and information were shared orally back then, and to identify as many traces of this oral tradition as possible in the written texts.

Secondly, this research allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how the balance of power between oral and written traditions shifts over time. For instance, when a specific text shows that written traditions are open to influences from oral transmission, it reveals something about the dynamic between these two forms at that point in time, and between the social groups who carry these traditions. Given the long-standing, nearly total clerical monopoly over written records, this research acts as a corrective. One particularly inspiring example of research on the dynamic interplay between written and oral traditions is Marc Soriano's book about Perrault.[34]

Thirdly, from the perspective of researching group cultures, the question arises regarding the social origin of the traces of oral tradition found in written texts. As

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'Working the Land and Sea', and Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Worthy Efforts. Attitudes toward Work and Workers in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Leiden, 2012: *Studies in Global Social History* 10) pp. 159-.112, 'Imagined Peasantries'.

[32] E. Moser-Rath, *'"Lustige Gesellschaft." Schwank und Witz des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts in kultur- und sozialgeschichtlichen Kontext'* (Stuttgart, 1984) pp. 232-247, 'Die Bauern', featuring memorable quotes with insightful commentary.

[33] An initial overview is offered by R. Künzel, 'Mondelinge overlevering in middeleeuws West-Europa', in: M. Mostert (ed.), *Communicatie in de middeleeuwen. Studies over de verschiftelijking van de middeleeuwse cultuur* (Hilversum, 1995) pp. 21-38, and M. Mostert, *Oraliteit* (Amsterdam, 1998).

[34] M. Soriano, *Les Contes de Perrault. Culture savante et traditions populaires* (Paris, 1968, 1977[2]). The second edition features, as an introduction, a summary of a fascinating discussion on methodological issues between Soriano and several editors of the journal *Annales*.

mentioned earlier, these were produced mainly by members of the clergy well into the Middle Ages. Yet, traces of oral tradition found in these works originate from secular-aristocratic, agricultural, and urban circles. Such accounts of oral tradition, then, point to environments outside the strictly clerical sphere. Even as more laypeople began to write during the later Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, the majority of people remained illiterate for a long time, making the written record of oral traditions an important source for understanding communities that left little to no written traces. [35]

The written accounts by medieval clerical writers about other groups in the society of the time reflect their perceptions of those groups; these are outsider perspectives. Traces of oral tradition originating from these groups can guide us toward perspectives from within, to self-images that may be quite different from clerical perspectives. [36]

As I wrap up this account, I find myself once again thinking back to a question Bas van Bavel asked me while I was preparing this contribution: 'Rudi, do you think that social reality exists?' It was an understandable question in light of the rise of all sorts of postmodern ideas. I had to think for a moment before I said yes. Why the hesitation? That social reality does exist, was absolutely clear to me. But at the same time, there was also the fact that reality is seen quite differently from various perspectives, and the ways people react can vary greatly. That is why, I believe, the group culture research perspective is a valuable tool: it enables researchers to capture this diversity.

[35] I explored this topic further in my work 'Boeren aan het word', see pp. 31-69. The English version is titled: 'Peasants Speaking. A Brief History of Oral and Written Communication in the Dutch Countryside', in Anna Adamska and Marco Mostert (eds.), *Oral and Written Communication in the Medieval Countryside* (Turnhout, 2020: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy*, 45).

[36] R. Künzel, 'Oral and written traditions in the *Versus de Unibove*,' *The Plow, the Pen, and the Sword*, pp. 101-124.