

Traditional games in Flanders: state of the art

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Abstract

When the research project of the Flemish Folk Games File was launched in 1973, the researchers could not rely much on existing information and had to carry out field work. The results showed a rich variety of traditional games (mainly bowling, shooting and throwing games) still actively practised in Flanders. A limited number of traditional games is practised in all provinces, but most of them are practised regionally. The results showed furthermore that the traditional games participant is an elderly male of the working-class who lives mainly on the countryside. A recent survey research (2005) reinforces this socio-cultural profile except for the female participation which increased significantly.

The organisational structure of traditional games shows a wide variety in structures with on the one hand the federations and on the other hand the Flemish Traditional Games Centre (research, documentation) and the Federation of Flemish Traditional Sports (managerial and sport technical support), which promote traditional games. Traditional games deserve attention from society and from the local and national authorities for the beneficial effects they have on the psychological and social quality of life. We should also safeguard the rich *ludodiversity* as a part of our heritage.

Keywords: traditional games, Flanders, heritage, popular culture, sport

Introduction: the roots of a long playful tradition

Works of miniaturists as Simon Bening (1483-1561) or Gerard Horenbout (1465-1541) and painters like Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525-1569) and David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690) give evidence of the rich variety of traditional games in Flanders at the time. Besides these iconographic documents from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, little written information is available about the early history of traditional games. There are some illustrations in the margins of manuscripts from the thirteenth and the fifteenth century (Randall 1966, De Vroede 1998) and several city bans from the same period (Geerts 1987), but they tell us almost nothing about how these games went on and in which circumstances they were practised. Chroniclers did not pay much attention to the social life and the activities of the ordinary people, neither did historians until a few decades ago. Nevertheless we know that centuries ago a whole range of ball games, bowling and shooting games as well as throwing games were practised in Flanders. Flanders is the northern part of Belgium where Dutch is spoken. With its six million (60% of the global population) inhabitants for 13.500 km² Flanders is one of most densely populated (441/km²) regions in the world.

Studying traditional games: taking play seriously

After 1850 some publications on traditional games started to appear and after 1900 more and more journals of folklore and local history published articles about traditional games.

Although there exists a large amount of such publications, they are often purely descriptive

and have little social or cultural relevance. Most of these local folklore contributions are very short and the majority of them is devoted to children's games. Historians paid a lot of attention to the traditions of the archery and crossbow guilds of the cities and the villages of which Renson (1976) gave a review. Whereas the shooting activities of these guildsmen are well documented, other traditional games practised nowadays like *meetschieten*, *pagschieten* and *ringwerpen* left no written historical trace at all. Like oral history, they are ludic history, just there, handed over from one generation to the other.

When the research project of the *Flemish Folk Games File* (FFGF) was launched in 1973 (Renson & Smulders 1981) at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Faculty of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences) the researchers could not rely much on existing information neither for the history, nor for the actual situation of traditional games in Flanders. As part of their course work in sport history, students were stimulated to carry out field work. They were given the assignment to write a paper on a traditional game, which was still actively practised in their own community. Over the years this investigation resulted in 1500 files on local associations of traditional games throughout Flanders. The rich variety of the traditional games scene in Flanders has been studied and analysed by means of about 50 master theses and one doctoral thesis (Smulders 1982: 218-220). Parallel to this survey research, a bibliography of traditional games in Flanders has been compiled (De Vroede 1979). Additional information has been systematically gathered and the existing files have been updated. Furthermore, the socio-cultural profile of the practitioners of folk games in Flanders was analysed around 1988 (Renson e.a. 1997).

The most striking result of the research project was the rich variety of traditional games still actively practised in Flanders. Some of these games were completely unknown to the research team. Other games, which were believed to have died out, were found to be still 'alive and kicking'. Moreover, several games were still very popular on a local scale, but completely absent in other parts of the region. All over, about sixty different games have been identified which can be considered as a remarkable amount for a small region like Flanders.

Sociogeographical aspects of traditional games

An analysis of the data allowed Renson and Smulders (1981: 104-105) to draw up some conclusions upon the aspect of their geographical distribution. A limited number of traditional games is practised in all the five Flemish provinces. These are popinjay shooting (vertical and horizontal), cross bow shooting, pigeon racing and finch warbling contests. Most of the traditional games however are practised regionally, some of them also played in the adjacent regions in France, Germany, The Netherlands and Wallonia, the French speaking part of Belgium. The game of *beugelen* (closs) is practised in a small area in the Northern part of the province of Limburg as well as in the Dutch province of Limburg and in one location in Germany. The same goes for *kaatsen* (hand tennis), played in some areas of the provinces of East-Flanders, Brabant and Antwerp, but especially widely spread in the Walloon part of Belgium. Sometimes games are practised only in isolated pocket like *pagschieten* (bludgeon throwing) in Alken (Province of Limburg) and *javelot* (throwing the dart) in Wijtschate (Province of West-Flanders).

It is remarkable that traditional games of the same category tend to exclude each other spatially (Smulders 1982). One will for instance not find two different types of bowling games in the same area. Most of the traditional games seem to cluster together in their own territory and keep out 'intruders' of a variant games species.

Socio-cultural profile of the participants

Apart from some 'eye catching' infrastructure like the 28 m high poles needed for popinjay shooting, traditional games are not very visible. Mostly the activities take place at the local pub in a separate room or in the backyard, away from the 'madding crowd'. The people practising these games belong moreover to the lower socio-cultural classes which partly explains the rather old fashioned or 'primitive' image of traditional games. Based on the data (for the period 1973-1988) provided by the FFGF, the socio-cultural profile of the participants has been examined (Renson e.a. 1997). The data were analysed according to age, gender, socio-professional status and degree of urbanisation of the participants. Though the results showed some variety between the different disciplines of traditional games, they confirmed the stereotype that the traditional games participant is indeed an elderly male of the working-class who lives mainly on the countryside. Now, about fifteen years later, this specific socio-cultural profile has been reinforced by the results of a recent survey research (conducted by Renson & De Vroede 2002-2005, not yet published). The average age of 45 year in the 1988 survey has increased to the age of 48 and the already low social status of the participants has even decreased furthermore. Also the degree of urbanisation has decreased which means that traditional games are becoming more and more a rural affair. However, it is not all doom and gloom, because - compared to fifteen years ago- the degree of female participation has increased from 11% to 22%.

Organisational aspects

Federations of traditional games

The organisational structure of traditional games shows a wide variety in structures, especially with regard to the category of shooting games. For each shooting discipline there is a federation but at the same time there are umbrella federations which coordinate associations from different shooting disciplines. The fact that some associations or historical guilds are member of several federations makes it even more complicated. Roughly outlined, one can speak of two factions: on the one hand the federations (*Koninklijke Nationale Belgische Bond der Wipschutters*, °1908, and the *Vlaams Boogsportfederatie Liggende Wip*, °1972) which focus more on the competitive aspects, at the other hand the federations (most of them under the umbrella of the *Federatie van Vlaamse Historische Schuttersgilden*, °2000; a minor part of the guilds under the *Hoge Gilderaad der Kempen*, °1952) which stress the importance of the historical and cultural heritage.

Nowadays most of the traditional games have their own federation. For many of them though these coordinating organisms were quite recently established. Some of them are well organised, others are very informal networks where only some ad hoc agreements are made concerning the calendar of their competitions.

From Flemish Traditional Games Centre (Vlaamse Volkssportcentrale: VVC) to Centre for Sport Culture (Centrum voor Sportcultuur: CSC)

As a spin-off of the afore mentioned research project of the Flemish Folk Games File the Vlaamse Volkssportcentrale (Flemish Traditional Games Centre) was established in 1980 to study and promote traditional games. Partners in the non profit organisation were the Faculty of Physical Education (now Kinesiology) of Leuven University, the sport department of the Flemish government (Bloso) and the Open-air Museum Bokrijk, which focuses on traditional culture. The VVC is subsidised by the department of culture of the Flemish Community. Research on traditional games was carried out by the research unit for Socio-cultural Kinesiology (KULeuven). Together with the VVC, a specialised documentation centre on traditional games (both regional and world-wide) was established. The thus acquired information, background knowledge and practical know-how is provided to the public via

different kinds of publications, lectures and workshops. Important in this respect is that most colleges and universities involved in the formation of kinesiologists and/or physical education teachers call upon the VVC for training them in the art and skills of traditional games.

In order to make traditional games more visible and better known, and to offer people the opportunity to practise them, the VVC manages a network of regionally dispersed loan services which have been very successful from the beginning. Another means for promoting traditional games has been the creation of 'Traditional games routes'. These routes lead the tourists to a number of places, mostly local pubs, where typical games can be played while enjoying a local beer. Fourteen of such 'routes' leading to the roots of our play heritage, are described in brochures, distributed by local tourist centres.

A wandering exhibition on traditional games has toured during two years through the country and was exhibited in many cities. Afterwards a concise version of this exhibition has been put at the disposal of the public to provide background information at the occasion of traditional games festivals. Since the Sport Museum Flanders has been opened in 2004 under the name of Sportimonium (a contraction of the terms Sport and Patrimonium), a special section in the permanent exhibition is devoted to traditional games. Part of the Sportimonium project is the Traditional Games Park, to be opened in June 2006, where the visitors can learn how to master the skills and to enjoy the pleasures of the traditional games heritage.

After twenty-five years of existence, the board of the VVC has decided in the beginning of 2006 to change its name into Centrum voor Sportcultuur (Centre for Sports Culture).

Although a strong emphasis on traditional games will remain, the new name of the organisation reflects better the full scope and mission of the (former) VVC, which has gradually broadened its interest over the years to the social and cultural aspects of 'movement culture' in general, encompassing games, gymnastics, competitive sports and dance expression.

The Federation of Flemish Traditional Sports (Vlaamse Traditionele Sporten: VlaS)

As a result of its activities, the VVC established over the years close contacts with many practitioners and clubs of traditional games. One of the particularities of traditional games in Flanders is that most of them are practised in restricted areas and that their practitioners used to have little or no contact with each other, even though they are faced with similar problems. Each of these clubs and their federations (if existing) are too small to be heard on the wider community level and they do not meet the criteria for being subsidised as is the case for modern sports.

The VVC was instrumental in helping these 'Cinderellas' of the Flemish sports scene to establish contacts with each other and to found an umbrella organisation of their own. This resulted in 1988 in the creation of the Traditional Games Confederation (VOSCO), since 2001 renamed as *Vlaamse Traditionele Sporten* (VlaS). This confederation originally consisted only of two small federations and the VVC, and counted only 500 members. The organisation grew steadily and in 1990 the confederation was recognised and subsidised by the Flemish sports department and could establish its own secretariat and hire two administrators to support the affiliated federations and clubs. Today VlaS acts as an umbrella organisation for 23 types of traditional games and counts about 12.500 members.

Although the CSC (the former VVC) and VlaS are both concerned with the preservation and promotion of traditional games, they have each their specific tasks. While the CSC focuses on ethnographic, historical and socio-cultural aspects of movement culture in Flanders, VlaS concentrates on administrative, managerial and sport technical support for its members.

The last two decades have been difficult for the traditional games. Though a lot of promotion actions have been carried out to give traditional games more visibility, to support the associations and to emphasize the values of traditional games, the practice of traditional games has been constantly declining. Also the number of associations and the number of members per association has shown a drastic decrease. Some games have disappeared almost completely. This doom scenario has affected most those games which failed to organise themselves in a broader network, as was the case for games like pierbol, struifwerpen, ronde bol, schuiftafel.... On the other end, it appears that the remaining associations are today better organised, not only externally through their linkage with federations, but also internally, moreover they have developed stronger ties with the municipal authorities and local cultural organisations.

4. Traditional games and sports in Flanders: an inventory

The rich variety of traditional games in Flanders was already mentioned. Here follow a brief overview in which they are categorised according to the typology initially drawn up for Flanders (Renson & Smulders 1981) and later on slightly adapted for use on a European scale (Renson e.a. 1991). Only games played on a regular basis are included. Games which are only occasionally practised during a yearly festival or fair, are not included in this overview, neither are traditional children's games.

Ball games

Among the traditional ball games *kaatsen* (pelote) is the only one to survive. It is played by two teams of five players each. Although it was once considered as the national ball sport in Belgium before World War One (De Borger 1981) and it still is a highly institutionalised competitive game, *kaatsen* is more and more in decline.

Bowling and skittle games

In Flanders, mainly in the provinces of East- and West-Flanders a great variety of traditional bowling games is observed. Most popular is *krulbol* (curl bowls) with approximately 2500 players. It is not easy to give exact numbers because not all associations are member of the two existing federations. Other more or less popular bowling games are *trabolling* with its typical hollow alley and *gaaibol* ('jays' or blocks at the end of a sloping alley have to be knocked down by bowls). The other bowling games like pierbol and trou-madame are in firm decline and *rondebol* and *vloerbol* have almost died out during the last two decades.

Still popular are the different types of skittle games in the provinces of Brabant and Antwerpen. Commonly it is played with nine skittles but the alleys differ from region to region. In one particular game of skittles (*vlugbaankegelen*) the heavy bowl used to be thrown at the skittles instead of rolling the bowl. This type of skittles game has disappeared almost completely. The last bowling game to be mentioned is *beugelen* (cosh), to be considered as the precursor of modern billiards, is still practised by a couple of hundreds of players in a small area in the north east of the country.

In two more games skittles are used, i.e. *toptafel* (top table) and *tafelkegelen* (table skittles). Both of them are played indoors. In the first one a top is launched in a wooden box in order to knock down the small skittles, in the second one the skittles have to be knocked down by a small wooden ball tethered by a rope to a swivel on top of a pole fixed to the table.

In *sjoelbak* (shovelboard) and *schuiftafel* (shovel table) small discs are shovelled. In *schuiftafel* iron discs are struck with a billiard cue to an iron stake at the end of the wooden table, in *sjoelbak* wooden discs are shovelled to small gates at the end of the table.

Throwing games

Most popular type in this category are throwing games with discs like *meetschieten* (throwing at a line marked on the ground), *stopschieten* (throwing at a little stake), *struifwerpen* (throwing at lines in a box filled with clay), *tonspel* (throwing at a number of hole in a wooden board) and *pudebak* (similar to *tonspel* but with a toad as a typical ornament). Furthermore there are *vogelpik* (kind of darts), *pagschieten* (bludgeon throwing) and *javelot* (a heavy dart is thrown underarm to the butt). Perhaps the most spectacular throwing game is *struifvogel* in which a big wooden bird, hung up from a wire fixed to the ceiling, is launched at the butt with a dart in its beak.

Shooting games

Archery has a long standing tradition in Flanders. Some of these guilds can trace back their origin to the fourteenth century. Like in many European countries, most cities had from the beginning of the fourteenth century onwards their crossbow and longbow guilds, and later on their culverin guilds too. They inspired the village people in Flanders to establish their own guilds. Although their importance as a military force decreased, they remained important in social life (Renson 1976). The traditional shooting with the crossbow, longbow and culverin at both the vertical pole (popinjay shooting) and at the butts survived all the political turmoil and at this moment still hundreds of shooting guilds are flourishing in Flanders. In the course of the years new disciplines were added as for instance *liggende-wipschieten* or shooting at the horizontal rake with fixed (popin)jays, catapult shooting, *klepschieten* (carbine shooting at an iron target on top of a pole), *buksschieten* (culverin shooting at small wooden blocks on top of a pole), rifle shooting at (empty) bottles. Most popular are *staande-wipschieten* or popinjay shooting with a long bow at the rake with ‘jays’ fixed on top of a tall vertical pole and *liggende-wipschieten*, already described, with respectively about 8.000 and 3.500 archers.

Fighting and tilting games

Apart from tug-of-war there exists no other traditional fighting game. Ring tilting is practised on a bike in some villages near the city of Bruges. Horse riders organize their own ring tilting occasionally.

Animal Games

Pigeon races and finch warbling contests are very popular in Flanders. Although there are still about 40.000 pigeon fanciers nowadays, the game is in decline and the number of members of the Royal Belgian Pigeon Racing Federation steadily decreases. The same holds true for the amateurs of finch warbling though their decline is less striking. The General Finch Warbling Federation has in 2006 13.500 members. De ‘*vinkenzetters*’ or members of the finch warbling federation, mainly concentrated in the provinces of East- and West-Flanders, train their finches to sing a particular melody which the birds have to sing as many times as possible during the one hour lasting contest.

Similar to finch warbling is *hanenzingen* (cock crowing). The aim of this game is to guess in advance how many times a cock will crow in a certain time period. *Gansrijden* is practised by the riders of Belgian horses, who try to pull off the head of a – nowadays a dead - goose, which hangs from a gallows. *Hanenkappen* (cutting off the head of a cock hanging upwards down) and the survival of the illegal game of cock fighting should both be mentioned from an ethnographic point of view. *Gansrijden* takes only place in the period around Withsuntide in a few villages, while *hanenkappen* almost died out. No need to say that these ‘remnants’ of cruel amusements were not incorporated in the promotion campaigns described before.

Locomotion games

The only game to mention in this category is stilt walking which is practised by only by one association (Steltenlopers van Merchtem). In fact this group is to be considered as a mere demonstration group with spectacular performances on high stilts.

Flemish traditional games or traditional games in Flanders ?

If we compare the traditional games practised in Flanders to the traditional games scene in Europe we observe both many similarities and particularities. Kaatsen, the only ballgame in Flanders - in fact in Belgium as the majority of the players are to be found in the Walloon region -, shares its historical origin with the many other pelota-games in France, Italy, Spain, The Netherlands or Sweden. Flanders has skittles games and bowl games in common with many European countries. In the category of throwing games however we observe some particular games like struifvogel and struifwerpen which are nowadays not observed elsewhere.

Most striking however is the variety and popularity of shooting games. Though archery, crossbow and culverin guilds which practised popinjay shooting, did exist centuries ago in many other countries like Austria, France, Germany, Poland, ...this tradition remained particularly popular in Flanders and the adjacent regions, where even new shooting disciplines were added. Also striking is that there exist no traditional fighting or wrestling games in Flanders.

As to the nature of the traditional games in general one can notice some peculiarities for Flanders where traditional games are not athletic at all. Strength is never involved (except for tug-of-war); what matters is accuracy. For the throwing games the average distance is only three metres. If the distance to the target exceeds more than three meters (except for pagschieten), longbows, crossbows or catapults are brought in to do the work. Neither endurance nor speed are an issue. So, in contrast to many regions, Flemish people do not run for distance or speed nor leap in their traditional games. They tend more to a co-operative or co-acting model. Indeed, a lot of bowl games and shooting games are played in teams. The Flemish traditional games players like to play indoors – preferably in the cosy atmosphere of a local pub - where conviviality is important. In this way, it is not surprising that traditional wrestling does not appear. Also striking, with regard to the formal-structural characteristics of the games, is the observation that the Flemings ‘gamesters’ are always bowling, throwing and shooting to fixed targets and not for distance (De Vroede & Renson 2004).

Conclusions: traditions as challenges for the future

When the VVC started in 1980 its promotion campaign for traditional games it could reckon upon the Flemish government in the framework of the 'sports-for-all'-policy. The year 1981-1982 was even proclaimed as 'The year of traditional games'. In 1990 the confederation of traditional games (VlaS) was recognised and subsidised since then by the sports department of the Flemish Community. But the governmental strategy changed. The Flemish sports department argued in the late nineties that not enough physical effort was involved in practising traditional games. Based on this rather arbitrarily ‘physiological’ parameter, the department stopped its financial support for the confederation, not taking into consideration the beneficial social values and the unique opportunities which traditional games can offer to the elderly people, to social underprivileged or the disabled people. The Flemish Traditional Games Centre (VVC) and the Traditional Games Confederation (VOSCO) tried to turn the tide and launched a protest action, which even led to a public debate in the Flemish Parliament. The so called sports decision-makers reconsidered their decision and offered a (less favourable) alternative which is still valid. VOSCO changed its name to VlaS.

While traditional games were thus abdicated by the apostles of the modern competitive sports, the interest for popular culture in general and for traditional games in particular grew almost simultaneously and a decree was adopted in 1998 to support the field of popular, often intangible, heritage. The appreciation reached an apogee in 2005 when the Flemish government nominated in 2005 the traditional games, with popinjay shooting as a *pars pro toto*, as the Belgian candidature for the UNESCO World List of Intangible Heritage.

Physiological arguments, which were used against traditional games, can be used in their defence and rely on the outcome of a wide scale epidemiological study, carried out among elderly citizens (Glass e.a. 1999). The results of this population study showed the beneficial effects of social activities such as traditional games, which lower the risk of all cause mortality as much as fitness activities do. They also have a strong impact on the psychological and social quality of life. To many people these games are a convivial way to spend their leisure time and to keep fit and active until high age. Moreover, traditional games offer opportunities to get together and to have social contacts with each other. In modern times of growing individualisation these traditional games, which have a low threshold and where every spectator is a potential participant - are a valuable asset.

We should also safeguard the rich *ludodiversity* of our play heritage. The importance of keeping our games alive and highly diversified, instead of narrowing them down to a small number of strictly codified modern sports, may - culturally speaking - be as important as keeping our ecosystem diversified. Biodiversity is threatened by 'overhunting', by the introduction of certain species to places where they didn't previously occur, by habitat destruction and by a ripple effect in which - like branching rows of dominos - the extermination of one species may lead to the loss of others (Diamond 1992). *Mutatis mutandi*, these same mechanisms can be observed in the extinction of our ludic culture of traditional games. Some were indeed overhunted or were -in other terms- simply 'forbidden' by the clergy or political authorities because of their often wild or boisterous character. Many traditional games disappeared through the introduction and promotion of foreign -mostly British or American sports and games- into school playgrounds which had their own 'playlore'. The same holds true for the destruction of the habitats where traditional games were played: the old pubs, the streets and squares from our cities and villages, which are now replaced by parking lots or sold to so called 'city developers'. The domino or chain effect can also be observed and has made these traditional games endangered games species, which risk to become museum rarities if we find no solution to (re)integrate them in the ludic culture of our youngsters and protect their habitats for our greying society (Renson 2004).

Traditional games can certainly appeal en benefit to many groups in society. That is why traditional games deserve explicit attention from society and from the local and national authorities. It remains however important to bear in mind that traditional games are a living heritage and not a 'frozen' reality or romantic nostalgia. They have to keep up with the times, but without losing their idiosyncrasy.

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