

THE BAKKERSBUIJS AND THE MYTH OF THE DUTCH BAKER

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Abstract

This mythology, focuses on the *Bakkersbuis*. A garment used in the context of Dutch bakeries and the practice of baking bread. It has a longstanding visual history from historic children's literature, to contemporary YouTube tutorials, resulting in this piece of workwear being recognized as a symbol of craft, expertise, and the image of the Dutch baker. However, through oral history and ethnographic insights, it has been found that this jacket is not used by bakers during the actual bread-baking practice. The garment is and has throughout time been too restricting in movement, expensive in cost, and precious to the wearer. In the spirit of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, it is argued that the *Bakkersbuis* embodies the meaning surrounding the bakers' practice. Visual evidence shows that the *Bakkersbuis* has been used by bakers during local events and public appearances. The *Bakkersbuis* is a visual tool for nostalgia creation around the bakery trade and it is argued that the *white-coat effect* of doctors and their garments is at play here. Paradoxically, the garment signals aspects of craft, authenticity, and expertise even though it was not used during the actual labour.

Keywords: *Fashion; Workwear; Bakery culture; Work identity; Mythologies.*

ORIGINS OF THE *BAKKERSBUIJS*

The *Bakkersbuis* is a garment made for bakers and bread-baking practices. It is a piece of workwear: the product of a diversification of ordinary dress in recent times that started to develop through the industrial revolution and urbanization (Maccioni & Leopolda, 2009). The *Bakkersbuis* is in essence a sturdy jacket with (one or two) off-centre rows of buttons. The garment is made from white linen. The colour is a deliberate choice, highlighting the stains that are not the all-around white flour and being easily washed at high temperatures. Historically, the *Bakkersbuis* is accompanied by blue and white checkered trousers. Better known as a *Bakkersbroek* ('bakers' trousers'). Other historic and visual sources,

especially children's literature (Vlis & Schröder, 1940; Francina & Irme, 1928) emphasise a white bakers' hat. In contrast, the white apron that is a visible part of the outfit is not highlighted in these sources. This outfit can be traced back to '*Costumes parallèles du Cuisinier*' from the work of chef and writer Marie-Antoine Carême (Carême, 1842). Carême is known as a key figure for modernizing French cuisine (Whyte, 2021). Initially, this outfit was proposed to be the standard for chefs throughout Europe, but has made its way to the Dutch bakers practice. This first mention of this outfit in the Dutch bakery context can be traced back to literary accounts from 1839, in the Dutch literary classic *Camera Obscura* by *Hildebrandt*. In this novel the baker is described

as a man wearing a white jacket, a white hat, and smoking a pipe (Beets & Stapert-Eggen, 1978). This precise attire and its design was portrayed by Dutch costume designer Rie Cramer in 1941, showing the *Bakkersbuis* in full ornate (Fig. 01). At this time, these four pieces (*Bakkersbuis*, blue white checkered trousers, a white apron, and hat) can be considered the essential and historic outfit of the Dutch baker. Even though the outfit originated from the French Napoleonic era, and was initially intended for chefs. Over the course of the nineteenth century the complete set of clothing changed and, as for many similar trades, the outfits became fixed (Maccioni & Leopolda, 2009). This was the case for the bakers' outfit as well. So, the original blue white checkered trousers disappeared, which coincides with the rise and standardization of jeans as explained by Maccioni & Leopolda (2009). The blue jeans fit the bakers' practice as well through their sturdiness, mass-availability, and comfort during work. Next to this, the hat has most often been replaced by a simple cap. Therefore, the only contemporary garment that



Fig. 01

remained from this outfit is the *Bakkersbuis*. Today, the *Bakkersbuis* is still widely used, seen, and associated with the baker. It surfaces in YouTube explainer videos regarding bread baking (Omroep MAX, 2021), advertisements of the Dutch bakers' guild (*Echte Bakkersgilde*, n.d.), and in newspaper articles mentioning bakery culture (Fig. 02). Through consistent historic imagery of the baker and their garment, it can be concluded that the *Bakkersbuis* and its image shows up wherever there need be an emphasis on craft, authenticity, or expertise regarding bakery culture. However, through oral history and an ethnographic case study of a Dutch bakery and her archive¹, it has been found that bakers did not wear the *Bakkersbuis* during the actual bakery practice. This has multiple reasons. The first being the design of the garment itself. The *Bakkersbuis* is too restricting in motion to facilitate the heavy workload needed in the shoulders and arms. Second, bakers historically did not have the spending power to buy multiple *Bakkersbuisen*. One single garment was often what they could afford. Third, because of only having one *Bakkersbuis* the garment was worn only during public events. The most concrete visual evidence are two photographs of where Anton Douenburg, one of the bakers from the *Bakkerij Douenburg* lineage, is seen (Fig. 03). On the left, we can see the baker working the dough while wearing the aforementioned blue white checkered trousers, a white apron, and a white T-shirt. A simple white T-shirt fulfilled the functional aspects of the *Bakkersbuis*: The same white colour, and improved movement compared to the *Bakkersbuis* itself. On the right, we can see the baker wearing the *Bakkersbuis* in combination with a historic bread delivery bike (Fig. 04). This photograph was taken during the 50th celebration of freedom since World War II in the village where the bakery is established. These photographs juxtapose each other in terms of setting: from the actual practice of bread baking behind the bakery store to the public presentation of the baker as part of the local village and its celebrations. In the bakery context itself, the *Bakkersbuis* is the only garment missing

¹ The archive of Bakkerij Douenburg near the Dutch-Belgium border in the province of Noord-Brabant which has been in operation for 120 years.

Je kunt een snee brood lezen'



Bakkerswedstrijd: Joppen en Douenburg vallen in de prijzen.

door Annemieke Pepping
BREDAS - Twee tafels vol met heerlijk geurende broden van de diverse 'echte' bakkers uit de regio Zuid west-Nederland wachtten gisteren in Hotel Mastbosch op een rapportcijfer van hun vakbroeders elders uit het land. Er werd door de juryleden geproefd, geklopt, gedruwd, geroken, vergeleken en vooral gekeken. „Hoe zit het met de kleur, zijn de luchtbelletjes niet te groot? Hoe kenmerkt zich de korst?“ Volgens Chris Scholtens van het bakkersgilde, kun je een snee brood lezen. Jarenlange ervaring heeft hem geleerd op aspecten te letten waar iemand die bij de bakker een brood koopt aan voorbij gaat. „Dit brood is net te droog de oven ingegaan. Kijk maar naar de korst. Dat daar heeft er 1 à 2 minuten te

lang in gestaan. Dat ziet zelfs een leek aan de iets donkerder kleur“, luidde zijn onverbiddelijke kritiek. Naast het verplichte programma van een volkorenbrood, zachte puntjes, eierkoeken, een amandelpotterlet en een kerststol, was er ook ruimte voor de creativiteit van de twintig deelnemende bakkers zelf. Dat leidde tot mooie namen als Rogge Verdommeke, Bakkers amuse of Ouddorpse Duinroosje. De innovatieprijs, die door een consumentenjury werd uitgereikt, viel dit jaar bakker Douenburg uit Rijsbergen ten deel, met een zeer donker brood gevuld met cranberries en noten. Het beste volkorenbrood werd gisteren door de Bredase bakker Joppen gebakken, die eveneens als beste 'echte' allround bakker uit de bus kwam.

► Echte bakkers uit regio Zuid-west-Nederland deden mee aan wedstrijd in Hotel Mastbosch. De bakkers Joppen en Douenburg pakt de prijzen.

vakjury keurt de witte puntjes. foto Ingrid Bertens/het fotoburo

Fig. 02



Fig. 03



Fig. 04

of the outfit. Whereas publicly it is the most emphasized piece of the outfit. To explain this dissonance between actual practice and public perception, it is argued that the *Bakkersbuis* is a key part in the construction of the 'myth of the Dutch baker'.

THE MYTH OF THE DUTCH BAKER

A myth is in essence a way to read everyday objects and their form as being charged with meaning, as described by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (Barthes, 2009). The *Bakkersbuis* can be considered the vessel that combines the various facets of the bakery practice into a form.

This myth brings together not only craft and the craftsman, but relies on nostalgia as well.

The *Bakkersbuis* is embedded in more than 200 years of Dutch cultural and visual history, which makes the nostalgia argument fairly obvious.

A critical reflection through the *Bakkersbuis* is in its place because we often take 'matter' for granted, even though the objects, goods, fabrics, stuff and debris weave a complex web of meaning around us (Tynan, 2022). Maccioni & Leopolda (2009) state that clothing can be considered the armour of our physical, social, moral and cultural condition. In line with this, Loveday (2014) suggests that we should not dismiss garments like these as simple narrations of family folklore or mythologized versions of history.

The aspect of nostalgia of this myth can also be interpreted as a strategy for positive working class identification (Loveday, 2014).

Fashion reflects and extends economic tensions and conflicts (Partington, 2013), the *Bakkersbuis* being an expensive garment that could not be acquired easily has made the *Bakkersbuis* into a precious and well kept garment.

These arguments supply insights into why the *Bakkersbuis* became a special outfit worn in public. It becomes apparent that these practices shape when and where the garment is worn.

Making it an object of baker's pride and labour identity as a logical effect.

A parallel can be drawn regarding the work of Feitsma (2014) and Dutch fashion identity. Feitsma (2014) argues that fashion identities and myths are guided by *confirmation bias*: we can recognize a Dutch person through their specific Dutch brands (for instance, a *Gaastra* jacket) because the evidence overlaps with our belief of what Dutch people would wear.

This same bias shapes the bakers' identity as well: we recognize a baker through their *Bakkersbuis* because it overlaps with our beliefs which are in turn guided by the popular and visual history of the baker as discussed at the beginning. When the baker is wearing a *Bakkersbuis*, we recognize him as a baker.

When he is wearing something else we do not recognize him as a baker. This confirmation bias can be attributed to the fact that consumers create meanings by using their shared familiarity with other images and objects to make cross-media intertextual references (Partington, 2013) and in turn strengthening the fashion mythology surrounding the (sub)culture and historical constructions (Feitsma, 2014).

Looking closer at the historical construction of the bakery practice, Knutas (2013) argues that in the bakery craft there is an emphasis on the importance of the aesthetics and the association of tradition within the craft itself.

The baking craft has largely been technologized, and along with the exchange value aimed at increasing profit, the craft of baking bread, and the tradition of baking itself, has changed in character (Sennett, 2009).

Barbier *et al.* (2024) elaborate on these developments through exhibiting the changing craft from handwork to industrial machines.

Whereas the white attire as a visual marker stays present throughout time and all its visual imagery. This consistent visual marker of the *Bakkersbuis* throughout the ever technologized practice can be viewed through this lens of professionalism. Therefore, it is argued that the '*white coat effect*' (Brase & Richmond, 2004; Crutzen *et al.*, 2023) seen in the study of doctors and their garments, is at play here as well.

The *white coat effect* is a phenomenon where patient-physician interaction are influenced by the formal attire (white doctors coat).

A doctor wearing a white coat reinforces beliefs of professionalism and positively influences factors of trustworthiness for the patient.

Mapping this onto the case of the baker, we encounter the problem of the bakers not wearing the garment during practice.

However, we have seen the *Bakkersbuis* being worn during local competitions (Fig. 02), public events (Fig. 04), and in media such as YouTube tutorials. From this we can conclude that the visual sign of the *Bakkersbuis* is one of credibility

or trustworthiness through its recognition. Further endorsed by the ethnographic finding that the baker has only one *Bakkersbuis*, which is well conserved for these special public appearances. This faux-*white coat effect* relies on the *Bakkersbuis* being a visual sign for the more than 200 years of cultural history to communicate a sense of tradition, craftsmanship, and authenticity to the viewer. Even though the *Bakkersbuis* is not worn during the actual baking practice.

THE FASHION MYTHOLOGY OF THE DUTCH BAKER

To conclude, the baker's clothes represent the bakers' identity through their design and the cultural history they embody. It can be stated that the public perception of the baker and the *Bakkersbuis* is one-sided: the baker does indeed wear the *Bakkersbuis*, but not during the actual physical labour. This notion is not something harmful, or inherently false, rather an incomplete judgement formed by what can be seen by the public and what cannot, as for instance in the labour in the bakery-space. To echo the words of Maccioni & Leopolda (2009): regarding the workwear of various trades, the aprons, overalls, functional pants and jackets, smocks and clogs, generations of pastry chefs, mechanics, cooks or painters have recognized their uniform of protection and distinction. The *Bakkersbuis* is a form of pride and credibility in the visual representation of the baking world. This pride makes the garment ideal for the bakers public appearance which inherently reinforces the myth. The *Bakkersbuis* can be considered a uniform solely for public appearances and special events. Next to this, the faux-*white coat effect* creates a cycle of public appearances and confirmation of the baker wearing a *Bakkersbuis*, which deepens the myth in the public eye. The *Bakkersbuis* is more than a simple workwear garment or a remnant of Dutch nostalgia. It is a piece of clothing that embodies the bakery practice. When worn it is a sign of credibility: The *Bakkersbuis* is a vessel that represents the craft of the baker, the artisanal production of baked goods, and the authentic environment in which everything is conceived in. These aspects of meaning are weaved through the garment as a myth, more so than the blue and white checkered pants, the apron, or the hat have

achieved. The *Bakkersbuis* is a vessel for the idea and image of a 'true' baker.

All the while, embodying a central paradox: the *Bakkersbuis* symbolises the labour of baking even though it was never actually used in that labour, representing a case of mythological representation without the contemporary practice.

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CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] The *Bakkersbuis* depicted in the costume design by Cramer: Cramer, Rie, Costume design for the theatre play of Camera Obscura. 1940/1941; Collection of Allard Pierson, Source: ModeMuze,

[Fig. 02] Newspaper article depicting a bakery competition, 2007; Courtesy of the Bakkerij Douenburg archive,

[Fig. 03] Anton Douenburg at work in the bakery; Photograph courtesy of the Bakkerij Douenburg archive,

[Fig. 04] Anton Douenburg in the village parade; Photograph courtesy of the Bakkerij Douenburg archive.

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