

Atlantic heritage: Mutual, shared....?

By Alex van Stipriaan

Dear Colleagues & Friends,

Good morning. Yesterday a number of you presented the present state of the mutual cultural heritage in your own country. Today we will discuss the future of our mutual heritage more from an Atlantic perspective and in a more active setting. This means that there will be no speeches or papers except for the present one. Instead we will be working together on the contours of future mutual heritage projects. Therefore, I will keep it short. However, before pointing out the structure of today's workshop, it is good academic tradition to start with defining the concepts and tools we use, in order to make sure that no misunderstandings will rise while applying them later on.

In this case that seems to be an easy task: we will discuss cultural heritages from a mutual past, which can be found in Archives & Libraries (paper heritage); secondly what we have called Material Cultural Heritages, i.e. the field of museums, archaeology, monuments; and thirdly Intangible Cultural Heritages and Research, i.e. the field of anthropology, linguistics, musicology as well as the world of universities and research institutes.

I would not be a true academic if I would not immediately add that actually defining mutual cultural heritage is much more complex than it might seem at first sight. For example, we all know that uncountable publications have been dedicated to defining culture. And, not surprisingly, the same is true for heritages of culture. [SHEET]

I won't expand on this too long, so I'll give you just one example just make us stay alert and critical. Here is a quote from a work by Graeme Davison (2000) on Australian cultural heritage:

*"Definitions of cultural heritage are highly varied. Defining heritage can be the product of a single person or a group of people—it can be personal or social. Regardless, a fundamental question remains whether heritage is property ('things'), or a social, intellectual, and spiritual inheritance. It is our contention that human actions, our ideas, customs and knowledge are the most important aspects of heritage."*¹

UNESCO defines heritage as 'the product and witness of the different traditions and of the spiritual achievements of the past and . . . thus an essential element in the personality of peoples'. And Davison adds that to put it simpler: *heritage is what we value from the past. This reflects what we value or reject in our present surroundings, and what we anticipate for the future.*²

¹ Davison, Graeme 2000, *The use and abuse of Australian history*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney; Aplin, Graeme 2002, *Heritage identification, conservation, and management*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

² Graeme Davison, *The meaning of heritage*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991.

Now, two major problems arise from these definitions: First: is cultural heritage property, owned by someone or something? And secondly, who is the 'we' valuing the past and anticipating for the future. So what is ownership and who is 'we' when dealing with mutual cultural heritage?

When UNESCO uses the term mutual heritage, this organization is mainly referring to a worldwide community, a worldwide 'we' sharing tangible and intangible products from the past which should be protected and preserved, by putting it on a world heritage list. However this list is only a fraction of a fraction of what has been produced in the past and what can still be enjoyed. Therefore, money, power and politics decide what will be on the list of mutual world heritage and what will not.

Does this imply that the overwhelming rest is NOT mutual world heritage? And what does it mean that the list has been changing and keeps on changing fundamentally over time (for example the inclusion of landscapes). And what is to be expected when at first cultural heritage was limited by most cultural institutions, including UNESCO, to material culture only, and now, since the convention of 2003 Intangible heritage is considered at least as important, so we may ask ourselves if cultural heritage still has dimensions which, in the future, could be included too, but which we are not yet aware of now?

And who is the worldwide 'we', or how mutual is mutual when some groups or people claim particular cultural heritage within their realm to be there for their cause only, or if they even decide that it should be destroyed because it does not fit into their plans or ideology.

So, who's mutuality are we talking about and what do we mean by it?

Before going into the terminology let me reflect just a few seconds on the question of ownership, by taking the example of fort Elmina in Ghana. It was built by the Portuguese in 1482, conquered and expanded by the Dutch in 1637; the Dutch passed it on to the British in 1872 and finally it became Ghanaian with Independence, now half a century ago. The last few decades the fort has become a favorite site of pilgrimage for African Americans, who sometimes behave as if it is theirs. And as a consequence of this type of tourism the fort has become suddenly a spearhead in development and community projects of and for the Elmina population, we heard about that yesterday. Now, who actually owns this heritage site? Obviously, the state of Ghana does. But who are culturally and historically the mutual owners of this heritage? Not an easy one, but obviously necessary to think about.

Now back to terminology & definitions.

Actually, a number of different terms are used indiscriminately, pretending they all mean the same, but do they? The most frequently used are Mutual cultural heritage, Shared cultural heritage and Common cultural heritage.

But they are certainly not the only ones. The colonial perspective still resonates when coming across terms like 'overseas heritage', or 'cultural heritage abroad'.

Mutual heritage actually presupposes at least two parties involved whose perspectives on the particular heritage do not have to be the same, but whose claims are considered to be on equal footing, by all parties concerned.

Shared heritage, presupposes that all parties involved have a share in this particular heritage, but not necessarily the same type of share, nor equal parts.

Common heritage actually presupposes a community who has a specific culture and its heritages in common.

It turns out that in everyday practice we often use these three terms at random, which might be the cause of some of the intercultural problems that sometimes arise. Because the parties involved more often than not do NOT constitute a community, they are NOT equals, for instance when it comes to finances and they DON'T always share or have a share.

The web site of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a nice case in point. It has a special section on mutual cultural heritage. The title of this web page reads: **MUTUAL CULTURAL HERITAGE: POLICY FRAMEWORK** However, in the following text, without any explanation only the word 'common heritage' is used.

For example: *"The concept of common cultural heritage has attracted political interest for some years now."*

However, the ministry certainly is sensitive to the problem of definitions which to my opinion is rather unique in international heritage politics and I'd like to stress that this can't be appreciated enough.

For example, the web site states:

"There are a number of definitions of cultural heritage shared by different countries, both in informal use and in policy documents. Terms such as 'overseas cultural heritage', 'cultural heritage abroad' and 'common heritage' or 'mutual heritage' are often used indiscriminately. It seems sensible to establish a clear definition of common cultural heritage and determine its scope.

*The term **common cultural heritage** is used in this memorandum because it seems most accurately to express the notion that it is a heritage which all those concerned - the Netherlands as well as the partner country - agree must be preserved. It also reflects the idea that the Netherlands is not the only party with an interest in and responsibility for that heritage."* And the Ministry continues by defining even different categories of common heritage: *Common heritage is taken to mean both moveable and immovable cultural objects, which can be divided into three categories:*

- 1. Overseas cultural heritage: generally used for the periods of the Dutch East Indies and West Indies Companies and of colonial rule. [...] Prolonged interaction between cultures led to stylistic hybridization and to objects acquiring a new significance.*
- 2. Objects (including archives) the Dutch constructed in or transported to other countries [...] and for which they had no subsequent responsibility.*

3. *Objects now in the Netherlands but originating from countries with which the Netherlands once had a relationship of reciprocal cultural influence.*

However, despite the commendable attempt to be clear in terminology and what it stands for, the Ministry does not stick to its own choice for 'common heritage' and at times alternates it with 'mutual heritage'. Remarkably the term **shared** cultural heritage is not used, whereas, obviously the Netherlands and their former colonies share a lot of cultural heritage, ranging from Christianity to bureaucratic structures, whereas the products of that shared heritage, the archives, the stylistic hybrid objects, and so forth, do not seem to be common at all, in the sense that they are not inherited by some sort of community. Finally, it seems that despite the attempt at being sensitive to others, the definition still gives an impression of one sidedness. For example the phrase "... the Netherlands is not the only party with an interest in and responsibility for that heritage" seems to imply that there are of course other parties involved but that the Netherlands comes first (or am I over sensitive here?). Anyway, there are very interesting categories of shared heritage, in which the Netherlands is just one of the parties concerned and certainly not the most important one. Just one example.

I have done some research on the history of mermaid-like water goddesses in the Atlantic. In West Africa we know of Mami Wata or Water Mammy and other water goddess cults, in Suriname and Guyana, since slavery times Watramama or Watermama has been known, in Brazil the most famous water goddess is Yemanya, but mermaid like water spirits are also known. It does not seem to be too far fetched to assume that at least one of the influences in the evolution of this representation of African and Afro-American water goddesses were European representations of mermaids, for instance via figureheads on Dutch and other European ships.

This probably is not what the Ministry of culture had in mind while defining mutual heritage. The Dutch had or have only a small share in this shared, or is it common? Cultural heritage. Nevertheless it is a living part of culture also in the Netherlands, illustrated by the works of art I have come across in recent years in Dutch museums by contemporary artists depicting Watra Mama.³

The question now is if the at random use of heritage terms or concepts is a problem or not. It will not surprise you when I think it is problematic. The problem is that all heritages we are talking about here is related to the history of European expansion and colonialism and therefore subject from the beginning to a-symmetrical power relations, which have not stopped after independence. This unequal power dimension and antagonistic goals and priorities are part of the mutual cultural heritage too; or rather it is at the basis of it all. Therefore, it can not be separated from the specific heritage-products themselves. It is a heritage dimension typical of the post colonial era. What former colonial powers think to be mutual priorities might not be the priorities of the formerly colonized. Historical synchronicity in time and space should not be confused with mutuality, at least not as a given fact. And the same goes for the heritages of this historical synchronicity.

³ For example John Lie A Fo in the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam and Erwin de Vries in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

This became very obvious to me during the two local AWAD workshops I was involved in last June and July, on Curaçao and in Suriname. The first priority of the Antillean and Aruban and Surinamese delegates and heritage institutions, it seemed, was not so much the cultural and historical mutuality, or sharing with the Netherlands. That was more or less a given based on the assumption that Suriname as well as the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba have been Dutch constructions in itself, and therefore almost everything could be considered mutual. In both countries the question was much more how cultural heritage could be used to **create** mutuality, not with the Dutch but on a national level; how to create **national** sharing, how to create a national **community**. On the Antilles this creation or application of mutuality refers to the variety of island communities that constitute the Dutch Caribbean, in Suriname it refers to the variety of ethnic 'nations' in this country. The latter was made extra clear by the demand not to limit the Atlantic heritage to the Black Atlantic, but to include the Asian contribution to Surinamese society too. Asian indentured laborers, brought to the Caribbean by the Dutch obviously have produced heritage which belongs to the Atlantic world. This probably does not fit easily into Dutch definitions of Atlantic heritage; it does however from a Surinamese point of view. And this is but one example.

Of course, I am aware that long time & small scale colonies like Suriname and the Antilles and Aruba relate differently to their former colonizer than for example Brazil does the number eight economy in size of the world.

The point is that speaking about mutuality we should be very much aware of the different perceptions of the past and the resulting differences in present priorities, as well as, of course the imbalance in financial and technical resources.

Maybe the term 'mutual cultural heritage' should be reconsidered thoroughly, because is it not a contradiction in itself? Cultural heritage as a historical phenomenon is, by definition closely tied to the rise of the nation state in Europe and the accompanying ideology of nationalism. In the same way cultural heritage became part of nationalist discourse in late and post-colonial societies in the South, which more often than not was, and sometimes still is directed against the (former) colonizer. Therefore, we should be very critical of using terms like mutual, or shared or common in this respect. Let's not assume that we all subscribe to the same meaning, goals and priorities while using these terms. Being specific every time we refer to heritages and wonder what the real mutuality is from both sides, probably is a basic need when formulating transnational heritage projects.

Of course we share a lot as a consequence of a long history of interaction. The real sharing, however, is probably just starting now.

Thank you.

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