

Shared Heritage? Shared Responsibility?

Reflections on the role of 'shared' colonial heritage within capacity building programs in the postcolonial world

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Abstract

The Centre for International Heritage Activities (CIE) has been involved in developing Maritime and Underwater Cultural Heritage Programs (MUCH) in Asia and Africa since the 1990s. Although these programs aimed for a general development of capacity and awareness for MUCH in the specific region, often the focal point of the program was international (colonial) heritage sites. Although understandable from the practical implication of funding opportunities and available expertise of the international trainers, our experiences showed that this focus was not ideal for the establishment of a sustainable policy on MUCH management in the post colonial countries.

Building on that experience CIE has developed a vision on international cooperation that places MUCH in a broader perspective by including a platform of local and international stakeholders in all stages of the program. Through discussions about the relevance of the MUCH sites for the various stakeholders awareness can be raised for each other's perspective on this type of heritage.

Since the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) *2001 Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage* (2001 Convention) explicitly promotes international cooperation and given the reality that many MUCH sites in Asia and Africa are linked with the past of European expansion, it is important to develop a vision on the role of this colonial heritage that is seen by some as 'shared heritage' within the national, regional and global context.

This paper evaluates the MUCH programs of the CIE in Asia and Africa and hopes with this to open the discussion on best practices in establishing a sustainable MUCH program on a local/regional level but promotes at the same time international cooperation to be inclusive for all types of MUCH.

Introduction

From the 16th century, Dutch mariners explored the world outside Europe in the wake of other European nations. In the space of only a few decades they built up an international shipping and trade network. The diverse activities that derived from this commercial expansion, military expeditions and the later colonial rule have left many traces behind. For quite some time, the Netherlands has been interested in the legacy of the age of Dutch and European expansion. This is seen as an important period that is associated in the Dutch national memory with mixed feelings of pride and shame. In many countries where the traces of this period have been preserved, this period also forms an important marker in their history and national identity.

Netherlands policymakers introduced *Mutual Cultural Heritage* in the 1990's to label the heritage of the Dutch expansion and colonial period. This term, which can also be translated and used as *Common* or *Shared Cultural Heritage*, has been the subject of some debate because the remnants of a Dutch presence do not automatically lead to mutual appreciation (Fienieg and Parthesius 2008).

The overall objective of the Dutch Mutual Cultural Heritage Policy (MCHP 2009-2012) is to, "collaborate on the sustainable maintenance and management of common cultural heritage, on the basis of reciprocal political and substantive involvement". The aims and the associated funds of the MCHP also provided an excellent basis for programs focusing on the management of Maritime and Underwater Cultural Heritage (MUCH) sites like shipwrecks and maritime installations that the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the West India Company (WIC) left behind worldwide. Since the 1990's, the author and the Centre for

International Heritage Activities (CIE) have been involved in the development of MUCH capacity building programs in Asia and Africa.

Between 1998 and 2007 a program was implemented around the remains of the VOC-ship *Avondster* wrecked in 1659 in the Bay of Galle, Sri Lanka. In 2007 another MUCH capacity building program was initiated in Southern Africa (Tanzania, Zanzibar and South Africa). Although the funding still came mainly through Dutch funds, the set-up of these programs changed from a focus on colonial heritage to a focus on the development of a local vision on the relevance and importance of MUCH. The Dutch Culture and Development programme turned out to be another valuable framework (and funding source) for the set-up of more general MUCH programs that not only focus on the remains of the European expansion but also on the development of strategies to raise awareness for local perspectives on MUCH. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention 1972 and the 2001 Convention formed a framework for the international cooperation.

In this paper, the structure, results and development of some of these MUCH programs are discussed. Specifically, the programs in Sri Lanka and South Africa are compared in order to investigate the role that colonial/shared cultural heritage has in the development of a sustainable capacity building program. Is it possible to use a colonial heritage site to stimulate a local perspective on MUCH and to build capacity in the partner country?

Sri Lanka: the Avondster project

Since the early 1990's, a team of Sri Lankan and international maritime archaeologists, historians and museum curators has conducted research, on request from the Sri Lankan authorities, in the Bay of Galle and in the extensive archives in Sri Lanka and the Netherlands. Underwater surveys have revealed an impressive number of heritage sites, dating from the 13th century up to modern times (Parthesius 2007).

Based on this first inventory of underwater heritage sites in the Bay of Galle, an ambitious capacity building programme was formulated in order to establish suitable infrastructure for the management of MUCH sites. In 2001, a Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU) was formed under the Mutual Heritage Centre, managed by the Sri Lankan government agency, the Central Cultural Fund, in cooperation with international partners in the Netherlands, Australia and Mexico, and sponsored by the Netherlands Cultural Fund (derived from MCHP). Their first major project was the excavation of the *Avondster*, one of five Dutch East-Indiamen wrecked in the World Heritage Site Galle (for details see Wijamunige this volume).

During the 1993, 1996 and 1997 expeditions to Galle Harbor, the wreck of the *Avondster* was discovered and identified (Green, *et al.* 1998). A survey and test-excavation in 1998 and 1999 revealed a site in an excellent state of preservation; a rich source of material finds and historical knowledge was anticipated. The wreck site is situated about 80 metres off the beach in about 4 metres of water. From a diving safety perspective it was deemed suitable for training, although visibility was often poor. The site was relatively easy to interpret underwater, enabling the archaeologists to understand the construction techniques used on a 17th century East-Indiaman. The *Avondster* was also historically well documented, which allowed the Sri Lankan archaeologists to be introduced to historical-archaeological research.

The *Avondster* site was also selected because it was under threat. Due to changes on land caused by the building of a sea wall and the channeling from storm-

water drains, the *Avondster* had become increasingly exposed throughout the 1990s (Parthesius 1998).

The *Avondster* project had a number of aims in addition to the survey, excavation and conservation of the site and the artefacts. One of the primary goals was, through the involvement of the Sri Lankan archaeologists and conservators, to build up local capacity and the associated infrastructure, so that they could continue with a maritime archaeology programme in Sri Lanka into the future. Another important goal was the development of a Maritime Museum, based to some extent on the material recovered from the *Avondster* but also incorporating Sri Lanka's broader maritime history, its sites and the people involved.



Figure 1. NAS training of the members of the Maritime Archaeological Unit, Sri Lanka, 2001

The opportunity to conduct a professional archaeological excavation using the highest possible standards was seen as an appropriate step to take in protecting the site. It would also demonstrate how important archaeological information could be obtained and disseminated to the community. The *Avondster*-project involved the pre-disturbance survey of the exposed part of the site, excavation of trenches in the bow, midships and stern areas, and the recovery of about 3,000 artefacts, an iron cannon and a large iron anchor. In addition to the archaeological requirements, the development of a conservation infrastructure, conservation training, and implementation of conservation techniques were also deemed to be of equal

importance (Parthesius, *et al.* 2005). In cooperation with the Conservation Department of the Western Australian Maritime Museum, the Amsterdam Historical Museum and The Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia in Mexico, a well-equipped conservation laboratory was built. A small team of conservators was trained in many of the techniques required to conserve maritime archaeological objects.

Since the inception of the Avondster-project in 1998, the primary aim of the work carried out by the foreign consultants has been to train members of the MAU as conservators and maritime archaeologists so that they would have the skills to function autonomously. This aspect has been emphasized during every field season. As part of this training, many foreign consultants with various skills have worked with the MAU team. The use of different consultants has broadened the MAU team's exposure to different experiences, thereby giving them the benefit of alternative approaches and many years of accumulated experience and knowledge. To accompany the training provided by specialist consultants to the Sri Lankan team, a detailed system of assessment was designed. A very significant outcome of this project was that the Sri Lankan team collaborated with the foreign consultants who produced a two-volume publication on the work implemented on the *Avondster* (Parthesius 2007). In addition, through a UNESCO initiative, the Galle MAU served as a regional training centre in maritime archaeology for the Asia/Pacific region with field schools in 2006, 2007 and 2008 (<http://www.unescobkk.org/index.php?id=4944>).



Figure 2. Preparing a barrel for raising from the Avondster-site, Galle, Sri Lanka, 2004

The Avondster-project is considered a success but there is an important side note to make that refers to the sustainability of MUCH management through well-established awareness and a sense of ownership. The program in Sri Lanka was possible because a Dutch VOC vessel was under threat and we could persuade the Netherlands Cultural Fund to invest in a capacity building programme around this colonial shipwreck that has been labeled 'mutual heritage'. The built capacity turned out to be sustainable because the focus on a colonial shipwreck against the background of the fortified city of Galle is seen as important heritage and connected with the cultural identity of Sri Lanka.

Maritime and Underwater Cultural Heritage (MUCH) Programme in Southern Africa

On invitation by South Africa and Tanzania, the CIE took the opportunity in 2007 to build on the experience gained in Sri Lanka and formulated a four-phased MUCH capacity building programme that recognized the importance of establishing a local tradition and vision on this specific type of heritage. Key in this set-up is to bring all relevant stakeholders together and encourage full involvement, ranging from political commitment to community engagement. Unlike the project in Sri Lanka, the focus on Mutual Cultural Heritage in South Africa would not be developing a framework for the 'new MUCH programme'. For South Africa this would start the cooperation on the wrong footing since the colonial heritage has a negative annotation. An 'open definition process' started with multiple stakeholders deciding relevant subjects and sites for a MUCH programme. A universal framework for the MUCH programme was found in the context of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention 1972 and the 2001 Convention.



Figure 3. Surveying an intertidal shipwreck on Robben Island, South Africa, 2010.

South Africa

Since 2007 CIE has assisted the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) in developing a MUCH program in South Africa. The Netherlands involvement came about through their funding contribution to the program through the Netherlands Culture and Development Program. South Africa contains some of the oldest evidence of human occupation in the world and some of this evidence may be found around its coastline and underwater. The ongoing importance, use and exploitation of the sea and inland waterways by communities are evident today from numerous types of sites, traditional cultural practices and customs. Many shipwrecks from the activities of foreign explorers, traders and colonialists can also be found in its waters. South Africa therefore contains a range of tangible and intangible heritage, significant and relevant to contemporary communities and contributing toward the cultural identity of the country.

The workshops organized on Robben Island in 2010 and 2011 included a number of participants, particularly those from South African stakeholders other than SAHRA, being educated in parts of the NAS theoretical and practical training program. One of the aims of the practical workshops was to build-up a database of the Robben Island MUCH sites (on land and underwater). Robben Island and its surrounding waters contain in excess of 100 sites (many with poor provenance and lacking documentation) and the outcomes of the practical work will assist the Robben Island Museum in beginning the documentation and management of this component of its cultural landscape.

Apart from the direct capacity that has been built amongst various representatives of government agents, students, volunteers and of course the SAHRA staff, the project has an important focus on the development of public awareness and an African vision on MUCH. The discussions with many stakeholders and relevant communities have led to the selection of so-called "Legacy Sites", representing the vision on MUCH in South Africa. They are not intended to be an exhaustive list, they are simply 'highlights' to begin to describe how diverse South Africa's relationship with water actually is. In this stage of the programme four Legacy Sites have been selected:

The shipwreck site of the *Barrel Wreck in the Table Bay* shows the strong linkages of South Africa with an international shipping network (Sharfman 2012). It was selected as a legacy site because not only is it a good example of a 'traditional' underwater archaeological site but it is relatively easy to access and monitor, thus use for training and specialized studies can help answer conservation and management questions regarding similar sites.

Robben Island is also linked with the international maritime connections. As a place of isolation, it has a long history of banishment and imprisonment, stretching back to the first settlers who brought their political opponents from the colonies in the Far East (Deacon 1996). The fact that the site is an Island means that almost all the activities that took place there have an inherent connection with the ocean.

The *fish weirs at Stillbaai and Arniston* are an important element in the MUCH sites because they represent the relationship of local communities with the sea. These stonewall fish traps are of undetermined age but were used by local fishermen for at least the past century. The fish weirs could be anything

from 200 to 2000 years old. This poses several interesting questions regarding traditional fishing practices and interactions between settlers and indigenes.

Lake Fundudzi has been identified as Legacy Site due to its intangible connection with water. The lake is situated in the northeast of the Limpopo Province and is viewed as the only natural inland lake in Southern Africa. For the Vhavenda people, however, the lake is more than just a natural water body, as it forms a rich heritage of folklore, myths and ceremonial rituals. It is their burial site and is therefore sacred and believed to be the home of ancestral spirit of the Vhatavhatsindi people who claim their ancestors discovered the lake when they moved into South Africa from Zimbabwe (Sharfman, 2012). The living heritage that surrounds the lake, such as the communities' cultural practices, could be extrapolated to a broader understanding of African ways and means of dealing with its past, for instance broader African religious and spiritual relationships with water. These practices often provide a tangible element to the intangible aspects of spirits and their mediums with water. Broader research needs to be included in the submission as water is a central feature in the living heritage of numerous people.



Figure 4. Lake Fundudzi, Limpopo, South Africa, 2010.

Considerations and conclusions

As emphasized by the Avondster-project, sustainability in a country or region is only possible when a capacity building programme has been put together in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders (political, academic and bureaucratic). To obtain this, it is important that an awareness of the different values of maritime and underwater cultural heritage (MUCH) is appreciated between all stakeholders. It is in that context also necessary to create and implement practicable measures to stimulate public

awareness. This can be achieved in part through community engagement programmes, which implement MUCH projects for the benefit of contemporary communities. In addition to reviving or helping to maintain traditional cultural practices and protect and preserve indigenous sites in less developed countries, one of the benefits could be an economic gain through the re-use of UCH and through tourism managed by the local community.

Cultural heritage sites from the colonial period, that have been labeled Mutual Cultural Heritage from the Dutch perspective, take a prominent position in both Sri Lanka and South Africa. Through the nature of the European expansion, many of the remains of this period (e.g. port cities, harbor installations, fortifications and shipwrecks) can be considered MUCH sites. The fact that they are located in prominent places and that the Netherlands consider it Mutual Cultural Heritage, doesn't mean automatically that the partner countries may also consider it important heritage linked with their own cultural identity.

Sri Lanka and South Africa are different in that respect. In Sri Lanka the built heritage of the so-called *Dutch Period* (1640-1796) is considered heritage of 'Dual Parentship'. The World Heritage Site Galle is considered as the highlight of that heritage. The wreck of the VOC-ship *Avondster* does not fall under that concept. It was in a sense new heritage because before its discovery in 1993 neither the Netherlands nor Sri Lanka were aware of its existence. Placed in the context of Galle, but not as a product of Sri Lanka-Dutch design, the *Avondster*-site was considered Mutual Cultural Heritage instead of heritage of Dual Parentship.¹ This concept made the *Avondster* very suitable and reciprocal for research and for the development of capacity and heritage management strategies for this site. However, it kept the perspective on the MUCH sites in the whole of Sri Lanka very narrow.

The context for cooperation in South Africa was totally different. Cultural heritage plays an important role in the development of the 'New South Africa' after the first democratic elections of 1994. Cultural identity is key in the nation building process after the country was divided and scattered under the Apartheid regime (1948-1994). Although the authorities are acting very responsibly towards the inclusion of the cultural heritage of the former repressors, it is clear that VOC heritage is not generally and popularly linked with the South African cultural identity. Consequently these types of sites could not be a starting point for the set-up of a capacity building program. The cooperation was therefore centered on the technical assistance that international experts could bring to the development of MUCH management in South Africa. Since stimulating the development of a local vision on MUCH is a key activity in the CIE's capacity building vision, this element was also included in the programme. The sometimes-heated discussions during the workshops on the relevance of MUCH for South Africa led to a vision on the heritage that expressed the relationship of the communities with the sea and water in general. The identification of the four Legacy Sites shows how inclusive this vision is.

The work that is in progress on the Legacy Sites has only scratched the surface of the rich and diverse MUCH of South Africa. A great deal of work is still required. This will entail an examination of the challenges of redefining MUCH and the collecting of data to describe and analyze the sites. With diversification of the scope of MUCH comes the question of fitting MUCH into the heritage themes that are currently significant in South Africa. Is the new approach to MUCH relevant, and how are the identified sites relevant to all South Africans? The field has moved beyond

¹ Ironically the site can be considered as heritage of Anglo-Dutch dual parentship since the *Avondster* was a captured and modified ship from the English East India Company.

the confines of “physical sites”, “maritime” or “underwater” cultural heritage towards an integrated and holistic, seamless study of heritage associated with varied bodies of water within which tangible and intangible heritage can be explored. This is a very exciting process of reciprocity in which we could assist with the transfer of technical skills and knowhow, and where together we created a platform of discussion in the region that has led to a unique vision on ‘water heritage’ from an African perspective.

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