

Common Cultural Heritage

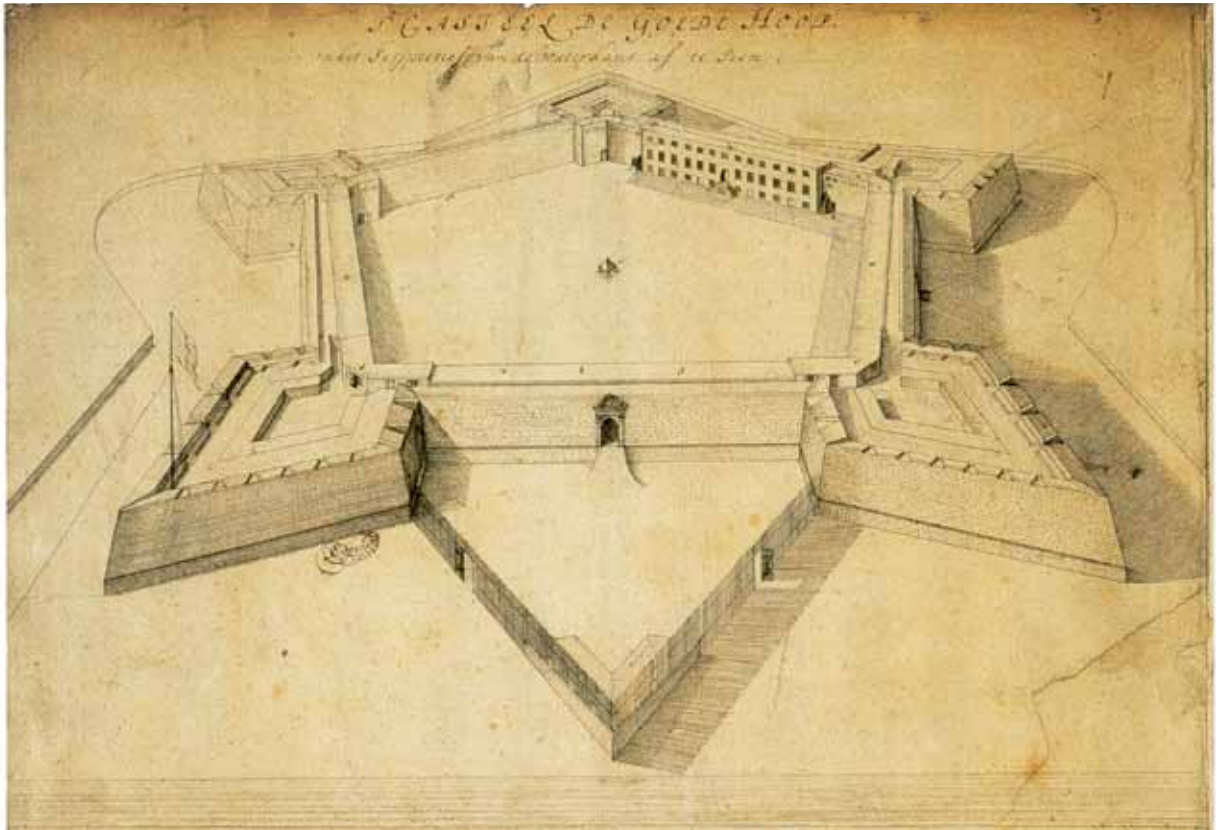
Work in Progress South Africa – the Netherlands

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[ROBERT PARTHESIUS AND ANOUK FIENIEG]

Following other European nations, from the sixteenth century on Dutch seafarers also took to the world. In the space of a few decades they built up an international shipping and trade network and Dutch settlements were established in the four corners of the earth. The diverse activities that derived from this commercial expansion, military expeditions and the later colonial rule have left many traces behind. Obvious examples of these remains are forts, warehouses, churches, waterworks, sunken ships and even complete towns. Less tangible, but still a striking presence, is the Dutch language and culture that has left its mark in various places. The Netherlands has been interested for quite some time in this legacy of the age of Dutch and European expansion - an important period that is associated in our national memory with feelings of both pride and shame. And in the many countries where traces of these contacts with the Netherlands have been preserved this period often forms an important marker in their history and national identity. A new term has been coined for the traces of the Dutch expansion: *'Gemeenschappelijk Cultureel Erfgoed'*, Common Cultural Heritage. This term, which can also be translated as *'mutual'* or *'shared'* Cultural Heritage, is subject to some debate because remnants of a Dutch presence do not automatically lead to appreciation from both sides and heritage status (see A. Fienieg, R. Parthesius et al.: *Heritage trails: International cultural heritage policies in a European perspective* in Oostindie, G., *Migration and cultural heritage in the Dutch colonial world*, KITVL Press, Leiden, 2008).

In recent decades a variety of common cultural heritage projects have been implemented in the areas of monument management, co-operation on archives, the history of migration and archaeology. In general these projects come within the normal cultural co-operation between the Netherlands and various partner countries and are concerned not only with preservation of the cultural heritage but also with building up the partner countries' capacity to take permanent responsibility for the management and conservation of that cultural heritage. Because these projects are of a co-operative nature, at first sight *'common cultural heritage'* appears to be a charming term that radiates equality. But on closer consideration it is less obvious that the heirs of the coloniser and the colonised should both attach the same value to a shared heritage site. Because what we inherit does not exist in a vacuum but is the product of interpretation,



and that depends on the identity of whoever ascribes value to it.

In implementing a common cultural heritage policy the Netherlands appears incapable of handing over all control of its overseas heritage to its former trading-posts and colonies. With the power of identifying what shall and shall not be classified as common heritage (and of the money attached to the co-operation concerning this heritage), the Netherlands continues to select and create memorial sites from its colonial past in its partner countries.

In this article we shall look more closely at just how 'common' the common cultural heritage is in South Africa and in so doing look also at attitudes to the traces of the Dutch presence. The term 'common cultural heritage' is probably too limited to cover all the many layers and facets (and thus potential heirs) of these remains, many of which have also been playing a part in a different context for centuries.

Traces of the Dutch presence in South Africa can be found in a variety of forms. The most obvious are the physical remains left by the Dutch East India Company or VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) in the West Cape region,

Castle of Good Hope.
As seen from the Waterfront,
by Jan Wittebol, pen drawing
on paper, *Nationaal Archief*,
c.1680.

the later site of the city of Cape Town. The physical evidence of this presence is not only Cape Castle, discussed below as a case study of the commonality of common cultural heritage, but also, for instance, the many kilometres of VOC archives that are now accommodated in the Cape archive. And in addition a further portion of the VOC's past lies off-shore and along the coast of South Africa beneath the water. Not all the ships heading for the revictualling station on the Cape made it, and not all those that left with fresh supplies were able to defy the Atlantic and Indian Oceans that meet off South Africa.

The numerous missions to South Africa undertaken by the Dutch Protestant churches resulted in a large number of small churches, and sometimes even complete mission settlements such as the well-known Genadendal (or Valley of Grace).

And finally, a 'speaking' trace of the Netherlands can be found in Afrikaans. This language, with English the most widely spoken of the eleven official South African languages, is a melting-pot of Dutch, native Cape tongues and Malaysian and Portuguese influences that Dutch people today can read fairly easily, but find much harder to speak.

An upgraded *lieu de mémoire*

In 1957 the South African historian Punt decided to erect a little memorial in the middle of the Kruger Park. The small bronze plaque commemorates an historical event that (probably) took place there on 12 July 1725. On that date there was an armed confrontation between the local population and a VOC expedition led by François de Cuiper (Frans De Kuiper) that was investigating the southern African hinterland for commercial potential. The expedition ended in a fiasco and would certainly have been completely forgotten had Punt not seized on it, during the Apartheid regime, as an excuse for creating a *lieu de mémoire* to the white presence in this area. Punt writes: *'5 July 1725 is an important date in the history of the Low Veld and the National Park, for on that day the first white men looked upon that area.'*

A good forty years later, a few years after the political revolution, it turned out that this monument was still in existence, even though people thought that with the decolonisation of South Africa's history it could well be got rid of. When the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) was asked why this monument was even upgraded in 2009, the reason appeared to be the pursuit of social cohesion. The Afrikaners, unlike the English, are clearly regarded as South African.

Why, when there are more significant and obvious examples, is it worth including this one in the overview of common cultural heritage? Because it shows the complexity of what comes to be regarded as *'heritage'* in a society. At first the Afrikaners saw themselves as separate from the VOC, yet today this link is being reinstated. At present the memorial is not officially listed as common cultural heritage, but it is certainly a monument that reminds us of a shared moment in Dutch and South African history. And it illustrates the disparity of interpretation that can occur between the population groups of South Africa. Bringing about social cohesion among these groups is a complex enough process, even without the Netherlands seeking a place in the South African identity.



Castle of Good Hope and Table Mountain.

Town was later founded as an adjunct to this castle. The VOC fortress on the Cape of Good Hope served as a revictualling station. To enable it to fulfil this function properly the VOC allowed so-called '*vrijburgers*' (free citizens) to settle on the Cape. They set themselves up as farmers (*boeren* in Dutch), and so the necessary supplies of food became available. Most of these farmers were former employees of the Company. The *vrijburger* population expanded rapidly, driving more and more of the indigenous population off the land. There were also a great many slaves living on the Cape; these had been brought by the VOC from Madagascar and Asia. Cape Town was run by the VOC. The *vrijburgers* had no role in government, and this led to tensions. This Dutch version of the story evokes feelings of pride at the great days of the Netherlands, the strength of its trade and exports, and also pride in the building itself which is still standing so many centuries later. But of shame, too, for colonialism and its feelings of Eurocentric superiority.

Repositioning the Castle

In South Africa people look at the castle in a number of ways. If you take a guided tour of Cape Castle, it is provided by the Castle Control Board. This organisation is connected to the Ministry of Defence, which manages the castle. The guide described how the castle was founded, its unique classical elements, how it was taken over by the English, and the restoration in the '80s when English additions were demolished and the original Dutch elements put back. All in all, it is a guided tour that clearly follows the history as seen from the Netherlands, with a lot of attention to the Dutch part of that history. So far we have been concerned here with a clear example of Dutch heritage. The role of the South African population, unlike that of the colonists, receives little attention in the story.

The fort's function as a visitor centre has been expanded by a number of rooms where exhibitions can be held. One of the organisations that do this is Iziko Museums of Cape Town, a body which comes under the Ministry of Art and Culture. The castle's history and the way it is presented are given more context

in Iziko's version of the story, which stresses that the fort's purpose was to exclude. It thus symbolised the power of the army and the colonists. The castle acted as a symbol of repression and the unjust policy of apartheid. Even the floor-plan of the castle contributed to this, since from 1972 on it was used as the logo for the South African air force. Later the castle even became the logo for the entire army. Iziko wants to emphasise that the castle does not conflict with the new South African society but is on the contrary a part of it. It looks at the site of the castle, which was an important place for the people who lived there as early as the Stone Age. Later, in the Dutch period, it continued to be important to everyone because all centres, both political and economic, were based in Cape Town and the castle. This affected not only the many soldiers and seamen but also the *vrijburgers*, the slaves and the local Khoi-San population. These last continued to regard the castle as an important place. Up to 1811 the castle remained multifunctional, until during the second British occupation it took on an exclusively military function. Slowly the image of the castle became one with the image of British imperialism. Later in the nineteenth century the Afrikaners, descendants of the *vrijburgers*, began to regard the castle as their heritage. When in 1888 there were plans to knock down some sections of the



Panorama of Cape Town (one of six joined sheets), by J. Jones. Watercolour on paper, Rupert Museum Stellenbosch, c. 1808. The Union Jack can be seen flying from the Castle.



castle it was they who protested against it. In the early days of apartheid the castle served as the setting for a festival celebrating Jan van Riebeeck. Later it was also the site of cruel and secret acts of apartheid terrorism.

The castle's custodian, the Ministry of Defence, is sending a message that is no longer appropriate in this changing society - a message that coincides with the place which the castle has been given in Dutch history. Whereas its custodians tell a tale of Dutch and English people who built and ran the castle, one section of South Africa's inhabitants associates the castle with repression and

apartheid. And some parts of the story are left untold. Organisations such as Iziko and SAHRA are trying to eliminate this discord by writing other parties into the story and thus giving the castle more of a South African identity. An identity that goes back further than that of the Dutch because it can be taken back to the Stone Age. The castle is about far more than the relationship between the Netherlands and South Africa. Gradually attempts are being made to make it South African again. This makes Cape Castle more of a common cultural heritage than it previously was.

Accepting many perspectives

Of course there is some common ground to be found. For instance, in Dutch history both as related by the castle guides and that to be read in Dutch history books. Or in the location now occupied by the castle, but which has been a place of significance for some South Africans for much longer. According to SAHRA, for a long time many inhabitants of South Africa viewed the castle not

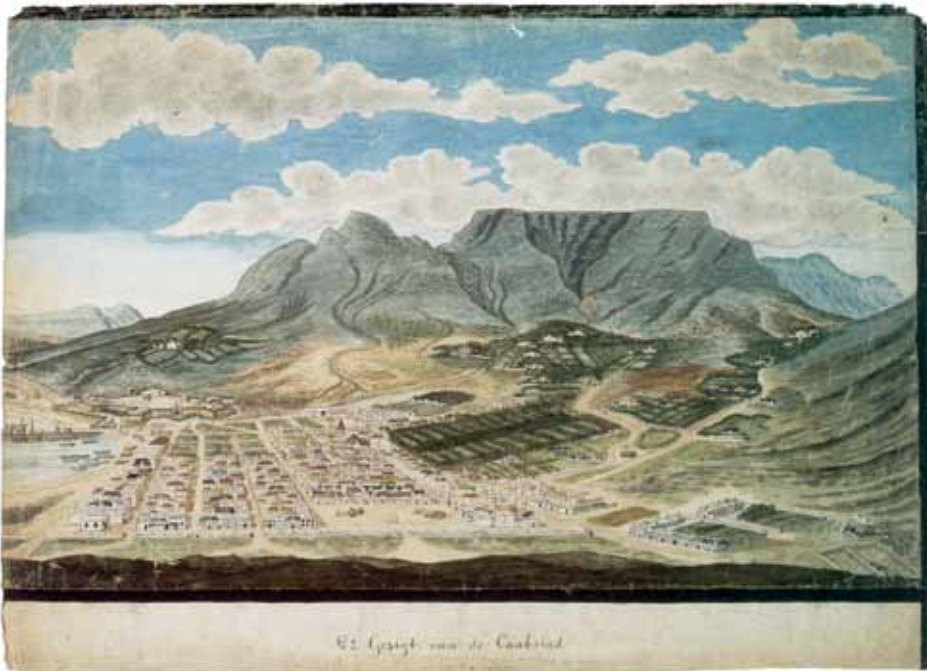


as South African but as a symbol of Western white colonial repression. Over the last ten years the abolition of apartheid has changed that here. The fact that the castle was built by the local inhabitants and slaves in South Africa bolsters the idea that this is more their own construction. In addition, in the post-apartheid era many South Africans are beginning to realise that the colonial history and apartheid are part of the history of South Africa, and therefore an inseparable part of that country's people and identity. In South Africa a lively debate is currently in progress concerning the re-interpretation of the national history, under the aegis of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This commission is trying to collect memories of the apartheid period. A difficult task, as some

South Africans do not want to look back, only forwards.

But instead of focusing on the common features of the heritage shared by the Netherlands and South Africa it is far more interesting to accept the different perspectives, focus on the diversity of that heritage and stimulate curiosity about its various layers. This may perhaps weaken the shared nature of the heritage, but it is really the cooperation between the Netherlands and South Africa on heritage matters that makes the relationship so worthwhile. By setting up and carrying out joint projects a new closeness is revealed. This creates space in the thinking about heritage and capacity in the whole heritage field, which gives heritage good standing in the community and helps to protect it. If education can also be given a place in this cooperation, we shall have the key to a very promising future for this past. ■

Translated by Sheila M. Dale



View of Cape Town,
by Johannes Schumacher.
Watercolour on paper,
Collectie Swellengrebel,
c.1777.

www.heritage-activities.org

www.sahra.org.za

www.iziko.org.za