CASE STUDY NINE

*Yesterday’s Knowledge, Tomorrow’s Future. Learning from the Elders*

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Project background

In 2007 we organized a workshop to discuss the options for setting up projects where sharing authority, sharing knowledge and sharing heritage could be made central to our practice (Broekhoven et. al. 2010). The most prominent conclusion that came out of the meetings at our museum was the evident need to reconfigure our praxis. We should not just set up projects next to our everyday practice as we had been doing for years with projects in Mali, Indonesia and Nicaragua. Rather, this kind of praxis should form an integral part of our institution’s strategic plan: to be successful, co-creative knowledge production should be an institutionalized praxis. In
the discussions with the invited experts, it became clear that there was not a miracle recipe we should follow to establish this praxis, but that many pilot-projects were the way to go. We would just have to try, fail quickly, evaluate, and keep on prototyping and experimenting.

We planned to work with communities from Suriname, since some of our most important collections are from indigenous communities in Suriname. The Linguistics department at Leiden University, our partner in this project, had longstanding relationships with the traditional knowledge carriers and villages in Suriname where they had done many years of research.

**Aims and outcomes**

The first consultations in 2007 set out to discuss the mutual aims and outcomes. Initially, we found that the University and Museum had very different outcomes in mind. We were thinking of CD's and educational products with modules on language, art, history, law and economics of the Surinamese indigenous communities and a website; cf. Carlin and Van Broekhoven, paper presented at Leiden 2007 Sharing Knowledge and Cultural Heritage Expert meeting) our partners had a different opinion. As we were only designing the project still at that time, this was not a problem. After mutual consideration we jointly adapted our ideas during the first visit. While seeing the collections our consultant Basja Marius Merenke and Sanoe Schelts had very different aims and outcomes in mind. Their advice was that we should invite people representing the different communities to come and discuss their heritage with us.

In 2009 and 2010 representatives of several Kari’ná, Trio, Wayana and Lokono communities visited our museum to share knowledge on our collections and their context with a multidisciplinary team of linguists, conservators, curators, archaeologists, anthropologists and computer scientists. The information gathered during the consultations was linked to existing documentation and, when possible, inserted into our database system (a process which is actually confronting us with new challenges right now).

All information and recordings were shared with the community curators and shared through community meetings organized by the representatives upon their return home.

In 2011 a communal meeting with the 10 representatives and 15 more representatives of different villages was organized in Paramaribo to discuss the outcomes of the project. In 2011 a public meeting was organized at Bernardsdorp, a migratory town close to Paramaribo where representatives of many different indigenous peoples of Suriname live. Here all representatives shared their experiences. Each participant had follow-up projects and plans. Many of those are currently being developed by them and (new) partners both in Suriname, French Guyana, Guyana and the Netherlands.
Are/were you merely providing access / information or is this a project with mutual aims and outcomes?

The aim was to share knowledge on cultural heritage and learn from each other through the consultations. Performance, ritual, music and ceremonial actions form an integral part of these kinds of consultations, as do in-detail-research on function, collection history and material and technique determination. Knowledge was generously shared on many levels, at times it was also negotiated and contested. We had agreed with our conservation management team that handling would be permitted after mutual agreement, and obviously, after informed consent on the risks involved.

How were the aims/outcomes agreed?

Possible outcomes where discussed as we progressed, and often unforeseen outcomes were taking place. They are —according to all participants— to be seen as either direct outcomes or (usually) spin-offs from the project. They include an MoU to set up an Indigenous Heritage Center in Suriname; Communal Houses being planned or built in different villages; Language and Culture Courses being organized at several villages; gatherings to develop one orthography of Lokono language between Guyana, French Guyana and Suriname (published booklet has been published by Konrad Rybka and Purcy Martin).

Who are/were the lead personnel on the project?
Dr. Laura Van Broekhoven, Dr. Eithne Carlin, Dr. Jimmy Mans

Who are/ were you working?

We worked with both traditional leaders (Kapitein and Basja) of several villages, usually in combination with knowledge carriers (such as shamans and medicine women) and young educational staff. The community curators are representatives of Kari’na, Trio (Tareno), Lokono and Wayana speaking communities.

Are you clear about why you are working with this selected group and with their role as representative of others? Please comment:

People were selected because they were what we called ‘knowledge carriers’: they were on the basis of their knowledge, former involvement with cultural or language projects. In most instances they were (selected by) the traditional authority of the village.
Consultations at ‘s Gravezande. At the table Farideh Fekrsanati (conservator NME); Ignatius Willebrodus Mande (teacher Donderskamp), Alfons Ferdinand Mande (kapitein Donderskamp); Jasper Luijendijk (intern); Margrit Reuss (conservator NME); Eithne Carlin (professor and co-projectleader); Paneshi Panekke (kapitein Amotopo) in front behind camera: Jimmy Mans (research NME and Leiden University). © Laura Van Broekhoven.

Assessment of authority: why are/were you dealing with this individual or group; how are/were they empowered to speak on behalf of a community? Are/were you satisfied with their ‘credentials’?

The villages we selected were villages we (largely Eithne and Jimmy) had worked with for several years. This ensured a sustainable contact and also a long term involvement both during and after the project. In general the individuals were selected by the Community Council to represent the community. Since in 2009 only males were selected, in 2010 we tried to also involve women. For women, however, it is more difficult to be away from home as their role in the household and community is a large one.

Who were the main partners?

Stichting Kuluwajak, Apetina; Stichting Meu, Kwamalasamutu; Stichting Bernharddorp; Het dorp Amotopo; Het dorp Cassipora; Het dorp Donderskamp; Dr. Andreas Schlothauer, independent researcher, Berlin; Leiden University (Faculty of Humanities and Faculty of Archaeology); Lim A Po Instituut, Paramaribo.
Is/was it a museum-to-museum/cultural centre project?:
A project with a variety of partners (academic, museum, independent researchers and indigenous communities)

What are/were the budgets and other resources? (e.g. grant awards, dedicated staff, sponsorship):
The museum and university generously offered dedicated staff (curators, researchers, conservators). The Embassy of the Netherlands in Paramaribo and Erfgoed Nederland in the Netherlands paid for some of the travel costs. The Ethnography Museums and World Cultures (RIME) EC project contributed to the payment of dedicated staff; the NME generously set apart a budget for the Consultations. The 2007 and 2011 Expert Meetings were funded by a variety of funding agencies in the Netherlands (LEF, Leids Ethnologisch Fonds / Leiden Ethnologic Fund; LUF, Leids Universiteits Fonds / Leiden University Fund; Leiden University CNWS, Research School of African, Asian and Amerindian Studies; Nederlandse Ambassade in Suriname, Paramaribo / Dutch Embassy in Surinam; ACSN, Association of Canadian Studies in the Netherlands; National Museum of Greenland, Nuuk and the NME, National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden). A large number of interns and volunteers participated in the project.

What are/were the timescales?
2007-2012

Ethical considerations – describe what these involved in relation to the project and how they were agreed/adhered to?

Memorandum of Understandings where set up concerning the use of copyrighted material, agreements were made concerning the use of secret or sacred information with all people present. One of the things that became clear throughout the whole of the process is that material culture obviously did not have one meaning that would speak to all, nor did the different individuals in the group have congruent opinions on the significance of objects. It also became clear that we had to take a lot of time to discuss individual objects, and that significance altered overnight; gender, education, language, personal histories and sleep and dreams affected significance; and the kind of object also mattered in the final outcome on what we could do with the information that was shared. Some information, for example, was sacred. Especially objects of the pijai which might involve a lot of ceremonial acts, and issues of secrecy were discussed and measures needed to be taken on the disclosure of the shared information. While in 2006 we made an exhibit about the collectors and their writings, commemorating their 100th anniversary without any involvement of indigenous counterparts, right now we have an exhibit planned for 2015 that will most certainly take into account the research results and palimpsest of meanings we have gathered from our years of experience during the consultation projects.
Please also describe any compromises, surprises and how the project may have been transformed through the engagement:

Consultations are full of surprises. During the consultations, a number of days were spent visiting our galleries and those of museums in our vicinity, such as the Tropenmuseum and Museon. Our Public Programming department had planned several moments where our audiences could get to meet the consultants. In 2010 we asked the community curators to mount a small exhibit to tell their story. All usual museum standards were broken on that occasion. Objects were mounted one on top of the other; water and food were positioned within the showcases for objects that were thirsty and hungry. Stools were provided for objects that were tired, objects were sung to and danced and blessed through prayers. Much the same happened in the permanent gallery exhibits we visited throughout the Netherlands: exhibits were blessed and danced to, and we received ample input on how to improve the exhibit, both at a documentation level and at an individual object level such as a Maraca rattle that was offensively displayed at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam.

What things would you consider if embarking on a similar project again?

Right now we are in the midst of a new Suriname project, this time with the Coastal Kali'na and Lokono populations. In 2003, part of a manuscript was discovered in our libraries. We transcribed it, and found it of interest but incomplete. Last year the project moved forward to the next level. The manuscript we found in 2003 was written in the beginning of the 20th century by two Surinamese ornithologists. They interviewed Carib shamans, and wrote an encyclopedia that is the oldest encyclopedia of its kind on the area. The document was considered lost for almost a century. In 2011, when our library was given more square meters, we found the manuscript intact in its archives. The information in it is of great sacred and secret value to the Surinamese indigenous communities and through the partnerships we established during our former project, we now are embarking upon a new partnership, albeit more formal as it is with a more official organ: the VIDS (Vereniging voor Inheemse Dorpshoofden Suriname, the Society of Indigenous Chiefs of Suriname) that represents the traditional authority of Suriname.

What things would you avoid?

Heritage is intrinsically bound to politics. It makes heritage projects complex, but tremendously interesting. We were lucky however to be able to experiment and have long enough periods of time allotted to us to make sure that we would first understand the political dimensions of these projects in Suriname (a former colony of the Netherlands) without politics being completely involved. So that now, in our next project, we are able to judge the political aspects of the project more carefully and incorporate the politics.
VIDS delegation arrives at Schiphol in May 2013 and is welcomed by a large delegation of Dutch Surinamese indigenous representatives of Stichting Weju en Stichting Wajonong. Delegation members: Kapitein Artist Lesley (President VIDS; member of parliament and Kapitein Redidoti); Kapitein Pane Richardo (Deputy president of VIDS); Kapitein Makosi August (Secretary VIDS and Kapitein Powakka); Kapitein Lewis David (Secretary VIDS and Kapitein Apoera); Kapitein Pierre Romeo (President KLIM (Marowijne) and Kapitein Pierrekondre); De Heer Michel Nasja Ronald (Piyai); Mrs. Samsoedin Roline (District Commissaris Sipaliwini/Kabalebo); Mr. Jurrel Armand DC (District Commissaris Sipaliwini); Mr. Samoe Schelts (Bureau Volkscontacten Afd. Indian Affairs); dr. Randy van Zichem (Director Social Sciences Adek University, Paramaribo); Mrs. Loreen Jubitana (Directeur Bureau VIDS); Mr. Maximiliaan Ooft Maximiliaan (Bureau VIDS). © Laura Van Broekhoven

References to publications relating to project (online/in print):

Two Expert Meetings (2007 Leiden – 2011 Paramaribo); three Community Consultations (2007-2009-2010) with 10 community curators from four different indigenous peoples), international and public lectures; meet & greet; additions to RMV database and archival information; Edited Volume: Sharing Knowledge and Cultural Heritage. First Nations of the America’s. Mededeling 39 (2010) co-authored with Cunera Buijs and Pieter Hovens; several academic (co-authored) articles and conference papers; results to be incorporated in NME Suriname Exhibit 2015 and were incorporated in NME permanent gallery (2013) and incorporated in NME Op Expeditie exhibit (2012).
Publications


Online:
http://volkenkunde.nl/nl/historisch-samenwerkingsverband
http://volkenkunde.nl/nl/de-gebroeders-penard
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http://www.starnieuws.com/index.php/welcome/index/nieuwsitem/6927?keepThis=true&amp;TB_iframe=true&amp;height=600&amp;width=950
http://dwa.rnw.nl/suriname/article/inheemsen-adviseren-museum-leiden
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Podcast
http://framerframed.nl/nl/dossier/verslag-cultural-heritage-and-shared-knowledge/