



On heritage and civil rights

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Session on Heritage

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It's a pleasure to be here today and to be able to share thoughts on important topics that affect all of us. I will present a broad introduction to heritage and civil rights. But first, I'd like to introduce myself, so you know the perspective I'm speaking from.

I am Anneloes van Kuijk, and I work for the Catholic Documentation Center - which is the national archive of social catholic life in the Netherlands - with catholic migrant communities. In addition, I do communication work for the Dutch Association of Caretakers of Monumental Church Buildings (VBMK). I'm a cultural anthropologist. And as for church life, I'm part of the Orthodox parish in Amsterdam, where I am an enthusiastic member of the church choir.

Civil society and the public good

In a previous role, I worked for a global network of civil society organisations – advocating for the right to education, the Global Campaign for Education. I (co-)led the Dutch chapter for 10 years, and we focused on education in the global South; so I was mainly working with development organisations.

What struck me most during that time was a growing realisation: that the widespread idea that civil society exists to protect our common interests, our human rights - against the powers of Government on the one hand and the powers of the commercial sector on the other hand, doesn't always hold true. I found that many civil society organisations leaned so heavily on government subsidies that they had in fact become implementers of government policies. They did that because they prioritised their own institutional and commercial interest, just like a private sector party - even at the expense of the people they were claiming to help. At the same time, I met people in leading positions in government and in the private sector who were genuinely committed to the public good, using their positions and influence to protect just that.

These experiences made me even more aware of the need to safeguard the general, public interest. And to constantly reflect on our roles in society. Whether as individual citizens and consumers - and whether we are part of a government, a commercial enterprise, an educational institute, an archive centre, a civil society organisation, a church community...: how can we contribute to a safe, resilient society for everyone who is part of it?

This perspective can easily be translated into Christian terms: that our actions should be guided by our inner Christ - by wisdom, respect, and love for God's creation - rather than by love for power, glory and money, or by simple obedience to our superiors or to our peers.

This same awareness is what I bring into my current work in the heritage sector.

What is heritage?

Heritage is the topic of this session. So, what is heritage? A simple answer is: heritage is everything that a person or a group finds valuable enough to preserve and to pass on to future generations – and what the new generation itself wants to preserve and carry forward.

It is not as simple as it seems, however. Because: who gets to decide what constitutes 'heritage' and what does not? How do we assess its value? And what happens if different groups share the same heritage?

In complex matters, it helps to start at the micro-level. Picture a man who inherited a golden watch from his father, who in turn inherited it from his father. The man wants to pass it on to his son. The watch is valuable both commercially and sentimentally. But for the son, something else holds even greater value: a recording of his father singing traditional songs from his home region. That is what he hopes to pass on to his own children. The recording holds no commercial value but a sentimental and cultural one.

This example illustrates that heritage can take many forms. It can be an object or a song... Or: a book, a building, a language, an image, a tradition.... well, anything.

It also shows: When talking about heritage, it is not about the objective value of an object, but about the meaning and value that people attach to it.

That means: it is not up to external experts or professionals to define what a community's heritage is. It is the community itself that decides on that. Not just its leaders, but all of its members.

The Faro Convention

This perspective on heritage is actually central to a European Convention. 20 Years ago, in 2005, the Council of Europe adopted the Faro Convention, named after the Portuguese city where it was drafted. The convention links heritage to democracy and human rights.

Now, I believe human rights should not be understood primarily at the individual level, as mere 'entitlements'. Rather, they are about the community level, about what is needed to uphold a democratic rule of law; one that includes all citizens and prevents communities from being marginalised.

To some of us - especially to those who associate heritage with nostalgia - the idea of a European convention on heritage may be surprising. But in fact, communities' heritage is also a deeply political issue. Think again of the golden watch. What if it were stolen? What if two sons fought over it, both laying a claim over it? Or what if the recording was deleted by a resentful neighbour? These kinds of conflicts and struggles happen at the community level as well. Just consider the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, the suppression of regional languages, the banning of cultural traditions.

But heritage is not only about preserving the past. Culture, norms and values change, and so do traditions. Cultural conflicts around heritage do not only exist between communities, but also between generations of the same community. Think of European traditions such as bullfighting, Zwarte Piet, and fireworks on New Year's Eve.

The Faro Convention, therefore, is not simply about preserving the past. Its ultimate purpose is, and I quote: "to help build a democratic society, based on cultural diversity, unity for the diverse communities present in Europe, and the improvement of the quality of life for everyone".

There are many interesting points raised in this convention (although I do find that these international agreements focus too much on human welfare alone and not on life and nature in a broader sense), but let me take just 3 key points that can be helpful for our work today:

- As said: citizens and their organisations have the right to define their own heritage
- and the right to determine its value
- and the right to preserve it and maintain access to it.

The Dutch Faro Program

Although the convention was adopted in 2005, the Dutch government only signed it last year (and is waiting to be ratified). There is now a 'Faro Program', under the Cultural Heritage Agency - the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed - under the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

The convention allows each country to adapt its principles to local contexts. In the Netherlands, I believe, it was sparked by concerns over what to do with so many church buildings facing closure due to the ongoing secularisation. It was felt that decisions should involve not just the legal owners of church buildings, but also local communities, governments, and heritage groups. Which is why the Faro Program emphasises stakeholder collaboration in its projects.

I encourage everyone interested in working with the Faro program to visit the European website, as it clarifies the visions and ideals underpinning the convention:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/faro-convention>

Case: working with catholic migrant communities

How do these ideals and ideas reflect in my own work? The Catholic Documentation Center is the national archive for social catholic life in the Netherlands. For a start, catholic migrant groups are simply part of our core business. It's not a 'special project' but a permanent 'theme'.

Second, if we want to include all groups, we cannot exclude groups simply because they do not fit our systems. Instead, we must find new ways of working to include them.

This applies for instance to the kinds of materials we seek to preserve. For many traditional Dutch organisations, conventional archives are often sufficient, such as reports of board meetings and annual reports. But if we want to build collections on other traditions and perspectives - collections that are *valid*, *reliable* and *representative*, we may need other types of resources and other methods of collecting them.

We can only do this effectively by working in close collaboration with the communities themselves. We discuss: Who are the groups that make up this community? What connects them? How can we help safeguard what matters to them? It's called: *participative acquisition*.

Now, I mentioned earlier that it's not up to external professionals to define a community's heritage and its value. But experts do have a role to play. For instance, by helping to identify heritage. For most of us, the objects that we use, the way we go about, our traditions... are so natural that we can easily overlook their historical or cultural value.

Experts also bring in professional standards. Like in oral history projects. Much of the knowledge and experience of migrant communities has not been laid down but lives only in the memories of individuals. Oral history is a way to document these memories. It's more than just storytelling. It's a scientific method and it requires thought about whose story is being told, how the interview should take place, and what conclusions can and cannot be drawn.

Participative acquisition is not just about asking communities about their *perspectives*, but also about taking into account their *interest*. Why do they want to work with us, as an archive institute? It can be various reasons, for instance: to pass on their legacy and expertise to the next generation... or, to demonstrate their presence and role in Dutch society... or simply to keep their documents safe...

For us as an archive centre our interest is mainly in providing quality resources to study Dutch society. Primary resources of catholic migrant communities add to our understanding of issues such as religion/secularisation, what it means to 'be a church community'... on culture and heritage... on integration/assimilation...



Now, a third key point I took from the Faro Convention was: access. That is a topic we're actively discussing. As part of Nijmegen University, we have traditionally collected resources for academic research. But when we gather materials from marginalised catholic migrant groups and store them in systems they cannot access, it risks benefiting only privileged researchers and issues of their interest.

Stories

Let me end with a story that illustrates the urgency of this work.

A former priest of mine was a remarkable and influential man. He was educated in both catholic and Orthodox traditions. Born in Amsterdam, he worked in the United States and in Canada, in Greek monasteries and in the Vatican, in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. He eventually founded a community here, compiled a liturgikon, and taught many about Eastern Christianity and its traditions.

Even before I began working at the Documentation Center, I urged him to preserve his work. We lost contact, but two years ago he suddenly called me and invited me to his home. He was old and ill. "I have a box ready for the Documentation Center," he said. But when I opened it, it contained just one single leaflet. I managed to convince him that especially his correspondence is worth preserving. It demonstrates his broad international network and the role he played in building bridges across communities. I suggested that his materials should best be deposited with the national archive for religious orders. We also agreed to document his life story. Tragically, after just one interview, he passed away. We had only been talking about his childhood and studies. He was a keen observer, had a great memory, and was full of interesting anecdotes. And now all his inside information has been lost for ever. We also don't know what will happen to his archives and correspondence.

This is just one example to illustrate why oral history and timely archival work matter so much. Once a voice is lost, a unique window into history and into contemporary society is lost with it.