



# Sharing expertise on Dutch funerary heritage

Funerary heritage is a field of study and practice that deals with historical cemeteries, churchyards and grave monuments. It is a field of expertise offered by the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE), especially through the work of funerary heritage expert Leon Bok. Because of the processes of colonialism and globalisation, today Dutch funerary heritage can be found around the world. These historical sites are thus excellent examples of shared cultural heritage since they connect past, present, and people across countries. This article explores how and why this expertise is a useful instrument for our partners in the Shared Cultural Heritage countries, and why these historical cemeteries constitute interesting grounds for knowledge exchange.

## Historical background

Many Dutch historical cemeteries and graves, dating from different periods, can be found across the world. These constitute tangible traces of the Dutch presence around the world and they testify to different (hi)stories that the Netherlands shares with many countries. Historical cemeteries and graves are also important resources for tracing artistic developments and craftsmanship through time and across diverse social, economic and cultural contexts. Because of cross-cultural interactions and the availability of resources, Dutch funerary heritage abroad can present different characteristics than contemporary examples located in the Netherlands. Hence for funerary heritage experts in the Netherlands, Dutch cemeteries and graves abroad are very interesting sites for knowledge exchange. Furthermore, considering the individual and affective nature of cemeteries and graves, funerary heritage constitutes an important historical source for identifying and exploring individual histories and memories, and for tracing back one's ancestors.

The presence of these traces is often linked to historical trading networks or to Dutch expansionism abroad. An example of that is the Dutch cemetery in Nagasaki (Japan). The Dutch came to Japan



*The entrance of the Dutch cemetery in Nagasaki. The cemetery was established in 1654 but received its present appearance in the twentieth century (photo: Leon Bok)*



*The monument of Antonia van Steelant at the cemetery of Nagapattinam in India (photo: Leon Bok)*



A slab in the Nieuwe Oranjetuin in Paramaribo. The cemetery is rich in symbols, types of materials and grave monuments (photo Leon Bok)



Work on the Nieuwe Oranjetuin in Paramaribo, Suriname – digging for information on the depth of the ditches in the cemetery (photo: René ten Dam)

in the early 1600s and settled first in Hirado. The Dutch traders remained there for several decades until they were transferred to the artificial island of Dejima, in the harbour of Nagasaki, where they remained for over 200 years. The location where the Dutch buried their dead in Hirado is still to be located, but in Nagasaki, a small burial site called ‘[Hollandsche Begraafplaats](#)’ constitutes a physical reminder of this period in the shared history of Japan and the Netherlands. Other examples associated to a similar history are the [Dutch cemetery in Fort Kochi](#) and the [cemetery of Nagapattinam](#) (India).

Many other examples of Dutch funerary heritage found abroad are connected to the Dutch colonial activities, some of which lasted until the twentieth century. These represent tangible traces of often violent pasts shared between the Netherlands and its previous colonies. An example is the [Nieuwe Oranjetuin](#) in Paramaribo (Suriname). This cemetery was used between mid-eighteenth century and 1961, at a time when Suriname (then Dutch Guyana) was a colony of the Netherlands. The [cemetery of Peneleh](#) in Surabaya (Indonesia), dated to 1840, represents a similar example.

## Funerary heritage today

Nowadays, Dutch funerary heritage outside the Netherlands is part of the cultural heritage stock of the countries where it is located in. Despite their social and historical significance and values, due to current social and economic developments and needs, these heritage sites can sometimes become a burden to the local communities and to those responsible for their upkeep.

Much like with other types of cultural heritage, the management and the use of these sites is therefore required to take such developments and needs into account in order to be sustainable.

Whether it's necessary to raise awareness of the historical values of the sites in order to secure their preservation, or to attract members of the local communities or tourists; whether a plan or new strategies need to be developed for the management, preservation or adaptation of these sites to current needs, the Shared Cultural Heritage programme can contribute with its extensive knowledge and experience of dealing with Dutch funerary heritage, in the Netherlands and abroad. This can be done through research and by providing historical information on a Dutch historical cemetery and its different objects, which can in turn support intentions of making information available to visitors. It can also be done by exploring possibilities for a site to accommodate the need for additional space in densely populated environments, while securing its partial or entire preservation. The advice provided can also be in the form of short, medium and/or long term plans on how to deal with the site or prevent further damage.

## Tailor-made advice

The starting point of the Shared Cultural Heritage programme's involvement and advice is a request made by local stakeholders. These can include residents, managers or caretakers of the sites, heritage professionals, local or national authorities and Dutch embassies. The second step is often a visit to the site by the experts of the RCE, to assess the situation, understand what is

requested and share knowledge on the historical site. The advice and expertise provided is always based on the individual situation and the needs of the local population. Whatever the mission at hand, close collaboration with local stakeholders is essential. Hence the work that is carried out and its outcomes always differ from site to site. A few examples of recent projects carried out with partners from some of Shared Cultural Heritage countries are presented below.

In the case of the cemetery of Peneleh, the lack of maintenance and ensuing dilapidated state of the historical site was posing a nuisance to the surrounding residential areas. At the request of the local authorities, and together with partner institutions, the RCE organised a training in 2011 and 2012 for students from several local universities and formulated a policy advice for the local authorities to secure Peneleh's future, while taking into account the interests of the surrounding kampongs.

India presents quite a different example. A couple of years ago, the awareness of local heritage professionals that the Dutch East India Company's (VOC) cemetery in Nagapattinam was at risk due to neglect, eventually led to a collaborative project between INTACH (the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural heritage) and the RCE to tackle this situation. The identification of the core values of the cemetery, with the support of the experts from the RCE, enabled the development of a management and restoration plan.

In the case of the cemetery of Nagasaki in Japan, in 2016, the Netherlands Embassy in Tokyo requested the expertise of the RCE in order to support its plans to enhance the preservation of the site. A management plan for the historical cemetery was develop-



*A delegation of the province of Nagasaki at the 'Hollandsche Begraafplaats' in December 2016, where they were informed of the story of the cemetery and ideas for the preservation of the site (photo: Leon Bok)*

ped, following [two visits to the site](#), establishing short, medium and long term strategies to enable the sustainable preservation of the cemetery.

### Focus on sustainability

Regardless of the type of advice provided, ensuring a sustainable framework for the upkeep and use of funerary heritage is a priority for the Shared Cultural Heritage programme. With every project carried out with the partner countries, an important goal is building the capacity of local heritage professionals, students and others involved. This can be done, for example, by including students from local universities in the project and by providing training regarding different aspects of using and managing funerary heritage.



*Leon Bok assessing the Nieuwe Oranjetuin in Paramaribo. The cemetery had just been cleared of shrubs and bushes (photo: René ten Dam)*



*Students from local universities are trying to find out the meaning of the words on the slab at the cemetery of Peneleh in Surabaya (photo: Leon Bok)*

In the case of the cemetery of Peneleh, architecture students from a local university participated in the project and learnt, for example, about the different materials that were used to make the grave monuments. In India, a workshop was organised with conservation architects and in Japan, Leon Bok gave several lectures on the subject of Dutch funerary heritage. In the ongoing project at the Nieuwe Oranjetuin in Paramaribo, students from the Anton de Kom University of Suriname will be involved in the project, to learn about iconography, materials, and other fields of knowledge in order to create a database.

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## Questions?

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