



## The use of oral histories for the understanding of shared maritime heritage

Traces of the maritime history of the Netherlands can be found around the world, often related to the country's former trading, colonial activities and military undertakings. These traces include wrecks of the former Dutch East and West India Companies, Admiralty and the Royal Netherlands Navy. The Dutch State still regards these shipwrecks as sovereign and thus as its property. The Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) is responsible for the management and protection of Dutch owned shipwrecks abroad, a mission carried out by the [International Programme for Maritime Heritage](#), a programme also responsible for Shared Cultural Heritage projects. The protection and research of Dutch heritage that lies outside the country's territorial waters always takes place in consultation with the country where it is located.

When researching and managing maritime cultural heritage sites, oral histories constitute an important source of information. Although the collection, preservation and use of oral histories is not unique to the RCE, they play a unique role in the international and collaborative projects of its International Maritime Heritage and Shared Cultural Heritage programmes. This article explores how the RCE's experience in this field can support the work of maritime archaeologists and heritage experts working on shared cultural heritage.

### Oral histories as a means and as an end

Oral history is a form of historiography based on the memories of eyewitnesses, usually collected through interviews, and it can serve different purposes. It can be used for recording and archiving the memories of individuals to be used as historical sources. It also has a democratising function, since oral sources of information give a voice to certain groups that are often less represented (or entirely absent) in traditional historiographic



*Randall Sasaki of Kyushu National Museum – the Japanese counterpart of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands – and Professor Ikeda of Ryukyu University interviewing members of the local community on Tarama Island, Okinawa-prefecture, Japan (photo: RCE, 2016).*

sources (such as women or labourers). In doing so, the collection of oral histories can serve to give recognition to certain groups, and thus can also have an empowerment function.

In the context of maritime archaeology and heritage, oral histories can refer to the memories of survivors of a shipwreck or the eyewitness descriptions of how a ship sank. But they can also refer to the stories of those who engaged with a shipwreck (whether recent or centuries-old), such as recreational divers or amateur archaeologists. When it comes to maritime archaeology, oral histories can support the research on a site. Desk research can include interviewing recreational divers, amateur archaeologists, professional divers, fishermen and diving marine biologists (amongst others) to check whether they know of any shipwrecks or shipwreck material in a given area. These oral accounts can sometimes also provide information about post-depositional processes and about shipwrecks that no longer exist, due to damage to or loss of the archaeological record.

The memories of individuals who in some way or another were involved in a shipwreck offer another important layer of information, concerning the experienced, personal and communal values of a site. By collecting and assessing these memories, professionals working on Shared Cultural Heritage projects are able to form an understanding of a site that goes beyond its tangible and historical values, and the confines of national (often dominant) narratives. Because oral history often focuses on groups that are usually left out of traditional narratives, it allows heritage professionals to create a narrative that takes different perspectives into account.

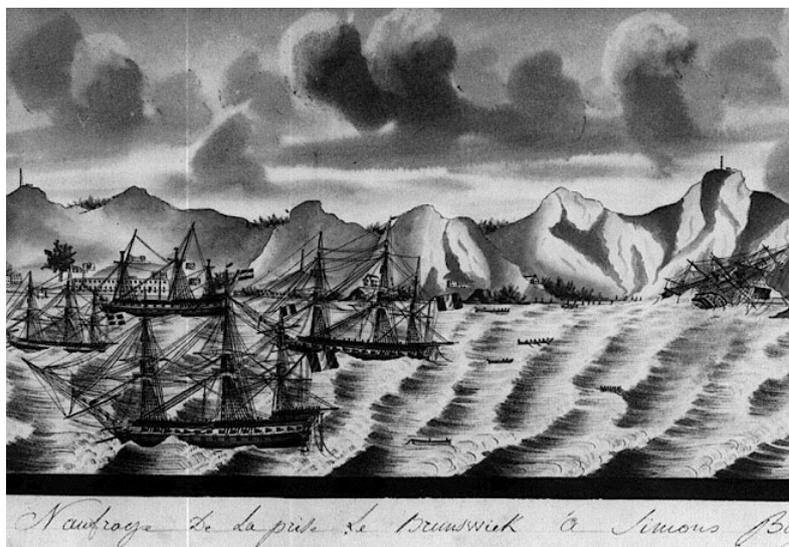


Photograph from Reg Dodds, showing the wreck site believed to be the Dutch Rodenrijks ship (1737) in Table Bay, South Africa. Dodds is one of the interviewees of the 'Modern Oral History: Dutch Wrecks in South Africa' project (photo: courtesy of SAHRA).

Ultimately, the information provided by oral histories contributes to the creation of more inclusive research, preservation and management plans for shared cultural heritage sites. This information is then made accessible by the RCE and the Shared Cultural Heritage partners through different ways, including scientific reports, popular science articles, exhibitions and conference presentations.

### Strengthening reciprocity

Dutch maritime heritage can often be found in one of the 10 Shared Cultural Heritage partner countries. In the context of the RCE's maritime heritage projects, shared decision-making and equal responsibility for a site constitute the basis of international work. Through knowledge exchange, capacity building and taking local interests into account, the RCE ensures that shared maritime heritage is managed independently by the country where it is located in. Oral history is thus an important instrument, since it allows experts to take into account the needs and values of local communities and stakeholders. And in doing so, it strengthens the Shared Cultural Heritage programme's mission to work on the basis of equality and reciprocity. Depending on the context, the oral history method may be proposed and applied by the RCE or by the local partner. But key to the success of an oral history project is that it is jointly prepared and coordinated by the RCE and the partners, including local stakeholders (such as municipalities, universities and potential interviewees).



Historical painting of the wrecking of the English East Indiaman Brunswick in Simon's Bay in 1805. The Dutch warship Bato is visible at the centre in the back (with the yards and upper rigging missing). Bato was a floating battery and was to be scuttled the following year (1806) during the second British takeover of the Cape of Good Hope (image: courtesy of SAHRA).

### Oral histories and archaeological research

The RCE is currently working on the joint project 'Modern Oral History: Dutch Wrecks in South Africa' with the [South African Heritage Resources Agency](#) (SAHRA). The aim is to gather information about the history of diving and modern salvage of Dutch historical shipwrecks in South African waters. Since the early 60s, many sites have caught the interest of sports divers and treasure hunters, at which time some objects were taken from the sites and occasionally ended up in (museum) collections. At the moment, still very little is known about these activities and about the sites themselves. Although archival sources provide useful information, it is important to collect data regarding their more recent condition, what was removed from each site and what still remains *in situ*. For this purpose, SAHRA has been carrying out interviews with the early divers about their activities, to create an archive of oral and other records that will contribute to the knowledge of these sites. For instance, in some cases, they had information on some of the artefacts from the wrecks, namely what they were and where they have gone. The divers' stories thus add another layer to the history of the wrecks.

### Oral histories and intangible values

Two other examples of the use of oral history by the RCE's Shared Cultural Heritage programme are located in Japan. These are the [Van Bosse](#) and the '[Search for the Kanrin-maru](#)' projects. The Van Bosse and the Kanrin-maru were nineteenth century ships that

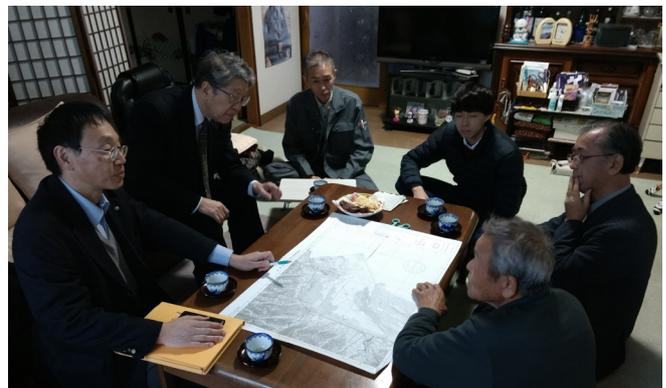
sank off the coast of Japan. The crew members survived, which enabled memories of their experiences to be passed down through generations in Japan and in the Netherlands. The location of both wrecks, however, remains unknown, despite the ongoing efforts of the projects' team members.



*A meeting held on the significance of the Kanrin-maru heritage to the society of Kikonai, between the RCE and the Kikonai Society for the Preservation of the Kanrin-maru. The anchor seen in the photograph is thought to have belonged to the Kanrin-maru (photo: RCE, 2017).*

The RCE's experts proposed including oral history in these projects, since they noticed a difference in the way local Japanese people experienced these heritage sites. Namely, the intangible values of the sites appear to be more important to local stakeholders than their tangible elements. For instance, the supposed wreck site of the Van Bosse is currently legally protected in Japan even though the shipwreck hasn't yet been located. Furthermore, there were indications that in the case of the Van Bosse, inhabitants of the island of Tarama (Okinawa) were still passing down stories about the Dutch shipwrecked crew members that were taken in by the locals, information that cannot be found in history books nor archives. These stories are now being captured by a Dutch-Japanese team of experts.

In the case of the Kanrin-maru project, the oral history method will be applied again later this year. It was applied already in 2017, during the assessment research, and oral information provided by a local professional diver was used to narrow down the potential shipwreck location of the Kanrin-maru. More specifically, he provided information on where shipwrecks lay and what kind of wrecks these were (wooden or metal vessels, age, etc.). Most importantly, he mentioned that he knew the location of an unknown wooden wreck he had spotted a few years before, which provided a target site for the search of the wreck of the Kanrin-maru.



*Professor Iwabuchi (Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology) and others interviewing Mr. Miura, a fisherman in Izumisawa village in Kikonai Municipality in Hokkaido, Japan (photo: RCE, 2017).*

The upcoming oral history research phase will offer an opportunity to highlight the different perspectives about the history of the Kanrin Maru that is shared between both countries, since this shipwreck connects the [Society of Kanrin-maru Crew Descendants](#) (a Japanese association of relatives of the ship's crew) to the village of Kikonai in Japan, where a local association is committed to anchoring the Kanrin-maru heritage in local history and tourism. A maximum of five members of each association will be interviewed to contribute to the understanding of the history of the Kanrin-maru, and to understand its role as (shared) heritage in the present.

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## Questions?

Please send an email to [maritime-heritage@cultureelerfgoed.nl](mailto:maritime-heritage@cultureelerfgoed.nl) or have a look at our website [www.cultureelerfgoed.nl](http://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl)

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Images: Cultural Heritage Agency, unless noted otherwise.

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