



Good practice: international collaboration on shared difficult heritage

Introduction

This article presents a good practice that developed in the context of an international collaboration around a site of shared heritage. Partly still ongoing, it involved a joint Dutch-Indonesian investigation into the disappearance of the wrecks of three Dutch warships - the Hr. MS. De Ruyter, the Hr. Ms. Java and the Hr. Ms. Kortenaer. These ships sank off the coast of Indonesia in 1942, in the context of the [Battle of the Java Sea](#) during WWII. The good practice refers to the way in which this project, albeit propelled by a painful event, was framed and guided by a three-track-research plan, and was based on open discussions between both countries. To write this article, we talked to Robert de Hoop of the [International Programme for Maritime Heritage](#) of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) and Shinatria Adhityatama of [ARKENAS](#), the National Research Center for Archaeology in Indonesia. Both were closely involved in this project as maritime archaeologists.



[Slag in de Javazee \(Battle of the Java Sea\)](#), by J. van der Ven, 1970
(image: Marinemuseum Den Helder).



The Indonesian and Dutch team members who carried out the fieldwork in 2019 (photo: ARKENAS/RCE).

The site of the three Dutch WWII shipwrecks can be seen as Indonesian-Dutch shared heritage because they are considered property of the Dutch State (according to the [United Nations Law of the Sea Convention](#)) and because they are located on Indonesian territory. Furthermore, they represent material remains of a past that is shared between these and other countries: on 27 February 1942, the first part of a decisive sea battle took place between the allied forces of the American-British-Dutch-Australian Command (ABDACOM) and the Imperial Japanese Navy. This battle was the last attempt to maintain the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) as the last barrier of an alleged “free West”, considering that this country was then still a colony of the Netherlands.

The three Dutch warships were torpedoed by the Japanese Navy during the battle, leading to the death of the 915 men on board. Ships from the other ABDACOM countries also sank, resulting in a significant loss of life. For the Netherlands, the loss of this sea battle meant the loss of this East-Asian barrier in the war and a permanent change in the relation between the Netherlands and its colonies in Asia. For Indonesia, this represented an important shift in the region’s geopolitics, which eventually led to the country’s independence. Japan occupied the Dutch East Indies in March 1942. And in 1945, Indonesia declared independence from the Netherlands, although this was only recognised by the Dutch in 1949, after several years of violent conflict.



Maritime archaeologists Martijn Manders and Robert de Hoop, and surveyor Dwi Haryanto view multi-beam images of the wreck sites (photo: RCE).

For a long time, the exact location of the three Dutch shipwrecks was not known by the authorities. For several years, they were subjected to technical (tourist) dive trips and commemorations on the sea surface. In 2008, during one of these dive trips to De Ruyter and the Java, the wrecks were recorded and it became clear that they were laying well-preserved on the seabed. In 2016, a field visit took place by the [Karel Doormans Fonds](#) in anticipation of the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Java Sea. During this trip, the divers discovered that there were no more wrecks on the location of De Ruyter and the Java, and on the spot of the Kortenaer, there was only a fraction of the earlier identified shipwreck. It was later discovered that this loss was the result of illegal salvaging operations.

Given the complicated context in which the ships sank, the consequent loss of life, and the [recent events](#) surrounding these shipwrecks, this could also be seen as a site of difficult heritage, in the sense described by Sharon Macdonald. For Macdonald, “difficult heritage” refers to a past (and its remains) which is recognised as meaningful in the present but which is also awkward, unsettling or uncomfortable, often because it’s associated with suffering.¹ These Dutch WWII shipwrecks represent a heritage which conjures painful and uncomfortable memories, and which embodies diverging meanings for different stakeholders. The fact that Indonesia was for long a colony of the Netherlands², also means that collaboration on topics associated with this past sometimes leads to tension from both sides.

¹) Macdonald, Sharon (2009). *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*. London: Routledge.

²) Dutch colonial involvement in what is now Indonesia started in the sixteenth century with the establishment of trading posts and later colonies by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) across the archipelago. When the VOC went bankrupt in 1799, its possessions, including colonies, went to the Dutch state. From this moment onwards, Indonesia became an actual colony of the Netherlands, gradually expanding throughout the archipelago until the first half of the twentieth century.

Working together on shared yet difficult heritage

The loss of a significant part of this heritage led to considerable negative media attention, [particularly in the Netherlands](#). Given the escalation of events, the Indonesian and Dutch governments realised it was necessary and urgent to tackle this issue together and to find a solution to this complex situation. To investigate what had happened, and to decide how to deal with these sites in the long term, a joint research team made up of Indonesian and Dutch experts was set up to develop a plan of action. This resulted in a three-track-research plan which included: 1) a joint identification of the problem and verification of the disappearance of the warships; 2) a joint appreciation of the facts and a legal framework regarding the missing wrecks of the sunken ships; and 3) cooperation regarding the future preservation of maritime war graves and other maritime cultural heritage. Because of the sensitivity surrounding this project, it was also agreed that all reports and public communication would have to be agreed on by both sides, before being published.

It was decided by both sides that the first step should be finding common ground regarding the meanings of this heritage site since, although representing a shared past, its meanings were not self-evident. This mutual understanding would serve as the basis for the whole project. The teams from the RCE and ARKENAS played a central role in these discussions, and worked closely together with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. Each side gathered and shared data regarding the history (1942 to 2016) and contemporary values of the site. Robert de Hoop explained that for the Netherlands, the most important meaning is its value as a war grave and as a site of commemoration. Hence it was necessary to collect and share information regarding the emotional value of the site, especially amongst the relatives of the Dutch crew who passed away during the Battle of the Java Sea in 1942.



Meeting at the start of the fieldwork on the research vessel in 2019, during which the director of ARKENAS, Dr. I Made Geria, M.Si, gave a speech (photo: RCE/ARKENAS).



The Indonesian crew during the expedition in the Java Sea, 2019 (photo: RCE).

For Indonesia, the meaning of this site is relatively less straightforward. For some, it embodies the painful memories of Dutch colonialism, and for others, the history of an important geopolitical shift in the region. Furthermore, before this collaboration started, this site was not regarded as heritage, which has to do with local perspectives on the meaning of heritage itself. According to Shinatria Adhityatama, the field of underwater heritage in Indonesia is relatively underdeveloped in comparison with heritage sites on land. Throughout the talks, the Indonesian team recognised the social and emotional value of this site due to the death of many Dutch crew members, but also since there were Indonesians on board. It was understood that this site holds an important humanistic value, related to pain and suffering on all sides that stemmed from this war. Even though these values are not shared by all Indonesians, Adhityatama hopes that by disseminating more information about the history of this site, it will be possible to raise more awareness and understanding for its importance in Indonesia, and for the field of maritime heritage more generally in the country.

Once a mutual understanding of the values of this site was achieved, and thus common ground was found, it was possible to implement the three-track-research plan. Robert de Hoop explained that this plan served as a framework that helped structure and guide the entire investigation. Particularly considering the emotional and political character of the task at hand, having clear step-by-step tasks with specific goals, helped the project and those involved maintain the focus throughout the

process. At the end of each track, a joint report was written, which stated the conclusions of that track, and the decisions and recommendations regarding the following step. This proved a successful strategy to tackle a complex situation involving multiple tasks and stakeholders.

The start of further mutual collaboration

Although the joint investigation was propelled by a painful event, this project worked to strengthen the ties between Indonesia and the Netherlands when it comes to shared maritime heritage, and it helped trigger further collaboration in this field. This is relevant for both countries since there are many other shipwrecks connected to Dutch (mostly colonial) history located in Indonesian waters. This is also important because, according to Shinatria Adhityatama, the field of maritime archaeology and heritage in Indonesia can benefit from the experience of the Netherlands in this area.

Following the joint investigation, a plan was developed by both countries for the protection and management of the wreck sites. They have been mapped and the Indonesian government has acknowledged them as important heritage sites, thus setting the grounds for their protection. Even if only limited material traces remain on site, the areas represent important sites of memory for both countries. Shinatria Adhityatama explained that, although this remains a sensitive collaboration today because of the colonial history of Indonesia and the Netherlands, he hopes that this collaboration helped develop more positive narratives about the relationship between both countries. For the RCE and ARKENAS, this project has shown that both countries can work together, despite their difficult past. Furthermore, it also showed that it is important that countries share data about their shared heritage and enter discussions about it, even when this might prove uncomfortable for one or both sides. Sharing information and not shying away from difficult discussions is important in order to gain a better understanding of the past and its impact on the present, as well as to prevent irretrievable loss of heritage.

Questions?

Please send an email to Robert de Hoop, r.de.hoop@cultureelerfgoed.nl or have a look at our website english.cultureelerfgoed.nl/topics/shared-cultural-heritage

Author: Sofia Lovegrove, with the support of Robert de Hoop and the International Maritime Heritage team (RCE) and Shinatria Adhityatama (ARKENAS)

Images: Cultural Heritage Agency, unless noted otherwise.

October 2020

Cultural Heritage Agency, Smallepad 5, 3811 MG Amersfoort.

Through knowledge and consultancy, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands offers the future a past.