



Recap: Closing Session Sharing Stories on Contested Histories (2019)

On 12 December 2019, the 22 participants of the *Sharing Stories on Contested Histories* training programme came together at the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) for a discussion about the importance and challenges of sharing contested (hi) stories about shared cultural heritage in multivocal and dialogical ways, and approaches and strategies for doing so in an inclusive manner. For this discussion, the participants – young museum professionals and researchers from Australia, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Netherlands, Russia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Suriname and the USA – were joined by Mrs Barbera Wolfensberger, Director-General of Culture and Media at the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and those who attended this public event: interested individuals, heritage and museum professionals and researchers.

Sharing contested (hi)stories

The event was part of the 2019 edition of the Sharing Stories on Contested Histories training which took place between 2 and 13 december. The training, organised by RCE in close collaboration with the Reinwardt Academy, originates from the need to gain more expertise on the engagement with contested heritage and explores approaches and tools to present such heritage from multiple perspectives. On 12 December, during the training's closing event, the participants and Mrs Wolfensberger addressed four themes: politics of exclusion/inclusion; icons or stereotypes; words matter; and decolonising.

“We should not be afraid or ashamed of our history. That paralyses us from taking action.” (Participant)

To start with, it was stressed that if heritage institutions aim to become more inclusive, they should clarify what they mean by “inclusivity”: does it refer to gender, race, age, mental and physical (dis)abilities or national identifications? It is important to be clear about who and whose stories are being presented, by whom and for which purposes. Furthermore, efforts towards more inclusion should also imply restructuring institutions and fostering supportive leadership.

Regarding the second theme, the participants discussed how cultural heritage tends to promote the creation of icons, which simultaneously tend to create stereotypes that risk negatively affecting individuals and groups. An example given was the case of Black Pete, a figure whose persistence in the Dutch commemoration of Saint Nicholas, backed by the alleged longevity of the “tradition”, fuels heated debates amongst different groups. The participants argued that such type of icons need to be critically deconstructed.

“While dealing with contested histories, you will hit a nerve and get big responses from society, so for cultural institutions it's important to back and support people and statements.” (Participant)

From icons the conversation shifted into the realm of words, and the need for museums to be critical about the language they use. This does not imply simply replacing certain words for others, but also showing the (often racist) implications of words. This is a topic which, according to the participants, should receive more attention within education programmes.

The final theme – decolonising – has been receiving much attention in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Whereas the participants shared their appreciation that in the Netherlands, discussions about decolonising institutions, education, thought, etc. are taking place, they also argued that much work still needs to be done.

Altogether, participants, Mrs Wolfensberger and the audience agreed that although addressing contested histories is difficult, as it leads to many diverging responses, such efforts are vital as they open up discussions within society. It was also suggested that when dealing with colonial or other types of shared history and heritage, international cooperation has the potential to foster more understanding within and between cultures.

Third edition of the training

From 4 to 16 October 2020, the Cultural Heritage Agency and the Reinwardt Academy are looking forward to welcoming a new group of young museum professionals and researchers to Amsterdam to further investigate the complexity of presenting contested heritage. For more information about Sharing Stories on Contested Histories, please contact Arjen Kok (a.kok@cultureelerfgoed.nl) or Ruben Smit (ruben.smit@ahk.nl), project leaders of the training programme.