

Traveling Caribbean Heritage

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Supporting consortium of c. 20 culture and heritage organizations mainly in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao as well as in the Netherlands

Summary

Centuries of intense migrations have deeply impacted the development of the cultures of Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao. Creolization is the key concept for understanding the origins of these Caribbean cultures, and the most telling expression of this is their unique language, Papiamentu/o. The islands' asymmetrical relation to the Netherlands begs many questions regarding insular identities. Everyday discourse on the islands abounds with references to this uneasy postcolonial relationship. In addition, intensive contemporary migrations – from and to the wider Caribbean, the Netherlands and beyond – have deeply impacted insular demographics and understandings of what it means to be Aruban, Bonairean, or Curaçaoan. Finally, mass tourism became a booming business and a central pillar of the insular economies, adding to the changes in the demographic make-up of the islands.

All of this provokes debates about insular identity, and the need to preserve the islands' literarily traveling cultural heritage – but heritage is as much a contested concept as identity. While scholars emphasize its evasive, constructed and contested character, local activists search for constructive and practice-oriented approaches, driven by questions pertaining to the fields of nation-building ('What do we want our citizens, young and old, to know and cherish about our unique insular heritage?') and to the field of tourism ('What image of our island do we want to present to tourists, emphasizing our unique heritage without falling into the trap of excessive folklorization and even fossilization, preventing people from seeing all kinds of new cultural expressions?').

In this project, Caribbean and Dutch scholars and cultural heritage specialists address these questions, identifying and questioning the dynamics of heritage formation, and developing a multi-generational human resource base as well as a digital infrastructure for the preservation of insular cultural heritage, for outreach activities, and ultimately for stimulating the sustainable development of these non-sovereign SIDS.

In this project, Antillean and Dutch scholars and cultural heritage specialists will jointly address the dual challenge of identifying and questioning the specific dynamics of heritage formation, while at the same time developing an intellectual as well as tangible (including digital) infrastructure for the preservation and analysis of insular cultural heritage. The first and more academic question therefore is: *What were and are the dominant definitions of tangible and intangible heritage of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, either jointly or separately, and how do changes in definitions and priorities over time relate to debates about (post)colonialism and non-sovereignty, migrations and nation-building, and tourism and nation-branding?*

Over a period of four years, the research team will investigate this theme and will discuss questions and preliminary findings with the broader consortium of institutions and individuals active in this field.

A platform will be built both for academic and intellectual exchange and an infrastructure and praxis for capacity building, enhanced cultural heritage preservation, and outreach activities directed towards local and international communities as well as the tourism industry. The entire four-year process will not be only about addressing the research questions, but also about developing a praxis involving both the development of cultural heritage policies and the inclusion of younger generations of Dutch Caribbeans in these debates and practices.

The arguably most important challenge when it comes to capacity building is generational rejuvenation. Many of those working in and on Caribbean cultural heritage, whether in academic positions or in practice, worry about the near absence of the younger generation in this field. Precisely for this reason we have decided to allocate a substantial part of the funding for personnel to young candidates of Caribbean backgrounds, whether as PhD student or as research assistant or intern on one of the three islands. Moreover, all senior staff will be involved in teaching and other educational tasks on the islands. To a large degree therefore, the deliverables will be investments in a young generation of Caribbean heritage specialists and the rejuvenation of the relevant institutional infrastructure.