Presentation Heritage, History, the Canon, Nation Building & Nation Branding

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Difference between history, heritage and historical canon

History is the whole past as it presents itself through stories, the environment, archeology, archives, libraries etc. and how we interpret this whole.

Heritage is only those aspects of that past –tangible as well as intangible– that a community chooses to preserve and pass on to the future. So heritage is always just parts of a larger story.

A **canon** at least pretends to show that larger story in a structured way, but at the same time it is a selection of historical aspects that we now choose to pass on to future generations.

a historical canon, or rather a canon of history is …

… A timeline showing a selection of events, persons, objects and ideas which are representative for particular periods, and which taken together form a more or less coherent narrative of a community which recognizes itself in that shared narrative.

Timeline of the Dutch canon with heritage representations

For starters:

- A canon is much more than an educational or didactic tool. It has political, moral, cultural and social dimensions which have to be critically examined when wanting to construct one

- Canons are fundamentally related to the nation. In the TCH project we therefore also address the nation and it its role in the use of history and heritage, because it combines the two to a certain extent

- History is as much binding as it is dividing. Knowing your history is no guarantee for peace, harmony and tolerance. Often on the contrary.
- Nations, canons, heritage are almost by definition exclusive: WE belong! YOU don't!
- Crucial: who is WE, who is YOU, and who defines that

Types of History preferred by students in a survey on pluriform highschools in Rotterdam, London and Paris, 2011

Type of history	NL native	NL Surin.& Caribb.	NL Morocc	NL Turk.	Englnd native	Englnd former colonies	Englnd other non-western	France native	France former colonies	France other non-western
National history	2	-	-	-	3	-	5	2	5	4 & 5
Sub-national history	5	3	3	5	4	5	3	4	-	-
Country of my parents		2	4	2		3	-		4	3
My family history	1	1	2	4	2	1	4	1	2	1
History of my religion	-	-	1	1	-	4	2	-	1	2
World history	3	4 & 5	5	3	1	2	1	3	3	-
European history	4	-	-	-	5	-	-	5	-	-

(Composed by Alex van Stipriaan, based on: M.Grever, B.Pelzer, T.Haydn, 'High school students' views on history', in Journal of Curriculum Studies 43, 2011, 207-229)

Which history would Dutch Caribbean students prefer?

History of	Afro-descent	European descent (incl. Jewish)	Other..........	2nd-3d generation immigrant
My island				
My barrio or village				
Dutch Caribbean ABC SSS Dutch Kingdom				
My family				
My religion				
World				
The Americas Pan Caribbean				

Constructing a national canon

Don'ts:
- No ethnocentrism or sexism (my ethnic or gender group is at the core of it all)
- No lococentrism (my place as the centre of the World)
- No teleologic coninuity (inevitably we as a people had to develop this way)
- No single cause explanation (what/who we are now is all caused by …)
- No vacuum approach (no conscience of being in interaction with 'others')

Do's:
- Include differences, and treat them equally
- Include negative experiences and actions done to as well as by (parts of) the we-group
- Include discontinuities and breaks in historical developments: there is no inevitability; there are no eternal traditions; there is not a single cause
- Show influences from others

Quotes by some historians on a canon
- "a valuable national historical canon actually is a continuous canon debate"
- canons don't exist, they are "a valuable, structuring myth" which we need to "genuinely simulate a common national identity"
- "a canon should be thin, light, holding back and no louder than a whisper"

My own view:
Let's make canons, hang them on the walls of our class rooms, point at them and then tell our students a whole lot of conflicting, confusing and alternative histories.
Because, as human beings, we all are walking contradictions, and paradoxes, and exceptions to the rule. But still, when we introduce ourselves we have a sort of structured standard story to make it easier to be understood. For others as well as for ourselves. And that is what nations do as well.

Gert continues with some basic reflections:

Nation-building and nation-branding: some caveats for those interested in constructing a canon of Dutch Caribbean cultural heritage and history

The discussions we have these days about cultural heritage and canons of local history are framed in a context of our desire to contribute to inclusive societies and to strengthen feelings of shared identity – presently mainly defined as insular on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. Hence, we are talking about nation-building. This seems a positive, constructive, perhaps even progressive endeavor, but it is important to be aware of the possible downsides.

Nation-building was developed primarily as a state-driven, hence top-down process. Much of the scholarly literature focuses on nation-building in 19th-century European states. Mainly top-down processes, driven by the urge to contain regional (ethnic) identities, languages etc., and replace these with one national culture. Instruments included (and I will give several examples here):
- language policy and education

- architecture, statues, museums
- mapping
- scholarly and cultural institutions

The creation of an 'imagined community' (Benedict Anderson) could to some extent be extended to the colonies and colonial subject – in the Dutch context, the Royal Family of Oranje was one such instrument.

Of course nation-building was not only a European affair. As we are in the Americas, we may point at similar developments after the *emancipación* in Latin America (1820s and beyond). Issues of inclusion and exclusion were strongly present here. Not only cultural, class, and gender, but also race was a thorny issue. Tendency by white *criollo* elites to define national identities of Latin American nations as 'European', relegating indigenous and African cultures and hence people to the margins of the nation. (*examples*)

The new round of decolonization after the Second World War resulted in the creation of many new states in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. With the creation of these states came the concomitant need for nation-building. The anti-colonial dimension in the narrative of the new nation was evident and relatively easy to formulate – though not, of course, in those former colonies such as the Dutch Caribbean islands that opted for non-sovereignty. But otherwise, again, there were serious challenges for incorporating regional, ethnic, religious and even political diversity. Hence there was often little room for nuance, and often postcolonial nation-building was anything but inclusive for all citizens of the new states. (*examples*)

Meanwhile new debates emerged in post-War Europe about national identities, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the resulting eastbound extension of the European Union since the 1990s. These new debates were partly a response to the decrease of sovereignty through the transfer of governance to the EU. But also, and probably more, because of unprecedented immigrations. Result were new and vehement debates about who belongs and what constitutes the nation. (*examples*)

The Netherlands is a clear example of this – with particularly Islam as a hotly contested issue, but also affecting Caribbean communities. (*examples*) Bottom-up contributions to nation-building are not necessarily inclusive, often the opposite (cf. *Zwarte Piet* backlash). But there is a clear influence of immigrant communities in debates about what constitutes the nation and national history (debates about colonialism and slavery). How to respond to these contradictory arguments and demands as a liberal state? Different states react quite differently, but the times of one-sided top-down statist definitions of the nation seem gone – except for in (quasi-)totalitarian states. (*examples*)

Nation-branding has a more externally directed dimension and is driven both by economic and geopolitical motives. State institutions and big business are leading, hence the process tends to be more top-down. We may think of statist projects to 'market' the nation for commercial or political purposes. Cf. in NL: Rijksmuseum, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, history of tolerance etc.; rather not of colonialism. Sometimes top-down and bottom-up approaches to nation-branding convergence into a happy mixture: sports, music (cf. Jamaican reggae).

So this is the overall context of nation-building and nation-branding. But there are additional challenges in small-scale states or non-sovereign jurisdictions in the Caribbean. There is the obvious heavy dependence on tourism, and hence the need to attract foreigners with happy messages: sun, sea, beach, etc. But what about culture as a tourist attraction, what type of cultural heritage does an island such as Aruba, Bonaire or Curaçao want to promote? European legacies? Innocent folklore? Cultural heritage of later Caribbean immigrants? Confrontational reminders of colonialism, slavery,

race? These are serious dilemmas. Cf. Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, in his masterful epos *Omeros*, where he is referring at once to the female protagonist and he native nation of St. Lucia at large:

She was selling herself like the island, without
Any pain, and the village did not seem to care
that is was dying in its change, the way it whored
away a simple life that would soon disappear