

SPOTLIGHT Oct_Nov_2021 — Association of Critical Heritage Studies

Member Spotlight, October/November 2021

Drs Rene Teijgeler

Tell us about who you are and your work:

I was very much taken by surprise at the invitation to be the ACHS Spotlight member for this month. It is an honor to be able to share my work on heritage and its protection with the distinguished members of ACHS.

In fieldwork, researchers need to know who they are, what they represent and how that might influence their 'field of research.' For example, a study in Mexico has shown that female researchers were not thought of as 'female', but as a 'researcher,' first and foremost, which was considered to be genderless. Self-reflection in research, especially in field work, is an important first step and will be helpful in understanding the social interactions between the stakeholders and researchers. In '[Controlling the past, owing the future](#)', the contribution 'Community-based Archaeology in Israel' by Ilan and Gadot provides a good example of this. Thus, by knowing where I come from, the reader is able to acquire greater insight into where I stand today. On a personal note: I am a 71-year-old white male Dutch grandfather from a lower-middle-class background; I was the first one to go to university in my family, and have been a lifelong independent and critical researcher. The version of myself described below represents one of the many versions of myself. It is colored by a selective image of my 'academic self', my stage of life, and the stories I choose to ignore or push away. This is one of the stories I live by ([MacAdams](#)).

Where I come from

At the start of my academic career in 1970, I was following the 1968 student uprisings in Paris closely, reading the corresponding literature and becoming active in radical politics. Due to this interest, sociology made a natural choice of study. Soon, I gained more in-depth knowledge on Grounded Theory, Ethnomethodology, Radical Sociology, Qualitative Methodologies, Fieldwork and Participatory Observation. In my graduate studies in social psychology and hospital sciences, I worked as an assistant care worker in an old-age home in order to understand the power structure of the organization and became an undercover patient in the local academic hospital to experience life as a patient. Though Poppers' positivism was the dominant theory and methodology at that time, I chose the less popular direction of qualitative methodology and fieldwork. Depending on the research subject, qualitative research can provide more in-depth knowledge of a field of study. Discussions on 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' in social sciences can also lead to an activist approach in solving societal problems, where researchers place themselves at the service of the different social movements of that time. Many decades later, the 'bottom-up approach' in today's heritage strategy and tactics is, perhaps, a late consequence of these views; at least this

strategy has gained greater acceptance recently. Despite this, sharing true power with the stakeholders in situ can still be very difficult for the main heritage institutions and funding agencies. The Corona pandemic, however, appears to have accelerated the necessary transition.

Earning my livelihood as a research assistant, I developed a taste for books and became a book and paper conservator, acquiring a good grounding for conservation in other fields as well. I continued my studies in anthropology, specializing in museum anthropology, anthropology & archaeology, and the languages and cultures of Southeast Asia, while simultaneously working as a conservator at the National Library of the Netherlands. It was there that I discovered a Batak manuscript that had been inaccurately catalogued. In order to conserve it, I felt that I needed to do fieldwork on the island of Sumatra, where the Batak people live. As a conservator, it was clear to me that it was absolutely necessary that I learn more about the people, their (book) culture, and their religious practices. Objects need context and have a 'social life', as [Arjun Appadurai](#) wrote. I consider my publications about the production process and conservation of Pustaka, the Batak book, as my first academic achievement. My next discovery in the collection of the National Library of the Netherlands was a rare Javanese manuscript written on [tapa](#). This resulted in my MA thesis in anthropology on these Javanese manuscripts combining data from different natural sciences, lab research, codicology, linguistics, comparative literature, history, and fieldwork. Over the years, I have published more on paper-historical subjects such as handmade paper in India, amatl (a local tapa and writing material) in ancient Mexico, paper made from water hyacinth in Bangladesh, and Chinese offering papers.

After completing my degree in anthropology, I continued to develop my career as an independent researcher and adviser. My first projects took me to Asia, where I provided technical and management training on several income-generating projects on arts & crafts; I could apply my knowledge and skills as a conservator and acquired new skills in the process. Also, the projects aroused my interest in development projects in general and what role culture could play in developing countries. I became a major promoter of culture in development and worked to ensure culture could be the 9th goal on [the Millennium Development Goals](#) agenda. During the projects on preservation science and preservation in tropical climates in the first year of the new millennium, I realized that these studies revealed our preservation practice to be very ethnocentric; local preservation and conservation practices were ignored, and prevention and passive conservation needed to be more prominent on the conservation agenda, including disaster preparedness and other forms of risk management. After I was invited to design the risk management plan for the National Library of the Netherlands, I trained other cultural institutions on risk management both at home and abroad. From that time onwards, disaster preparedness, risk management, and first aid in the heritage sector, both in times of natural and human disaster, received my full attention and proved to take up most of my time. From that time onwards, I have followed the ins and outs of humanitarian emergency aid very closely as an example for heritage emergency projects.

Where I am

As a political activist, I read many works on non-violent action and pacifism. I do believe that in extreme circumstances individuals do have the right to defend themselves if non-violent methods do not work (I practiced [aikido](#)), but on a societal level, the use of violence will only create more violence. Notwithstanding my pacifist ideas, I took the decision after long deliberation to join the civil affairs unit of the Dutch army as a specialist in the protection of

cultural heritage in 2003. The argument that this would be the only way to safeguard heritage during a violent conflict with the backing of international humanitarian law and the UN Security Council resolutions finally convinced me. I believed in the concepts of [Defense, Development and Diplomacy](#) (3-D approach) and the [Responsibility to Protect](#) (R2P) to assist our heritage colleagues in conflict to protect their heritage. From June 2004 until March 2005, the Dutch army seconded me to the American embassy in Baghdad to become the senior cultural advisor. This became a life-changing experience in many ways, both on a personal and a professional level. I have written about parts of these experiences, and more so the results of my work in Iraq. Fortunately, I was able to assist my Iraqi heritage colleagues in many ways. At later occasions, I asked them if my work in Iraq had been meaningful to them and all of them answered positively. Nevertheless, my doubts as an embedded heritage expert continued to grow, especially after the tumultuous [World Archeological Congress](#) (WAC) in 2008 in Dublin, where I called for clear guidelines for embedded heritage staff, introduced the ethical and humanitarian standards laid down in the [Sphere Handbook](#), and the Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) [Do-No-Harm program](#).

I observed that civil affairs officers were not the only ones working in a conflict zone and that humanitarian workers had already been doing so for many years. Later, I addressed these issues and other fruits of self-reflection in several publications. Nonetheless, I accepted the position of cultural adviser to the (Dutch) commander of International Security Assistance Force South in Afghanistan in 2009 and... this proved to be a big mistake. I was too much a part of the war machine and it was very difficult to escape. Consequently, I only marginally succeeded in protecting Afghanistan's heritage. The difference between this experience and the Iraq mission could not be greater! After several contributions to meetings at UNESCO, UNESCO National Committee Netherlands, the foundation group of the [Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield](#) and writing the first 'Make Sense' editions on gender and on cultural protection for the [Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence](#), I still did not receive satisfactory answers to my question on how best to support our heritage colleagues in conflict areas. At the World Archaeological Congress in Jordan, January 2013, a Syrian archaeology student from Barcelona, Isber Sabrine, gathered a group of people to discuss the possibilities to support our colleagues in the Syrian civil war. Not long after, he and I founded the non-governmental organization (NGO) [Heritage for Peace](#). Our primary goal was to safeguard *all* of Syria's heritage during the civil war and to work with *all* willing Syrian partners and secondly to start a dialogue between diverse parties through heritage. And that was the best decision of my life! Now, I play the role of senior advisor in the background.

Heritage for Peace and ACHS

Finally, I could put all of my ideas and experiences, collected over the previous years, to the test. The statutes were set-up to include the standards and code of conduct from the Sphere Handbook and the Do-No-Harm principle. The idea to exclusively work in violent conflict areas, the first years in Syria only was unheard of in the field of heritage protection as the bulk of the heritage protection projects were implemented in 'post-war' conditions. The distinction in conflict situations between pre-conflict, peri-conflict, and post-conflict, however, overlooks the fact that violent conflicts do not have a clear-cut beginning or a clear-cut ending. Both conflict and peace are fluid concepts - just like disaster and risk, they are social constructs. Conflicts are often rooted in old controversies between different identities that have a difficult history. Also, 'cold conflicts' can suddenly turn into 'warm conflicts', and fragile states can endure protracted conflicts. In short, the distinction is too static. Besides, the declaration of war or peace is subject to political decision-making - remember, President [George W. Bush](#)

declared that the major battles in Iraq were over on May 1, 2003, only 40 days after the invasion, in the run-up to his 2004 re-election campaign. The last US troops left Iraq in 2011 and the country is still suffering from ISIS who is regrouping in the countryside, and violent outbreaks between Shia and Sunni militias. Thus, better to say Heritage for Peace is supporting our colleagues in *warm conflicts*.

If we want to start and maintain a dialogue, the beginning of peacebuilding, with all the ‘connectors’ and even ‘dividers’ in conflict we need to take our neutrality as one of our most important principles. Regrettably, not all of the local stakeholders accepted this, though most did. Moreover, humanitarian work is progressively becoming more difficult and, increasingly, more workers are being [killed in spite of their neutrality](#). They are considered more and more as representatives of ‘the West’ by the warring parties. Subsequently, foreign aid organizations repatriate their own staff from conflict zones when the dangers become too great and leave the local staff to do the job. For different reasons Heritage for Peace never set foot on Syrian soil since the civil war, so we chiefly met our Syrian colleagues in either Lebanon, Turkey, and sometimes in Europe.

Our first (self-financed) project was providing a 3-day training course for employees from [DGAM](#), Syria’s state heritage authority. This training was held in April/May 2013 in Beirut and consisted of basic tools to protect heritage. In the same month, we held a presentation for members of the opposition [Syrian National Coalition](#) (SNC), in Istanbul. The primary aim was to introduce them to international humanitarian law and the relevant heritage conventions, which they were previously unaware of. We noticed that [the Hague Convention \(1954\)](#) was not available in Arabic but, luckily, we were able to get hold of an unofficial translation. Further, we organized different projects with the [Syrian Interim Government](#) and a group of former DGAM employees around Idlib. During the 2014 international conference ‘[Heritage and Conflict, Lessons to Safeguard Syrian Heritage](#)’ that we organized in Santander, Spain, the delegations of DGAM and the Syrian Interim Government agreed to sit down in a separate room and discuss how they could cooperate to safeguard the country’s heritage. Later, we sent a proposal for a resolution on the protection of cultural heritage to the chief negotiator of the Syrian National Council during the second round of peace talks in Geneva, 2016. Furthermore, together with Blue Shield UK, we published a no-strike list for Aleppo, developed a brief document on how best to store artefacts and books in emergency storages outside the institution, advised the inspector of antiquities in Palmyra after an emergency call on how best to hide the collections whilst ISIS approached the site, and set-up a first aid program for al-Raqqa after ISIS left the city. Over the 8 years, we developed more heritage protection projects with our Syrian colleagues. We also publish a monthly newsletter on ‘[Damage to Syria's Heritage](#)’ and irregularly the list ‘[Towards a protection of the Syrian cultural heritage: A summary of the international responses.](#)’ Last year, we created the [Arab network of Civil Society to Safeguard Cultural Heritage](#) (ANSCH) for Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen and people are still very active on its [Facebook page](#). In the beginning of this year, our [Guidelines for COVID-19 and Heritage](#) came out. These are just a few examples of the projects we have developed with our partners in the Middle East. Meanwhile, after 8 years, people know where to find us and we have expanded our activities into conflict areas in other parts of the world like Afghanistan, Tigray and Myanmar. xxx

Most heritage aid projects concentrate on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of ‘materiality’ with ‘authenticity’ serving as the guiding principle, the universality of heritage values, and the necessity of preservation for the future. Several ACHS members have questioned these premises, and rightly so! Universality, for example, also manifests itself in heritage education

and heritage awareness training. First of all, this can presume a lack of (western) knowledge within the intended public, which is, in fact, a continuation of the post-colonial discourse, and, secondly, it reduces the victims of war to passive citizens despite the fact that they are often the first responders. Universality is also a foundational aspect of conservation; our almost purely technical approach and additional ethical principles is supposed to be the only valid direction towards conservation. I must admit that I have contributed to the concept of universality in conservation in my publications on preservation science and, to a lesser extent, on preservation in tropical climates. The acknowledgment of traditional or better other conservation practices like in [Africa](#) and [Asia](#) started to make a difference. Several ACHS authors have taken the discussion a step further. Behind conservation are a set of distinct heritage constructs that are often omitted in the conservation and heritage debates. This has led to new insights, such as the ‘illusion of permanence’, ‘fear of loss’, ‘[curated decay](#)’ and limits of the Heritage@Risk concept. The literature on heritage, constantly in the making, shows very thought-provoking examples, especially in the context of disasters such as from [Bosnia](#), [Indonesia](#), [Italy](#), [Japan](#), [Thailand](#) and the [USA](#). The critical questions that Cornelius Holtorf raises in his editorial to the [special issue of the International Journal of Cultural Property on Authenticity and Reconstruction](#) are ones that many still need to ask themselves when designing heritage projects in warm conflicts. For several reasons, it is a real challenge but a battle we should not shy away from.

I trust that readers have received an insight into how careers can develop by reading my personal academic biography. Furthermore, I hope they have come to understand why I joined ACHS and why I am deeply grateful to my colleagues from ACHS who have given me the opportunity to continue to develop my ideas on heritage, to remain a critical heritage researcher and practitioner, and, in the end, to become a better person.

Contact: rene.teijgeler@planet.nl

Publications: https://uu.academia.edu/ReneTeijgeler?from_navbar=true