

Uncovering myths: A critical reflection on heritage communities and participation

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Summary In recent years, there has been a shift in heritage policies towards incorporating heritage communities and encouraging participatory practices. However, the concept of *community* often possesses a romantic appeal, leading heritage professionals to adopt the notion uncritically. The 'messy' practice of engaging with communities should not be taken for granted. This article explores the very premise of community engagement, offering a critical reflection on the meanings we attach to it. Drawing from my fieldwork experience in a Cabo Verdean heritage community in Rotterdam, the article evaluates my own engagement, exposing the necessity to broaden the understandings of *community* and *participation*. To foster more socially engaged practices, it is essential for cultural workers to challenge one's own assumptions and biases.

Keywords heritage community, participation, community engagement, socially engaged practice

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Introduction

We encounter communities everywhere – in our daily lives, in our local neighbourhoods, and in our virtual spaces. Whether we consider ourselves part of a community or not, these are social structures that guide the way we perceive groupings in society. The practice of working with communities in heritage management appears to be a straightforward solution to challenge the prevailing top-down practices. However, it is crucial to critically examine the notion of *community* itself to grasp the complexities of community engagement.

Since 2019, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) has been conducting research on participatory heritage as part of a process towards ratifying the Faro Convention. Developed in 2005 by the Council of Europe, the Faro Convention promotes participatory practices in heritage management, reimagining heritage as a democratic and co-creational process.¹ During my internship at the RCE in the spring of 2023, I was assigned the task to con-

duct research on international heritage communities within the framework of the Faro Convention. The convention represents a significant shift in Dutch heritage policies, indicating a new conceptualisation of heritage as a dynamic community asset opposed to the prior focus on collections, archaeology, and built heritage. This institutional reorientation within the RCE is treated internally as a natural progression towards a more inclusive heritage management. My own assumptions about the potential of community engagement were influenced by the institutional framework I was working within. However, as I explored the literature more extensively, I found myself repeatedly revisiting the question: why do I – as a cultural sector worker – place such importance in working with communities? Questioning the very premise of community engagement transformed my research into a critical reflection of the meanings we attach to the concepts of *community* and *participation*.

In this article, I will evaluate how communities are imagined, engaged with, and mobilised by cultural workers. Drawing on my own experiences with a Cabo Verdean heritage community in Rotterdam, I will assess how cultural workers can identify their own blind spots to work towards a more socially engaged practice. Rather than treating community engagement as a checkbox exercise, reflecting on one's own assumptions might enable cultural workers to approach their engagement with greater care, acknowledging that messy entanglements affect individuals and communities. I begin by reviewing the concept of *community* and its applications as discussed in selected literature. I will then turn to my own fieldwork in a Rotterdam community, advocating for a broader understanding of *community* and *participation*. I conclude by suggesting how cultural workers can apply a self-reflective approach to their work in order to challenge biased practices.

Thinking about communities

As the understanding of heritage has evolved, so has the perception of communities. Today, heritage professionals might find themselves questioning: *why* do we care about communities? In the past, cultural heritage was often viewed in a static manner, closely tied to historical environments and conservation practices. Historic monuments and buildings were primarily perceived as artefacts to be preserved in their original form, without much consideration for their contemporary uses and varying meanings attributed to them. However, contemporary perspectives on heritage emphasises its dynamic nature as a negotiation of ideas

and values beyond the physical remains.² Heritage is no longer solely perceived as a source of coherence, but rather as a complex entity of conflict, dissonance, and multitudes.³ Heritage is inherently political, as it strives to shape potential futures through the lens of the past. Thinking about heritage as a practice of future-making raises crucial questions around ownership: who bears the responsibility for safeguarding heritage? And who holds the authority to define it? Within this framework, communities hold a significant role in the contemporary discourse surrounding heritage.

At the start of the 20th century, the concept of *community* was predominantly used in sociological literature to describe rural towns and villages.⁴ Communities were considered primarily rural, constrained by geographical boundaries, and described as a traditional assortment of individuals. However, following World War II, the perceptions of communities underwent a transformation, as the ethical imperative to tell multiple narratives emerged.⁵ Postcolonial work challenged the one-sided narratives and advocated for the recognition of a diversity of voices, and marginalised communities sought to define their own groupings on their own terms. Consequently, the concept of *community* expanded beyond geography and became a way for marginalised groups to self-identify and present themselves to the outside world.

In today's world, communities form around shared interests, political engagement, constructions of otherness, emotions, or everyday experiences, often connected through virtual channels.⁶ One aspect that scholars widely agree on is that the concept of *community* is as highly contested and flexible as *heritage*.⁷ Waterton and Smith argue that *community* functions more as an action or verb than a noun, as it is (re)constructed through ongoing social relations.⁸ Communities can never be considered complete, as the individuals involved negotiate their identities in a continuing process. As a result, communities are dynamic social engagements characterised by constant movement rather than fixed entities. They are an ongoing process of becoming.

Even though professional-led heritage management remains the prevailing norm in the field, international and national policymakers are increasingly initiating efforts to involve communities in heritage preservation, such as the case of the Faro Convention. Heritage policies on community engagement reflect an understanding of heritage as fundamentally participatory, where citizens themselves should become active agents and interpreters of heritage. However, scholars argue that the idea of *community* possesses a romantic and alluring appeal, leading heritage professionals and policymakers to sometimes adopt the notion uncritically as an easy solution.⁹ While working with communities continues to

be emphasised in heritage management and policy as a way of securing a more democratic and inclusive approach, critics argue that the very process of idealising community engagement in this context can potentially overlook the stakeholders who are already vulnerable or marginalised.¹⁰ Community engagement is perhaps not as straightforward as assumed. Imposing questions arise: how does the conceptual understanding of *community* translate into real-life heritage management? And how can the interaction between officials and communities be valuable?

From theory to practice

For my internship at the RCE, I was tasked with researching an international heritage community to explore how heritage is enacted and preserved. According to the Faro Convention, a heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish to sustain and transmit to future generations.¹¹ Through colleagues at the RCE, I connected with two members of a Cabo Verdean heritage community in Rotterdam – a community with strong international connections. Between May and June 2023, I conducted research through interviews with the two members and engaged in participant observation at community events. As a white, non-Dutch speaker living outside Rotterdam, I approached this research as an outsider, which also came to influence my later shift in focus.

I conducted two semi-structured interviews with community members introduced to me by colleagues who had collaborated with them on previous projects. This prior connection facilitated their willingness to share individual experiences and insights into their community. The first interviewee, A, holds a prominent position within the community and has a political background. The second interviewee, B, is also a well-known figure in the community, particularly in the music scene. Initially, I intended to examine how community members define their heritage. The interviews therefore aimed to explore personal perspectives on *heritage*, with open-ended questions seeking insights into individual experiences.

In addition to the interviews, I participated in two events organised by local community associations. First, I attended the Morabeza Festival, which celebrated Rotterdam-based Morabeza Records, the first Cabo Verdean record label in the world. Second, I took part in the São João Baptista celebration, an annual event held at Pracinha d'Kebród, featuring religious rituals, food, commercial stands, dance, and music. At these events, I engaged in participant observation, small

talk with attendees, and attending performances to gain insight into the heritage community.

After completing the research and reading into more literature on the subject, I decided to shift my focus. Instead of examining how *heritage* is perceived and enacted by community members, I began critically examining the role of the cultural worker – in this case, myself. The theoretical imperative to critically examine community engagement and my own positionality as an outsider made this shift necessary. This approach allowed me to reassess assumptions on *community* and *participation* based on my own methodology, the interview responses, and my experiences at the events. The reassessment is particularly interesting in the case of the Cabo Verdean heritage community in Rotterdam. Diasporic groups often navigate the interplay between local, national, and transnational influences, with identity being negotiated through broader networks. This apparent complexity makes them particularly productive for challenging rigid perceptions of communities. My fieldwork therefore allowed me to consider how approaching, defining, and working with heritage communities were implicated in certain conceptualisations of *community* and *participation*.

Historical context

The Cabo Verdean community in Rotterdam holds a unique position as one of the largest Cabo Verdean populations in Europe, second only to Lisbon. Within the diasporic community, the languages spoken are a combination of Portuguese, Crioulo (a Creole language), and Dutch.

The history of Cabo Verdeans in Rotterdam traces back to the 1950s when the first men arrived, primarily as sailors who resided in boarding houses between their voyages.¹² However, significant changes occurred within the Cabo Verdean population in Rotterdam following Cabo Verde's independence from Portugal in 1975. This milestone marked the beginning of a new wave of emigration, primarily consisting of women seeking to reunite with their families.¹³ In these years, Rotterdam played a pivotal role as a centre of anti-colonial and cultural activity during the Cabo Verdean struggle for independence. João Silva, one of the first Cabo Verdean men to arrive in the Netherlands, was commissioned by Amílcar Cabral, a prominent figure in the independence movement, to safeguard and promote Cabo Verdean cultural identity in Rotterdam.¹⁴ Silva established Morabeza Records, the world's first Cabo Verdean record label, in 1965 to record music and poetry that spread messages of independence and support from the diaspora. The Cabo Ver-

dean diaspora in Rotterdam served as a network of cultural resistance, providing support to the growing migrant population and the decolonial movement.

Throughout the years, the Cabo Verdean community in Rotterdam has celebrated their cultural heritage through various events. The annual São João Baptista celebrations, held around June 24th on Heemraadsplein, play a significant role in bringing together Cabo Verdeans in Rotterdam. This festive occasion encompasses both religious and cultural customs, blending elements of native traditions with remnants of Portuguese influences that were introduced during the colonial period. To ensure the preservation and promotion of intangible heritage, cultural organisations like the Cabo Verdean club Associação Centro Cultural have played a pivotal role in organising and structuring these celebrations.¹⁵ In 2019, the São João Baptista celebration was inscribed into the Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands.

Approaching communities

It is important to acknowledge that the *community* itself is an imagined construct. As described earlier, the concept of *community* has a history of being applied and imposed on certain groups by academics and cultural workers. *Community* is often used based on assumed characteristics and connections, influenced by preconceived notions and prescribed aims.¹⁶ While communities themselves may use the concept of community to self-identify and mobilise, professionals often retain the authority to define and delimit the boundaries of what constitutes a community in their specific context, rather than relying on the community's own self-identification. This fixed approach can potentially essentialise people's backgrounds, neglect their hybrid identities, and lead to the 'othering' of individuals, reducing them to a single aspect of their lives.¹⁷ Identifying communities often involves a sense of imagined creation, and it is therefore essential to recognise one's own assumptions before approaching a community. This will lead to a greater awareness of the potential expectations placed on individuals to contribute to predefined narratives, allowing for more agency in narrating their own stories about community and heritage.

Reflecting on my own position, I realise that my role as an outsider significantly influenced my initial approach to the community. My approach has academic foundations in ethnographic practices that – to some degree – position the researcher as the observer and the community or heritage as the object. My positionality as a white, non-Dutch speaker living outside Rotterdam made it even

more tempting to separate myself from the context I was studying, as the location, language, and cultural setting was unfamiliar to me. This unfamiliarity influenced my prior imaginations of the community before approaching it, as I imagined it mostly according to its national ties to Cabo Verde, without recognising the complex formations that all communities entail. Despite naive intentions to approach the community without presuppositions, I had somewhat reductive ideas that shaped my interview questions, and thereby pushing the interview answers in a certain direction.

Without being fully aware at the time, I assumed a shared heritage and a sense of identity tied to the migrant background, even if these were second or third generation Dutch-Cabo Verdeans. Given the significant population size of the group, mapping out the entire community would be an impossible task. Not everyone within this group is necessarily preoccupied with preserving Cabo Verdean heritage. Not everyone showed up to the Morabeza Festival or the São João Baptista celebrations. This raises the important question: would individuals still be part of this community based solely on their migrant backgrounds? While this might be up to the individual to decide, we – as cultural workers – must recognise the delimitations of communities that we inevitably construct before approaching it. Only by recognising these preliminary delimitations can we begin to see them for what they are: imaginations.

Self-reflection is crucial when approaching a community. A community is always more fragmented than initially perceived. Communities are neither homogeneous, unified, or singular. Mapping out communities should not be based on one-dimensional identities but explored with an openness respecting hybrid identities and intersectionality. In this case, I initially assumed that the community was defined by a national identity and failed to consider how individuals might be connected or disconnected through other experiences. Had I explored these other connections, it would have allowed for multiplicity and given individuals the option to disown a community, if needed.

Broadening the concept of *community*

Having discussed how communities are approached, I will now examine how they are engaged with. In this context, my research highlights the importance of recognising communities as messy. According to community member A, the community in Rotterdam reflects generational differences in terms of activism and political engagement:

I think there is a difference in the generation, because I think in the first generation there was a lot more activism and participation than now. The people who are active at this moment, they all follow a business model. They are not active because of ideology or because they want to achieve something in the community, they are active because they are organising parties and they are organising cultural events, but more from a business perspective. (A)

These generational differences became particularly evident at the Morabeza Festival and the São João Baptista celebrations. Attendees at both events were of a wide range of ages. At the Morabeza Festival, numerous stalls featured young individuals promoting their businesses, confirming A's statement about the young generation's entrepreneurial spirit. Furthermore, A highlights a difference in how communities are enacted through generational gaps:

And, nowadays you have, with social media, you don't have to meet each other physically. You can also meet each other on social media. [...] So, that is also one of the explanations why a lot of the associations and the young generation don't organise themselves in associations. (A)

The influence of changing technologies, such as social media, have redefined the ways primarily young people connect within the group, creating varying ways to be part of the community across generations.

Both A and B maintain a strong sense of pride in their Cabo Verdean backgrounds. They take pride in being part of one of the smallest countries in Africa and acknowledge the historical and cultural significance of their roots:

Cabo Verde managed with the help of the diaspora. So, I feel proud. My parents also worked through the development of our community and also for the family and Cabo Verde at home. (B)

As previously mentioned, these responses were partly influenced by the interview questions focused on their personal connections to Cabo Verde. These questions may have shaped their expectations and influenced how they articulated and defined their heritage. However, while A and B maintain a sense of ownership of a Cabo Verdean identity, they also emphasise the diasporic Cabo Verdean communities dispersed around the world as central to their understandings of their heritage. Their sense of national pride is deeply connected to other transnational

networks that connect people through shared histories, including colonialism and the history of slavery:

So, what we are trying to do is to combine and work together with other groups or other minority groups. To see, what are the similarities and which similarity objectives do we have? (A)

B elaborates on the shared historical connection:

Cabo Verde and Guinea Bissau are ancestrally linked to the slave trade. A very, very large portion of those enslaved Africans came from the region of Guinea Bissau, Gambia, Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone, which in that time would be Portuguese territory. [...] Transatlantic slave trade started from Cabo Verde, and we are very conscious about this position. (B)

For B, the shared struggle and fight for emancipation multiplies his perception of identity as both a Cabo Verdean, Rastafarian, and Pan-Africanist on equal terms:

I am very well known as a Cabo Verdean and Rastafarian. I'm promoting Africa, I'm promoting our global nation. And promoting humanity. You know, peace, love, and prosperity for each other. (B)

Both A and B emphasise Rotterdam as a local space where transnational kinship can be cultivated through everyday interactions, demonstrating how these global links manifest in local identifications. The relationship between the transnational and the local is exemplified through the role of language, serving as both a source of sameness and difference:

The most important feature of your being as a Cabo Verdean is your language, because it is the thing that connects me and my countrymen. They have nine island variants. Every island talks its own. We have the variation of Guinea Bissau. And here in Rotterdam, we have the three creole languages from the three islands of the Caribbean, so we can converse with them very freely. It's very strange because they are so removed from Cabo Verde. (B)

Differences in language variants reflect a way to recognise and celebrate the heterogeneity within the community. Meanwhile, the shared history with other former Portuguese colonies fosters a transnational connection. B describes this

connection as a 'family kind of link', creating kinship through shared histories, languages, religion, island identity, and food. Language becomes a shared cultural understanding that transcends national borders.

Interviews with community members A and B reveal that the community is characterised by significant heterogeneity, including generational gaps and language. Additionally, the community is part of intricate networks with connections to other groups, highlighting the complex relationships between local, regional, and transnational influences in the formations of communities. As I approached the community, I imagined it through nationality. This approach clearly neglects both the heterogeneity within the group and its transnational connections.

These critical reflections can be a useful tool when trying to challenge one's own urge to essentialise and fix communities in certain contexts. While nationality remains an important marker on how we perceive identity, language has the potential to challenge this reductive construction. The interviews show that it can be 'messy' to map out communities, as all communities are simultaneously local, regional, national, and transnational. This messiness should be taken into account when working with communities. Let members define the community differently and make room for contradictions. Most often, communities cannot act as a homogenous group, and they should not.

Broadening the concept of participation

It is similarly essential to embrace the different ways in which individuals and communities engage with their heritage. While conducting research, it became clear that I had limited contact to members of the community, and I reflected on the effect of this limitation.

Working with communities is essentially about relationships, which require time to develop. Within my limited time frame, I interviewed two individuals and attended two different events. Both interviewees were raised in politically active households and related to political front figures of the anti-colonial struggle. This upbringing instilled a sense of community activism in A and B, shaping their involvement and participation over the years. They play a role in the community by organising, presenting, performing, and public speaking:

My father was like a militant of the party of liberation. He was very involved in the struggle of liberation. [...] Both of my parents were militants, so I don't

know anything else. I was privileged to be born in a house with those two fanatics. (B)

In total I have been 25 years active in politics. But I always, before I was active in politics and through the time that I was active, I always organised, and I always have been active in the Cabo Verdean community. Organising things, supporting things, doing a lot of things. I worked together with my uncles and also with my father in various things. For me it was like learning, walking – it was activism, politics, society of community activism was something natural. (A)

A and B exhibit a sense of ownership and mobilisation of concepts such as *cultural heritage, identity, community, and participation*. This reflects their political backgrounds and awareness of how these terms can be used to promote Cabo Verdean heritage:

Now we are patrimonial. We are patrimony of Holland, not only of Rotterdam, which is good for us to get more funds. (B)

While the interviews with A and B provide valuable insights, it is crucial to acknowledge that they represent individual perspectives within the community. Accessibility is key in this context: who has the access and opportunity to participate in festivals, interviews, and events? Who is visible, and who remains unseen? There are voices that may go unheard and individuals who choose to engage in ways that are not always acknowledged or celebrated.

Traditional models of participation are often represented as a ladder, enforcing a value system of engagement.¹⁸ Activities like organising and public speaking are deemed active and placed high on the ladder, while actions such as receiving information and observing are considered passive and ranked lower. This hierarchical way of thinking about participation should be challenged. Importantly, to participate in one way is often dependent on how others participate. Participation should not be valued better or worse, higher or lower. For professionals, it is therefore necessary to embrace a wider range of participation that reflects the different ways in which communities engage with their heritage.

Reflecting on my methodological approach, I initially expected community members to participate in visible ways, such as attending events. I took it for granted that I would be able to map out the community by attending these events myself. However, not everyone might be involved or want to participate in these

events. The events, like the Morabeza Festival and São João Baptista celebrations, featured performances and talks – ways of participating that are normally considered high on the participation ladder. Yet, by focusing on these events and the individuals on stage, I neglected those who engaged with the heritage community differently, such as behind the scenes or through everyday activities.

As mentioned by A, a big part of the younger generation engages with their community through online activities and business relations, which are completely different from the spaces I engaged with. Furthermore, I should have talked with more individuals that differ from those of A and B, as this would have given me insight into the multiple ways of participating. While most research on communities tends to focus on individuals who are positioned as spokespersons or representatives, the position of these should always be reflected upon. Individuals in a community may have very different experiences and perceptions of the government and cultural organisations, and some may be less inclined to interact with heritage professionals, especially government representatives. More time for my research would have benefitted the development of other relationships and recognition of the different types of participation.

Broadening the concept of *participation* is an essential practice for cultural workers engaging with communities. Insights from the Rotterdam community highlight the need to consider participants' backgrounds and positions. Often, the hierarchy of participation is implicit. My research showed that only individuals engaging in traditionally celebrated and more visible ways of participating were given a voice. Shifting away from a framework of optimising participation can create better relationships that honour and promote various forms of engagement with heritage. Recognising other ways of participating – such as observing, listening, or engaging online – allows for a more nuanced understanding of a community. Additionally, when heritage policies incorporate participation, professionals must address the occasionally contradictory desires and engagements within communities. This includes acknowledging engagements that are traditionally considered unproductive, such as refusing to participate.

Conclusion

When taking off the rose-tinted glasses, one realises that there are myths to be uncovered around *community* and *participation* – the myth of homogeneous communities, the myth of their inherent coherence, and the myth that some forms of participation are 'better' or 'worse' than others. Even though both *community*

and *participation* seem familiar to us, we are most often not familiar with our own role as cultural workers in imagining and defining them. Working with people is complex, and we should be curious about our own assumptions and limitations in relational work.

After reflecting on my research process, I look back and ask myself: how can a broadened understanding of *community* and *participation* contribute to a more socially engaged practice for cultural workers? Recognising the interconnectedness between the local, regional, and transnational calls for a safeguarding of the heterogeneity within communities. Essential for this practice is to stay critical of the delimitations of a community when approaching it. Furthermore, it requires a redefinition of *participation*, embracing a wider spectrum of engagements. The current value system of participation emphasises the need for more flexibility. My research shows the necessity of acknowledging backgrounds and positionality of both cultural workers and participants to amplify a multitude of voices. By challenging our own assumptions and biased practices as cultural workers, myths on heritage communities and participation can be uncovered.

Notes

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