Flatirons and the Folds of History
On Archives, Cultural Heritage and Colonial Legacies

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The notion of traveling heritages implies movement, but it may not be immediately clear what it is that travels in the context of an archive and library like the International Information Centre and Archive for the Women’s Movement (IIAV). The IIAV is an institution that specializes in collecting, archiving, providing information services and producing of knowledge on women’s history and women in general (see chapter by Wieringa in this volume). Over the past seventy years, the IIAV has become an internationally renowned center of expertise, with a unique and growing collection of archives, books and other materials related to a broad range of women’s movements and issues. When I look at the IIAV’s library and archives, I see them not as repositories, but rather as dynamic processes. An archival collection is not static. Collecting is obviously an activity, but the collections of books, papers, and objects are also, in a sense, active. New acquisitions influence how we look at what has been collected and preserved in the past.

In this respect, archives like the IIAV can be compared with a museum. The objects in the reserves and exhibition may be very valuable, but it is the dynamic of its acquisition and exhibition policies that keeps a museum connected to contemporary society. We create our relationship to and awareness of cultural heritage over and over again. The critical issue for a museum, as for other cultural heritage institutions like archives and libraries is not about making new acquisitions and improving collection management and accessibility per se. Understanding the interests and contribution to a sense of belonging and ownership that visitors and users bring to cultural collections is what is crucial. The challenge is to create and maintain vital relationships with visitors and users by inviting them to explore the relationships and connections between what has been collected in the past and the new acquisitions that are made in the present.

The concept of traveling heritages encompasses some of the major changes of our time: globalization, the creation of virtual communities, and the issues of immigration and cultural diversity. Understanding our collections as traveling heritages suggests a need to reconstruct the journey of the papers, objects, and people,
as well as to historicize the context in which the collections have been gathered. An important aspect of this ‘journey’ is the implicit colonial legacy of past collection and acquisition policies.¹

In this chapter I will look at traveling heritages as a dynamic concept that is relevant to the consideration of the accessibility and interpretation of collections and the development of new acquisition policies. My approach is to present and discuss three examples which deal with people, objects, and ideas, respectively. In each case, I will compare an archive and a museum. The first case starts with the history of two close friends – friends whose material legacies ended up in two different institutions: an archive and a museum. I will discuss how these different institutional contexts influence our perception of the historical material. The second case elaborates on the institutional ‘divide’ between archives and museums. It focuses on the presentation of objects in libraries and archives – as compared to exhibitions in museums – and discusses how each approaches the audience and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. The last case deals with ideas and focuses on the intangible heritage that travels with people. The traveling heritages concept challenges us to develop collection strategies that go beyond the traditional archival approach of collecting works on paper and material objects. This also suggests a change in the relationship between archives and their audiences.

The references in this chapter to museum policies and practices are based on my experiences in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Before presenting the three cases, I will briefly introduce the Tropenmuseum and discuss why, in the context of the notion of traveling heritages, it may offer a window into the meaning of the colonial past for contemporary IIAV policies.

The Tropenmuseum, the IIAV and the Dutch colonial past

The Tropenmuseum is an anthropological museum which was founded by colonial entrepreneurs in the Dutch city of Haarlem in 1864 as the Colonial Museum. In 1910, the Colonial Museum became part of the new Colonial Institute in

¹ Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, an ethnographic museum that from its start developed its exhibition, collection and research strategies in a close mutual relationship with the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Oxford University, has embarked upon a thorough collection research project based on actor-network analysis in order to understand the collection history and the agency of everyone involved in the process of collecting and presenting, cf. Gosden and Knowles (2001) and (2007). Also: http://history.prm.ox.ac.uk/
Amsterdam. When the museum moved from Haarlem to Amsterdam, Amsterdam’s city zoo, Artis, donated its collection of ethnographic objects to the Colonial Museum. In 1950, after Indonesia became independent, the institute changed its name to the Royal Tropical Institute and the museum became the Tropenmuseum. The combined Haarlem and Artis collections make up the core of the precious eighteenth and nineteenth century collections of the current Tropenmuseum. Material in the Haarlem collection had been accumulated in the context of colonial trade and the processing of raw materials, while the Artis collection was the product of a discourse on the natural history of humankind and of missionary activities and explorations by the Dutch Royal Geographical Society (Van Duuren 1990).

Given the Tropenmuseum’s history, reflection on the issues of globalization, cultural diversity with its implicit colonial legacy is essential to the museum’s current international research and acquisition and exhibition policies (Tropenmuseum 2003). As an institution concerned with preserving culture and promoting an awareness of cultural heritage, it is clearly important to acknowledge the museum’s roots in a colonial past. This means that the museum must address diverse audiences, which may sometimes have conflicting interests and perspectives: source communities abroad, immigrant communities here in the Netherlands as well as the heirs in the broadest sense of the word to the museum’s founders and collectors. They will all have different emotions and feelings of belonging and ownership in relation to the museum and the objects it houses. To acknowledge and understand these perspectives requires a critical understanding of the institutional history of the museum. This history has been shaped not only by Dutch colonial rule but also by the academic disciplines of cultural and physical anthropology, Indology, ethnography and art history. Both the political and academic worlds have shaped the context for the museum’s current institutional profile and identity.

With respect to the iiav’s institutional identity, this link between the colonial past and the contemporary discourse on cultural diversity is less evident. However, as a specialized center of archival collections and academic study with a focus on women and gender, the iiav has also been one of the many players in the complex process of categorization, academic specialization, and knowledge formation that informs our understanding of cultural diversity today. The traveling heritages concept can assist us in navigating both academic and institutional histories. This concept reminds us that it is important to follow – literally – how heritage materials have been divided among various institutions once they were turned into collections. It also urges us to explore how traveling people may connect their cultural heritage to these institutions.
Colonialism is not ‘History’

It is important not to see colonialism as a historical phenomenon that existed in the past and has ended. Colonialism did not start with early modern European expansion, nor did it end with post-Second World War anti-colonial nationalist movements and decolonization. The imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life today in what Paul Gilroy has called ‘the overdeveloped-but-no-longer-imperial countries’ (Gilroy 2004:2). This is certainly true for the Netherlands. Strictly speaking, the Colonial Museum no longer exists; it is an institution that existed in the past. However, the Tropenmuseum's institutional history and what we make of it today still play a role in contemporary society.

In my interpretation of collections and the role of institutions like the Tropenmuseum, I have been inspired by an image evoked by Gyan Prakash when he quotes Eric Wolf and urges us to review the relationship between the academic discipline of history and the ‘people without history’. According to Prakash, there is an issue we must face: ‘how the history of colonialism and colonialism’s disciplining of history can be shaken loose from the categories and ideas it produced’ (Prakash 1995:5). He refers here to ideas about Self and Otherness that developed in colonial times and relates these to what he calls ‘the colonizer/colonized polarity, where the historicist notion of history gathers “people without history” into its fold, and where the metropolitan culture speaks to the marginalized in the language of its supremacist myths’ (Prakash 1995:4).

This idea of ‘an historicist notion of a colonial history’, referring to an archival source that has gathered colonized people ‘into its folds’, can be applied to the tens of thousands of archives, books and objects which are stored in our museums and archives. These files and objects are sources not only of the colonizer but also of the colonized: many aspects of the history and culture of colonized peoples are enclosed in the texts and stored in museum reserves. One way of ‘unfolding’ these sources can be found in Mary Louise Pratt’s analysis of the various travelogues that were written during the period of European expansion since the sixteenth century, and most particularly since the Enlightenment (1992). She characterized these travelogues as ‘contact zones’ where local people (e.g., the interpreter, the concubine, the ruler, the priest, the boatman, etc.) had informed the western author. Pratt interprets the information they provided as a form of auto-ethnography – a self-presentation that was then appropriated by Western authors who shaped the information according to Western concepts and style. James Clifford borrowed this metaphor of texts as ‘contact zones’ and applied it to the museum: objects in museum cases and exhibitions both embody past encounters and infor-
mation sharing, and, at the same time, they facilitate new encounters on the conditions of the museum in the context of today (Clifford 1997).

From Women's Studies and Gender Studies perspectives, this approach to source material is not new. If we analyze sources from a gender perspective, essential research strategies include focusing on what is not said, what is also said, and on the nature of the encounters that preceded the textual or material evidence that is being analyzed. Much research has been published that deals with women and gender issues in the colonial past. At stake here, however, is the question of what the imperial and colonial past means to our society today. The IIAV also has ‘people without history’ gathered into the folds of its archives. Think of Louise Yda, the Surinamese Koto Missie and her colleagues from Suriname and Java, who worked at the 1998 Exhibition on Women's Labor in the Netherlands as representatives of Dutch Colonial Society and whose personal story could be traced in the archives (Grever & Waaldijk 1998: 323). In the first place, it is important to develop transparent relationships with the heirs of those people as new visitors to the archive; this is the main challenge of the traveling heritages concept. The IIAV's intention to embark on a more proactive policy towards issues of transnationality and transculturalism has implications for developing new acquisition and visitor policies and will generate new research using existing sources. However, with the three following examples, I want to argue that this change in focus on acquisition and visitor strategies has to take the existing archives into account as well. It requires an understanding of the role of our institutional histories in the making of metropolitan colonial culture.

Traveling people and the journey between institutions

The first example examines the differences between museums and archives through the lens of how the material legacies of two close friends ended up preserved in two different institutions: the IIAV and the Tropenmuseum. When you visit the IIAV’s website and navigate to the Archives, the first image you see is a collage of objects from the Lizzy van Dorp collection. Relevant titles in the context of Dutch colonial past in the Netherlands East Indies and issues of gender and ethnicity are, for instance: Gouda (1995), Clancy-Smith and Gouda (1998), Grever and Waaldijk (1998), Captain et al. (2000), Locher-Scholten (2000), Captain (2002), Stoler (2002), Botman et al. (2003), Praamstra (2003), Geudekker et al. (2007). The web page shows documents, photographs, textiles, and some leather bags – a collection of objects that
indicates that the iiaV’s archives contain a variety of biographical sources. The web page invites the visitor to search the database, and this virtual display strategy worked with me. I immediately wanted to know why Van Dorp’s name and a number were inscribed on the handbag. Another click of the mouse took me to a screen where I learned that the markings on this handbag provided visual evidence of Van Dorp’s imprisonment in a Japanese internment camp for women during the Second World War, Ambawara 10 in Banjoe Biroe in Central Java.

Van Dorp’s father had been a publisher and printer in Semarang, in the Dutch East Indies. She herself lived most of her life in the Netherlands, where she studied, worked as lawyer, and became active in the women’s movement, which explains why her archives are in the iiaV’s collection. When the Germans invaded the Netherlands in 1940, she happened to be in Ankara to settle the affairs of her late friend Mrs. Jenny Visser-Hooft, who had lived in Turkey with her diplomat husband. The Visser-Hoofths had undertaken various geographical explorations for the Royal Dutch Geographical Society in the Karakoram Mountains, between Kashmir (Himalaya) and Chinese Turkestan (Wentholt 2003). The German invasion of the Netherlands made it impossible for Van Dorp to return to the Netherlands, so she decided to go to what she herself called her mother country: the Dutch East Indies. She did not survive her imprisonment in the Japanese internment camp; she died just a few days after the Japanese surrender.

Van Dorp’s case is relevant here to show how the iiaV keeps objects as evidence of an individual’s life story. Van Dorp’s life also illustrates how colonial affiliations were common, indeed an essential feature, in many layers of Dutch society in the twentieth century (Legène 2003). Colonial history is never far away in the Nether-
lands; it is part of Dutch collective history, which also involves the women’s movement and thus the IIAV. Furthermore, Van Dorp’s story is also relevant here with respect to how historical materials have been divided up between institutions. Her archives can be found at the IIAV, whereas those of her friend Jenny Visser-Hooft are preserved in the Royal Tropical Institute.

Visser-Hooft’s bust, sculpted by Fransje Carbasius, has a prominent place in the marble entrance hall of the Royal Tropical Institute, and the negatives and photographs of the Karakoram expedition belong to the Tropenmuseum’s photographic collections. This is not a coincidence. The disciplinary divides that are reflected in our institutional landscape go beyond the divide between museums (for objects) and libraries or archives (for books and papers). Our cultural institutions embody the divides or distinctions that we impose between domestic issues and colonial issues, between high culture and folk culture, between the women’s movement and the labor movement, between politics and economics, and so on.
Museums and archives all have their own specific identities, often related to different academic disciplines. Each of these disciplinary divides, in turn, implies other systems of categorization and polarization. Returning to Prakash, as quoted earlier, it is crucial that we understand these polarities and know how to find our way through the institutional landscape when we assign new roles to existing institutions or create new institutions focused on particular issues or audiences.

Traveling objects: expanding the idea of the archive

The website image of Van Dorp’s collection, with its bags and other personal belongings, is relevant to keep in mind as we consider a second case, which deals with the very idea of what an archive is. It has become quite common for reading rooms, libraries and archives to strengthen their public image and identity through mounting exhibits from their collections. Maps, rare books, important documents and the personal life histories of individuals represented in important collections are put on display, both to educate visitors and to animate the exchange of ideas and knowledge between the visitor and the institution. A nice example of this is the Women’s Library’s 2005 exhibition What Women Want. As we might expect of a library, most of the objects on display in this London exhibition contained text or print in some form. The Women’s Library displayed banners, posters, badges, embroideries, and photographs from its collection. In many cases, the objects had once been used in a movement or organization in which their owners participated.

The leaflet that announced the exhibition suggested a connection between the objects depicted in the leaflet and the Library’s archived stories – a suggestion used by the Library to connect the exhibition to its audience. The leaflet featured images of a flatiron, a ring, a lipstick, a key, coins, a strip of pills, a high-heeled shoe, a book, a woman’s razor… Seen together these objects suggested a kind of ethnological archive of modern western women’s lives. The subtitle Stories from The Women’s Library indicated that these items belonged together and related to other objects in the Library. The Women’s Library exhibition web site provided no further information about these objects.4

Whether the Women’s Library has more information about the ‘biography’ and the social life of these objects was not important for this exhibition. The suggestion worked for the target audiences. Women and men who visited the exhibition – or the exhibition’s web site – did not need specific object information in order to

4 See: www.thewomenslibrary.ac.uk; last accessed on November 2005.
attribute meaning to the display from their own perspective on women’s lives. The everyday objects enabled visitors to connect their personal memories and experiences to a collective history. These exhibited objects invited visitors to recognize fragments of life histories that were familiar to their own lives and to add – literally or in their imagination – their own meaningful objects to this collection, as a way to strengthen their personal connection with this collective history.

Expanding the idea of the archive

The Women’s Library leaflet from the What Women Want exhibit expanded the very idea of the archive by explicitly presenting objects as emblems of women’s lives. Attention to objects is also important in order to improve public access to colonial legacies. In our search for the colonial past, written sources rank above material, oral, and other more intangible sources (e.g., forms of artistic expression or the knowledge and craftsmanship embodied in objects). The preservation of objects in archives and the interpretation of museum collections as archival
sources raise questions about where the archive begins and the museum ends. Let me give another example from the Tropenmuseum, which owns tens of thousands of ethnographic objects that women could possibly want: shoes, rings, household implements, scissors, combs, photographs, sculptures, money, baskets – in short, anything. In Western culture, we have learned to recognize non-Western objects as essential markers of Otherness, as fragmented parts that stand for whole cultures that either reside in the past or in an indefinite far-away present. This common knowledge is created in academic disciplines like ethnography, anthropology, Oriental studies and art history. But what is the meaning of these objects today? Who do we address in the ethnographic museum when we put them on display. Who is being invited to add (real or imaginary) objects to the exhibit, and by extension, who is being invited to create a link between her or his own personal history and a collective history, as was the case in the Women’s Library exhibit?

Let me try to illustrate this point with an example of another peculiar mix of fragments, which is similar to the haphazard ethnographic collection as presented in the What Women Want show. In 2005, Ko Minjeong, a South Korean master’s student in museum studies who worked in the ethnographic collections in the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, was invited to document and comment on the 19th century collection of Korean objects in Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum. She was intrigued by the fact that this modest collection consisted mainly of fragments of items of clothing: men’s jackets, belts which once had expressed their owners’ status, pairs of slippers, hats, and pieces of women’s underwear. Everything in this peculiarly gendered collection was incomplete. The individual objects – as well as all the objects together – did not make much sense to her. They seemed to be the souvenirs of encounters. But whose encounters with whom? Why did 19th century collectors bring these objects from Korea to Amsterdam? We, the Museum staff, had no answer, except a very general one: these objects had once been used to illustrate human cultural diversity. As is probably also the case with the flatiron in Lon-
Flatirons and the Folds of History

Korean objects, collected in the 19th century, from Tropenmuseum Artis collections, series A 8853-8903. Photo: Tropenmuseum, Lo Lange and Paul Romijn

don, it would be difficult today to trace these few objects back to specific Korean women and men. The essential difference with the ethnographic objects in London is, however, that in the case of the Korean artifacts, the lack of information matters. Almost no Dutch visitor will ever feel invited to attribute a meaning to these Korean objects that connects her or his own personal experiences to a collective history; these objects belonged to, and are concerned with, others. MinJeong realized that she was the other. What she encountered in the ethnographic collections in Amsterdam and in Leiden was a rather disturbing Western ‘idea of Korea’. It was disturbing because of its fragmented and yet fixed nature. Korean objects embodied a heritage that had traveled a long way and had no heirs outside the museum world where these collections are being kept as ‘orphans’ (Ko 2004).

MinJeong’s research thus turned out to be a study of Western exploration and culture through Korean objects. The objects provided a means to trace Dutch collectors and their doings oversees, as detached objects that attested to the collector’s encounters with ‘others’, not as images of Korean culture. Such an exhibition of fragments could easily fit in with the What Women Want display. However, it would obviously be ridiculous to put this Korean collection on display and invite Koreans in the Netherlands to come to the Tropenmuseum, look at ‘their’ artifacts and feel at home. It would only lead to estrangement between the Koreans and the Dutch. And yet this is what frequently happens. Institutions from the dominant culture often try to invite members of new immigrant minority communities in by putting objects from ‘their’ culture on display. This is meant to signal to the newcomer that the institution belongs to him or her as well. In these cases, though, only significant objects of the region, religion or culture in question are put on display. However, whether the objects are beautiful or average, masterpieces or ordinary daily implements, they are signposts to past encounters,
with meaning invested in them based on conditions imposed by their collectors and curators. Visitors will have to relate to those encounters – and to what they meant – from their own perspective. If there is no disclosure concerning the history of the objects, the context in which they were collected, and the aim of the presentation, then visitors are unlikely to perceive such exhibits as an invitation to feel identified with the institution and to link personal memories to a shared, if contested, history.7

Recording the intangible: traveling memories

The third and final example for reflecting on the concept of traveling heritages focuses on making this personal link to a collective history by exploring the notion of intangible heritage, and, specifically, the relationship between intangible heritage and archival sources in contemporary metropolitan transnational cultures. I will illustrate this with the example of the Bidesia project. The term Bides indicates a stranger, someone who left his community without leaving a message. The word Bides is in Bhojpuri, the language spoken in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in India. In the context of the Bidesia project, the term refers to songs and the singing as expressions of the culture of migration in India and among descendants of Indian indentured laborers in Suriname and the Netherlands.

The Bidesia project (2005-2007), an international research and exhibition project initiated in Allahabad, India, focused on migration histories from three perspectives: Indian, Surinamese and Dutch.8 In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, labor

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7 This is what also happened with the so-called 'Berber track' in the Tropenmuseum. In 2005 the museum added many objects from Berber culture to the various displays in the semi-permanent exhibition on North Africa and the Middle East (jewelry, earthenware, signs and language – see also www.tropenmuseum.nl). Some young Moroccans agitated on the Internet against the initiative, because according to them it stressed the poverty of Berber culture. They preferred the temporary exhibition on Masterpieces from Morocco in the prestigious Nieuwe Kerk on Dam Square in Amsterdam. Others replied that this reaction expressed a sense of inferiority, and that it was all right that the Tropenmuseum had added these objects. Through this Internet debate, the museum became aware of the pitfalls of an 'add-on' approach to multicultural society.

8 Historian and poet Badri Narayan Tiwari initiated the project in 2002 and worked with research teams in each of these three countries (Narayan 2001 and 2002). The Indian team was based in the gb Pant Social Science Institute in Allahabad. The Surinamese team was based at Anton de Kom University in Paramaribo, and the Dutch team at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. In 2008 a resource book will be published, based on the research reports, exhibitions in Allahabad, Paramaribo and Amsterdam, as well as the music and video recordings made between 2005 and 2007.
migration is an essential socioeconomic phenomenon that has existed since colonial times, particularly in rural areas. The so-called Bidesia songs are one explicit expressive form that women sing to express their feelings of sorrow and despair about the departure of a husband or son from the community. Some songs have fixed texts and are sung in a strict meter; others are long free improvisations – one woman expresses her worries and is accompanied by others who listen and join her in her dance. The pressure felt in these communities due to labor migration is expressed – in a canonized form – during wedding feasts as Bidesia theatre performances.

Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have a history of supplying cheap labor to other regions in India and outside the country. Still today, for example, large numbers of Indians work in the oil industry in the Middle East. From the second half of the 19th century, the English and the Dutch also recruited indentured laborers from this part of India for plantation work in other colonies after the abolition of slavery. The indentured laborers established communities overseas in places like colonial Suriname where they settled between 1873 and 1916 in extremely poor circumstances and in an ambivalent relationship with the Dutch colonial authorities who both needed their labor and regarded them almost literally as ‘people without a history’ (Legêne 2006).

The Hindustani, as they choose to be called, became one of the major population groups in Suriname. Their migrant culture drew on the heritage of their homeland, especially through their language, Sarnami. Though it is written in Roman script, the language stayed close to Bhojpuri and the other languages spoken in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Inevitably, of course, migrant culture develops its own unique and dynamic features. Songs were adapted and changed, and religion developed its own unique Caribbean form. India was both beloved and pushed away; the past was at once a painful taboo and a subject of longing. In the 1970s when Suriname became independent from the Netherlands, many Hindustani decided to leave Suriname and settle in the Netherlands. So began another chapter in their culture of migration, now in the context of Dutch society and characterized by complex relationships with Suriname, with the historical India where the journey of the ancestors had started, and with contemporary India which is an easily accessible part of today’s globalized culture (Choenni 2006).

**Individual and collective histories**

In the process of being recruited as indentured laborers, the migrants entered the colonial records. Immigration officials wrote down their names, villages, castes, and ages in ship registers and immigration records (Hassankhan & Hira 1998). As a result, many of their personal journeys can be traced in today’s archives,
starting at the very moment when they disappeared – in many instances almost literally – from their communities. The Bidesia songs in India express a collective oral tradition of remembering and of dealing with sorrow and despair in the communities of those who stayed behind. In certain respects, they also form a collective counterpart to the personalized colonial archival sources. When descendants of the Hindustani migrants today search the records through the Internet, they find traces of a personal history, of their lineage and descent, embedded in a collective migration history of a remembered, yet unrecorded, past. It is not easy to find the names of ancestors who stayed behind in India. Tracing an ancestor to a village in India is as near as the descendants of the migrants can get to their personal genealogies. In those villages, only a few migrants are remembered as family members (Hira 2000).

The Bidesia project tried to link individual migration stories to a collective history, but not in relation to past events. It focused on a contemporary culture of migration, a cultural heritage in songs, beliefs, tastes, customs and knowledge, that makes up a collective link between Indian, Surinamese and Dutch experiences. Historical research, however, was required in order to realize this contemporary perspective. It is not in contemporary daily life, but in an awareness of their past, that migrants face the challenge of linking individual life stories to collective histories. Identifying oneself with, and sharing the cultural expression of, a history of migration through song is not the same kind of cultural interaction as enjoying an exhibition with flatirons and other personal objects as a way to connect your own history to women’s collective history. Nor is it the same as looking at Korean slippers and understanding that the people around you know nothing of your Korean society. Participating in this project on the culture of migration and fulfilling multiple roles – as resource person, participant, and audience member – required a willingness to face very personal identity issues rooted in contradictory processes of inclusion and exclusion.

The Bidesia project intended to approach migration history not only as a sociocultural and political history, but also as a history of emotion and expression, of interpretation and appropriation. It tried to bridge the gap between individual life stories and collective memory by creating an understanding of community life and contemporary Bidesia culture in India as well as an appreciation of the many connections to Hindustani culture in Suriname and the Netherlands. The songs became sources that connected personal memories to a collective history. It is in this space between individual and collective migration histories that the

Flair’s traveling heritages concept has the greatest potential for future collecting and research strategies. Developing techniques to trace and record the intangible in language, songs, poetry, lifestyle, photographs, musical principles, recipes and systems of knowledge will contribute to developing new ways to approach existing archives. More specifically, it will make it easier for everyone involved to open the folds that enclose so many clues to our society today.

Poem by Chitra Jagadin*

sadá roti karher hot jái
pisal ámké catni
botal bharal páni
garmái ke jhurái
dohrávat hái koi
tor nám kai dain
bánhal hái tor kóí
bandh rahá tor munh
paral rahgail perh ke nice
purán sapné orhke tor denh
ab rovat hai tor khet
jhalássí aur kántá ke nice
jindá yad gárhke
piché chörh dele sab
thandhá rákh ke koilá likhat hai
tor navá dusar nám

e maiýá,
áj culhá ná bár, ná bár...

the sada roti becomes tough
fresh mangocatni dries out
bottled water evaporates
who is repeating your name
your hands bound
your mouth closed today
your body lies under a tree
covered with an old dream
your fields weeping where
beneath wild thorn bushes
living memories are buried
left behind now
charcoal from cold ash
spells your new name
mother,
don’t light the fire today

Conclusion

With this third example, a project that is still a work in progress, I conclude my reflections on the concept of traveling heritages. This concept, placed in the context of colonial legacies and cultural diversity, challenges us to think beyond the separate institutions of archives, libraries and museums. It also cautions us against an easy ‘add on’ approach, wherein we just include the archives of new groups to the existing collections and invite new audiences to join in. Each relevant new acquisition will change the collections as a whole. It is the ensemble of the archives, with all the embedded history it contains, that needs new vital connections to contemporary society. This will require the development of new and inclusive research and collection strategies that create space for controversy based on transparent and close cooperation with and between intended users, visitors, collectors and staff. Above all, the concept of traveling heritages demands new approaches to sources and methods of data collection and preservation in an international setting, while making optimal use of the new digital tools of our time.

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