

# The Odyssey Quilts

## Narrative through art of twice migrants

### Nonja Peters

Any object in a museum collection represents many things: the person or people who made it, the particular time and place in which it was made, the technology of the times and the prevailing social situation. This in turn is influenced by the sweep of historical, national and international events. The object is like the tip of an iceberg—what we see is only a part of the story. Hidden from our sight are the factors large and small that made the object what it is. The Odyssey Quilts represent such an object. The women that worked on it named their work ‘fractured fragments (of memory)’.

Why the quilts:

Frances Larder is the driving force behind the Odyssey Quilt Project. She originally envisaged it as a way of bringing together her culture and background. The exhibition, which has been named ‘Odyssey’ consists of the three wall hangings, visual diaries, photographs, and the stories of the women. She notes: “My aim was to leave an artistic impression of the connections between the cultures of these women and their subsequent bonding with Australia – a legacy of a bygone era”. The quilts were made by Dutch Australians from the former Netherlands East Indies (NEI) and the Netherlands (NL). Their background experiences are quite different as are the separate wars they endured and the migration experiences they underwent.

#### Introduction

Migration is usually a response to a combination of environmental, economic, political and social problems or their solution. Historically, Australian immigration policies were neither inclusive nor accepting of cultural diversity.

#### Some background history

The Dutch presence in the South East Asia Region extends from the end of the 16th Century when the VOC began trading in the region for spices.

Dutch presence in Australia was, not substantial until the outbreak of WWII when over 10,000 bureaucrats (including the Netherlands East Indies [NEI] Administration) and military personnel, comprised of ethnic Dutch and Eurasians, marooned mariners and political prisoners, were evacuated here from the NEI, ahead of the Japanese Occupation, to maintain the war effort and defend Australia. The collective fear of a Japanese Occupation of the region engendered a three and a half year alliance between the American, British, Dutch and Australian (ABDA) military in the interests of the defence of Australia.

When war finished in 1945, a further 6,000 NEI Dutch entered Australia for rehabilitation from war trauma before repatriation to NL or return to the NEI. As survivors of Japanese POW and internment camps they had also escaped slaughter by extremist Indonesian youth freedom fighters (pemuda) on killing sprees directed at interned Dutch. 3,500 were killed and another 20,000 went missing, presumed slaughtered.

Postwar from 1949, approximately 170,000 Dutch, migrated to Australia (330,00 Australians have claimed Dutch origins). They had been through six years of Nazi Occupation and a hunger winter in which thousands starved. Migrants include approximately 10,000 Indisch Dutch who chose to migrate to Australia, rather than stay resettled in the Netherlands, preferring to live in a warmer climate and closer to the NEI. They had fled the NEI for NL from 1945. The Australia resettlement made them ‘twice migrants’ with three homelands NEI, NL and Australia.

Anthropologist Fridus Steijlen notes: “Although some research has been done to compare the experiences of such refugees, that very little of it focused on unravelling the complex human and cultural ‘grit’ thrown up by migration movement. Especially those caused by political conflict in which refugees do not flee to one country

and/or do not stay in the first country they have fled to”.<sup>1</sup>

In this presentation I revisit the history of Dutch colonisation, war, revolution, evacuation, rehabilitation in Australia, repatriation to the Netherlands or NEI, decolonisation and migration to Australia via the Odyssey Quilts, a venture by a group of Dutch Australian women. I analyse the imagery they present to determine the factors Indisch Dutch Australians (IDA) and evacuees to Australia invoke to construct their experiences and their sense of self/place/homeland, identity and belonging.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on Basch et al's (1994:7) 'transnational perspective' I define this Indisch Dutch diaspora: A continuous cultural process – and not a single act of relocation – by which migrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement; and In which people, termed trans-migrants “take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks and relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nations states”.

The Macquarie Dictionary (1997:831) defines cultural heritage as “that which comes or belongs to one by reason of birth; an inherited lot or portion; or something reserved for one”. We often refer to material possessions in discussions about our cultural heritage, and in community historic buildings, archaeological sites and artefacts held in museums, archives and libraries. However, Vasiliki Nihlas (1999:1), Chair of the Cultural Council of the ACT, contends that:

The inheritance we most often receive and leave behind is our experience and our expression of culture, individually and collectively. Because ... it represents a metaphor for the human condition of growth and discovery, [and because] the stories it evokes are powerful and can create connections across cultural boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

Gupta and Ferguson's (1992:17) suggests that: “The ability of people to confound the established spatial orders, either through physical movement or through their own conceptual and political acts of re-imagination, means space and place can never be 'given' and that the process of their socio-political construction must be considered”. Ien Ang (1994:5), herself displaced from the NEI, asserts “it is the myth of (the lost or idealised) homeland, the object of both collective memory and of desire and attachment, which is constitutive to diasporas, and which ultimately confines and constrains the nomadism of the diasporic subject”. The present analysis of protagonists 'cultural heritage', 'is based on visual data derived from: quilting, drawing, visual diaries and narratives of the artists.

My interpretation relies overwhelmingly on protagonists' 'memories of the past'. 'Memory', according to philosopher James Booth (2006) [accepting its limitations], “is centered on an absence, tries to make it present, and in doing so answers the call of the trace.” Archivist Eric Ketelaar, calling these traces “memory texts” and contends that in any form, be it a map, a story, a landscape, a building, a monument, a ritual, a performance or a commemoration, they are usually a space of “contestation”. A space that “different people have different perceptions of...[that] they want to focus on different historical truths or myths [about]”. The NEI as 'homeland' is such a space.

## **Homeland**

'Homeland', became a 'contested reality' in the wake of the great voyages of exploration, discovery and colonisation. 'Sense of place', has come to mean an organic relationship between inhabitants and their particular homeland. John Hughes (2005:4) contends that in Australia we think and talk a lot about 'home' because our personal heritage and sense of identity relate to a place and a history not really our own. And that “the fact that our sense of self-discovery and self-realisation takes place in foreign lands is the [uniquely] rich and complex ironies of being Australian!” His views are relevant to IDA who as previous inhabitants of the NEI, are bonded to it, yet not indigenous to it.

Why do we become attached to a place? Bender (2001:4) argues that we are only capable of understanding the world around us, at least initially, from what we have learned, been exposed to, and received in the way of narratives, traditions and beliefs. Norberg-Schulz, (1979) claims it is the process of creating the man-made environment – nodes, paths, edges and districts that marks out a sense of place, creating an understanding of one's environment, that at least in navigational terms, engenders a “sense of emotional security”. Therefore,

he would say that 'place' is defined more by its ability to serve as a 'habitat' for its residents than by its physical properties. This led Norberg-Schulz (1979:5) to describe the connection between humans and their homeland as more spiritual in essence, relying on senses, memories and beliefs. Experiencing a place fully enables us to bond with a place, to develop connections, emotional attachments and meanings that are relevant in regards to developing our sense of belonging and identity. Experiencing 'place' through the body is also central to de Certeau's philosophy, who argues that "the opacity of the body ... in movement, gesticulation, walking, taking its pleasure, is what indefinitely organises a 'here' in relation to an abroad, a 'familiarity' in relation to a 'foreignness'" (Leach, 2002:283). Nell van de Graaff's (1994) experiences, on her first visit back to the NEI, her birthplace, even after 30 years of exile, are powerful and representative:

The plane landed in Jakarta at sunset. It had been raining heavily, the tarmac, was glistening, and the dark clouds drifted by as the setting sun glowed on the western horizon. The warmth and humidity enveloped me as I emerged from the aircraft and the sounds and the smells of Indonesia made me feel I was coming home. In a flash I realized how much I had missed all this since I had left the country more than twenty years ago. I felt emotional, close to tears, and I could suddenly understand the grand gesture of expatriates who, returning to their homeland, kissed the ground on which their first faltering steps had fallen... I smelt the Chinese bread in the basket and the freshly brewed coffee, and I heard the distant calls of street vendors selling sateh and other delicacies from their mobile stalls. The sweetness of it all was almost too much to bear. How I loved this country – I felt I had come home... I sighed and felt blessed, and asked the [taxi] driver to take me past the house I had lived in as a girl and the church where my father had been a minister. They were both still there, although in need of repair.

Nell's sentiments, full of de Certeau's 'familiarity', also portray, Norberg-Schulzian style (1979:5). The long-term impact that childhood bonding with the NEI continues to impact on all her senses despite her abandonment of its shores. De Certeau's 'familiarity' is also the central experience described by IDA of the benefit they derive from membership of the 'the other Dutch' clubs established in the 1980s:

When I first went to a meeting with other people from the Indies I straightaway felt at home. The people were familiar, the accent, everything was familiar. It feels like we are related. We have the same background, we went to the same schools, we like the same kind of food, tell the same kind of jokes. The first time was a sort of a 'homecoming'.<sup>4</sup>

You know what is so lovely about meeting another Indisch person? They know what I mean when I say pisang, babu or bottle tjebok.... We don't have to explain our past to each other. We share our past. That is what makes it so special.

The mnemonic type ingredients from which Indisch Dutch social clubs evolved, that centre largely on nostalgic imagining and the communicating of Tempo Doeloe - the collective memories of the good old times of colonial life – are also present in a different way in this extract from Somerset Maugham:

... men and women are not only themselves they are also the region in which they were born, the city apartment or farm in which they have learned to walk, the games they played as children, the old wives' tales they overheard, the food they ate, the schools they attended, the sports they followed, the poems they read and the God they believed in.<sup>5</sup>

The underlying identification of 'familiarity' in these quotes is Douglass' (1984) concept of "shared times and shared deaths".

My point is that we also create new bonds during our lives and these are visible in the women's quilts as they come to terms and engage with the new environments, but not losing what they have experienced in the past. The total person carries aspects of all these experiences.

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses the term 'mutual cultural heritage' to refer to the above relationships that stakeholder countries want preserved.<sup>6</sup>

## **Summary**

The exhibition and research highlights various events that rendered the NEI a 'contested space' following Ketelaar (2008) for the protagonists in this study. It also identified the social organizations and relationship networks in countries of sojourn, country of origin and country(s) of resettlement from which protagonists emerged and on which they continue to draw to locate themselves in relation to homeland, identity and belonging.

The research findings demonstrate, following Gupta & Ferguson (1992:19), how 'homeland' remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced people' and while 'deterritorialisation has destabilised the fixity of 'ourselves' and 'others' it has not thereby created subjects who are free floating Nomads.

## **Mutual heritage**

Since 2000, 'mutual cultural heritage' has been a priority in international cultural policy of the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education, Culture and Science. The overall objective was to create a 'mutual heritage program' via cooperation with the eight 'third world' countries they had given 'priority status' to, because of the impact on them from trade there by the Dutch East India Company during the 17th and 18th centuries. Prior to the Mutual Cultural Heritage Policy, feelings of guilt and shame predominated the thinking about colonial history. With the new policy, this heritage began to be reinterpreted as a valuable tool for critical reflection on Dutch colonial history and a mutual understanding of history, present and future, while simultaneously serving as a method to strengthen bilateral relations with former colonies. The policy aims were to preserve mutual cultural heritage and utilize it as an instrument for sharing expertise, building capacity for the cultural field in the partner country(s), stimulate cultural and economical development, create public awareness and increasing knowledge of this heritage. In 2012, a number of first world countries, that the Netherlands has/had maritime and/or military, migration or mercantile connections with since the 17th century, were designated 'priority countries' under their 'mutual heritage' policy. The selection included Australia and Indonesia. This proved an enormous shift from their original target countries as noted above as these countries like Australia already contain expertise in the fields of heritage and culture and research shows its Dutch population to be keen on the cooperation. The target for the Mutual Cultural Heritage Policy with them is to: Collaborate on the sustainable maintenance and management of common cultural heritage, on the basis of reciprocal political and substantive involvement.

## **Cultural Diplomacy**

A common view is that, while cultural diplomacy can help establish and support working relationships between countries, it is strictly subordinate to the harder stuff of laws and treaties, bilateral negotiations, multilateral structures and military capability. While culture plays a role in diplomacy, there remains a stark contrast between the amount of attention, money and column inches devoted to this area, compared with more formal diplomacy. Cultural Diplomacy argues that today, more than ever before, culture has a vital role to play in international relations. This stems from the wider, connective and human values that culture has: culture is both the means by which we come to understand others, and an aspect of life with innate worth that we enjoy and seek out. Cultural exchange gives us the chance to appreciate points of commonality and, where there are differences, to understand the motivations and humanity that underlie them. As identity politics exert an increasing influence on domestic and international exchanges, these attributes make culture a critical forum for negotiation and a medium of exchange in finding shared solutions. Cultural contact provides a forum for unofficial political relationship-building: it keeps open negotiating channels with countries where political connections are in jeopardy, and helps to recalibrate relationships for changing times.

## **Appendix - demographics**

In the period 8 March 1942 to 15 August 1945 it is estimated that the Japanese put between 37,000 and 42,000 Netherlands East Indies Dutch adult males and 22,000 Australians into forced labour as prisoners of war. The two groups were inevitably thrown together, particularly as working parties on the infamous Burma-Thailand railway and the Sumatra railway. By the end of the war, of these groups, some 8,000 Dutch and just over 8,000 Australian prisoners, had died of ill-treatment, starvation, and diseases such as yellow fever, malaria and cholera.

The bulk of the Dutch colonial forces, comprising around 32,000 men, like their British and Australian counterparts, ended up as Japanese POWs. Another estimated 100,000 Western civilians, including children (4,700 in Sumatra and 29,000 in Java), were placed into Japanese civilian internment camps. Ultimately around 30,000 Europeans died in these camps as a consequence of forced labour, untreated illnesses, beatings, starvation, malnutrition and other forms of violence perpetrated on them. They included members of the Koninklijk Nederlandsch Indisch Leger (KNIL), the colonial army. The KNIL numbered close to 42,000 men at that time, of whom around 10,000 were Europeans and the remainder indigenous troops comprised approximately 13,000 Javanese, 2000 Sundanese, 5,000 Menadonese, 4,000 Ambonese and 1,000 Timorese. Within weeks of arriving the Japanese were already interning allied subjects. These prisoners were incarcerated in over 300 camps and were often moved from camp to camp within the Indies. First to be interned were the Dutch military captives who were placed in prisoner-of-war (POW) camps. From there they were transported as forced labour to Japanese timber, engineering, mining, construction and many other projects around the Asia-Pacific region, and to Japan, where they had to work under deplorable and life-threatening conditions.

Thus it turned out that the Japanese were far stricter, more ruthless and much more cruel masters than the Dutch had ever been. In fact, rather than bringing the freedom the Indonesians craved, the energies of these Japanese were deployed to turning the Indies into a Japanese colony. This they set about achieving with the help of the notorious secret military police the Kenpeitai.

**Quilt 1:** The symbols on the “Childhood Memories “ quilt represents the waves of the water, symbolising our departure from our Mother country.

**Quilt 2:** The “First impression of Australia” represents the Southern Cross and an image of a kangaroo. These images represent the wide open spaces of Australia reflecting the lifestyle and a better future.

**Quilt 3:** The cross symbolizing all the war deaths; the wings of a dove symbolising the sought after peace. The quilt is in the shape of a Kimono to symbolise the invasion by the Japanese. The shape of the images is to show their expression of war as fractured fragments (of memory).

## **Nonja Peters, September 2014**

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Fridus Steijlen (personal communication).

<sup>2</sup> I use *Indisch* Dutch in its broadest rather than racial sense to include all Dutch who have a relationship with the NEI.

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/e107/content.php?article.162](http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/e107/content.php?article.162)

<sup>4</sup> ten Brummelaar 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Anderson (1989:341).

<sup>6</sup> Mutual Cultural Heritage Policy Framework ([www.minbuza.nl/en/search/simple](http://www.minbuza.nl/en/search/simple)), & War Heritage and Memory program, University of Amsterdam.