

Speech Ida de Kat, 3rd of November 2011

Your excellencies, dear hosts, esteemed fellow guests, thank you for giving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the floor on this festive occasion.

Authenticity, world significance, outstanding universal value. Those are the criteria of the Memory of the World Register. This register comprises archives, books and manuscripts that highlight heroic acts, wheeling and dealing of mankind throughout history all over the world. Today we celebrate the inclusion of the archives of the West India Company and the Middelburgsche Commercie Maatschappij into this prestigious body of knowledge. My sincere congratulations to the custodian countries, to the co-sponsors of the nomination and to the National Archive.

The Dutch have always been keen record-keepers. This is illustrated by the extensive archives of the Dutch East India Company and the West India Company. They tell the story of the *trade* conducted by those companies. For the West India Company this is a tale of sugar, gold and slaves. It also touches upon the *history of the countries* it traded with: the Gold Coast, Brazil and Manhattan. Often, its records are the only primary contemporary sources on those countries that survived. Last but not least the records tell the story of the *people* concerned. Governors like Johan Maurits van Nassau, countless seafarers and a great variety of people they engaged with on their journeys in the Atlantic world. In the records of the West India Company we can trace the long routes travelled by African slaves packed on board the Dutch ships to South and North America. Thus, the history of slavery has become part of the Memory of the World narrative. Indeed, this is of outstanding universal value.

The recognition of the West India Company archive is a result of the involvement of all countries in the former trade triangle. This again is a fine result of the Dutch mutual heritage cooperation as mentioned by the previous speaker. This recognition comes at the right time. The narrative of migration forms an essential part of contemporary dialogue. In the Netherlands, this narrative now is-
some might say belatedly- explored by a television series on slavery. In it, the well-known entertainer Roue Vermeer explores his Suriname and underlying background. He started his quest at the National Archive.

Noblesse oblige. Many more people, experts and the public at large in the Netherlands and abroad, should have access to this unique material. The registration as Memory of the World can serve to spread the information, the reputation of this archive and its significance. This will create more demand and drive to use it. Use it or lose it. Restoration, conservation, digitization, training in the Dutch language, maybe eventually transcription would be the next challenges. Quite a challenge! It is an extensive archive- some 115 meters, but not as extensive as that of its big brother the Dutch East India Company.

I am optimistic, though. The apparent interest of all custodian countries and co-sponsors of the nomination combined is an enormous asset. I reckon on the National Archive and the Cultural Heritage Agency to team up with partners in Brazil, Ghana, Surinam, United Kingdom and United States. I count on all present to mobilize energy and to enhance publicity on and accessibility of this archive. Our Embassies, our visitors programme, our mutual heritage programme and the brand new National Memory of the World Committee will support your efforts. The rest follows as a matter of course, given the records *authenticity, world significance and outstanding universal value.*