

# **Stories, Nature and Silence: Exploring Cultural Heritage and Sense of Place in Oldambt**

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Date of Submission June 6<sup>th</sup> 2025

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how long-term residents of Oldambt, a rural municipality in the northern Netherlands, perceive cultural heritage in relation to their sense of place. Rural community contexts like Oldambt face demographic shifts and experience socio-economic problems, therefore, understanding how residents engage with heritage can illustrate how place identity and belonging are maintained or challenged in these contexts. Using a qualitative approach, the research combined photovoice with semi-structured interviews, in cooperation with nine long-term residents in the region. Participants submitted photographs representing meaningful connections to their living area and discussed the importance of these cultural heritage elements in the individual interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to explore how cultural heritage influences place identity, place attachment and place dependence, which are key aspects of the sense of place concept. Findings show that both tangible and intangible elements contribute strongly to the participant's emotional and cognitive connection to place. Surprising findings include the importance of different senses in experiencing heritage and the emotional value of informal and everyday heritage, created by a sense of nostalgia and memories.

*Keywords:* cultural heritage, sense of place, photovoice, Oldambt

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Context and State of the Art**

Cultural heritage has the potential to expand social capital, stimulate local communities and strengthen regional cultural identity, however, in rural areas, it is often disappearing (Knapik & Król, 2023). Heritage can contribute to fostering strong communities and strengthening regional cultural identity, which could be important in these regions as rural areas often face complex socio-economic issues (Beard et al., 2009). Cultural heritage can be a powerful tool to promote sustainable development in these rural areas, as it can attract tourists and boost the potential for local businesses, furthermore, this development could lead to heightened well-being and quality of life (Cerquetti et al., 2022).

Cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible elements and plays an important role in developing individual and collective identities (Banaszkiewicz & Nikielska-Sekula, 2024). Tangible heritage includes the physical elements of cultures, such as structures, landmarks and objects, while intangible heritage is about the non-physical aspects, including the traditions, customs, languages and practices that shape the culture of a community (Smith, 2006). These aspects of heritage can contribute to a sense of belonging and place attachment, especially in rural areas, where it is a source of local identity and social capital, strengthening the ties within the communities and fostering a sense of belonging (Knapik & Król, 2023; Cerquetti et al., 2022).

The local residents within the community are key actors in the activities related to the protection and preservation of heritage, as well as the identifiers of what the meaningful aspects of heritage are in a place (Giombini, 2020). Giombini (2020) further notes the importance of residents' everyday practices in this place-making process, recognising everyday practices are important for cultural heritage and a sense of place. Sense of place is a related concept central to this study, it refers to the multifaceted experience of a location, encompassing the meanings,

emotions and attachments of individuals and communities that can be associated with a place (Chen et al., 2021).

Cultural heritage plays an important role in the formation and development of a sense of place, as it provides a shared history, cultural context and a sense of continuity across different generations, which can foster belonging to a specific environment (Tomaney, 2014). Understanding how people experience and interpret heritage in relation to their sense of place is especially important in rural areas facing social and demographic challenges. As in many rural regions, including in the Netherlands, depopulation and the loss of amenities can change community identities and attachments to place. These factors make the role of cultural heritage in the sense of place relevant (Gómez-Ullate et al., 2020; Sardaro et al., 2021).

Cultural heritage in rural regions like Oldambt faces the risk of disappearing due to population decline, which could lead to the disappearance of both tangible and intangible aspects of heritage in the municipality (Sardaro et al., 2021). In Oldambt, understanding the role of cultural heritage in relation to a strong sense of place could be a tool for improving the well-being of the residents in the region, as there is a potential for strengthening social capital and community cohesion, which would be an opportunity for the region, as it faces socio-economic problems (Boekholt, 2019; Wallace & Beel, 2021). This study builds on these insights to explore how long-term residents of Oldambt, a rural municipality in the Netherlands facing specific socio-economic challenges, perceive cultural heritage in relation to their sense of place.

## **1.2. Framing the Context**

Oldambt is a rural municipality in the province of Groningen, the borders of the municipality are shared with Germany (see Figure 1). Oldambt is located in the northeast of the Netherlands and has many villages and one small city, the municipality has around 39.405 inhabitants contemporarily and the region has experienced a small population decline of 0.3%

since 1995 (Allecijfers, 2025). Additionally, Table 1 shows the differences between the municipality of Oldambt and the statistics of the entire Netherlands. Table 1 focuses on population, social benefits, education level and income.

Compared to the Dutch averages, Oldambt has a relatively old population (Koreman, 2023). Additionally, household income and level of education show the socio-economic complexities discussed in the previous paragraphs, Table 1 also illustrates that relatively more inhabitants are reliant on governmental funds than the Dutch averages (Koreman 2023). These statistics reflect the socio-economic complexities discussed earlier, highlighting the importance of understanding how long-term residents perceive their sense of place and heritage within this context, as cultural heritage development could lead to better well-being and an increase in tourist income (Cerquetti et al., 2022).

Oldambt is located within the Oost-Groningen region and it exemplifies the challenges faced by many rural areas in the Netherlands, including population decline, socioeconomic problems, higher unemployment rates, health problems and lower income (Boekholt, 2019). Consequently, the cultural heritage in Oldambt is at risk of disappearing, as important traditions, buildings, narratives, languages and sites can be forgotten or lost, due to demographic shifts and a lack of funds (Knapik & Krol, 2023; Sardaro et al., 2021).





Figure 1 The municipality of Oldambt is situated in the northern Netherlands.

Source: Map created by the author using Mapcreator (2025).

**Table 1.** Data from the year 2020 on the Netherlands and Oldambt

	The Netherlands (2020)	Oldambt Municipality (2020)
Number of inhabitants	17,407,585	38,209
0–20 years old	21.7%	19.3%
20–65 years old	58.8%	55.8%
65+ years old	19.5%	24.9%
Inhabitants per km <sup>2</sup>	517	169
10-year population growth	+5.0%	–3.2%
Average household income	EUR 47,500	EUR 39,400
People on unemployment benefits (without pensioners)	9.1%	12.2%
Level of education of population aged 15–75: (2019 percentages)		
Low	28.4%	36.2%
Mid	41.4%	47.4%
High	30.2%	16.4%

Note. Source: Koreman (2023)

### **1.3. Research Gap**

Existing research explored the concepts of cultural heritage and sense of place and their significance in many contexts. However, a research gap exists in the understanding of how these concepts intersect within the specific context of long-term residents in rural regions in the Netherlands. Especially the long-term residents of the municipality of Oldambt remain under-researched (Hofstede et al., 2022). Studies have acknowledged the importance of cultural heritage in fostering a sense of belonging and place attachment, however, there is still a need for more in-depth investigation into specific perceptions and experiences of residents who lived in these areas for a longer period, as most of the research focuses on perspectives of tourists (Buonincontri et al., 2017; Sari et al., 2018). Limited research has been conducted in the sense of place perspectives using participatory visual methods, such as photovoice research, to capture and analyse how inhabitants perceive their sense of place and place attachment (Lyons et al., 2024).

### **1.4. Aims and Objectives**

This thesis aims to address this gap in research by exploring how long-term residents of the municipality of Oldambt perceive cultural heritage and how these perceptions shape their sense of place. Using the photovoice method, participants have documented what they associate with their personal or collective connection to Oldambt. Participants were asked to take up to three pictures that represent their connection to Oldambt, such as places, objects or everyday experiences. To achieve the research aim, the following research questions will be addressed:

#### **Main research question:**

How do long-term residents of Oldambt perceive cultural heritage in relation to their sense of place?

#### **Sub-questions:**

1. What aspects of cultural heritage do long-term residents of Oldambt identify as important contributors to their sense of place?

2. How do long-term residents of Oldambt interact with and experience cultural heritage in their daily lives?

### **1.5. Contributions and Implications of the Research**

This study contributes to the academic discussions on the role of cultural heritage in shaping a sense of place, particularly in rural regions like Oldambt. This thesis emphasises how cultural heritage is in relation to elements of a sense of place, such as local identity, feelings of belonging and emotional attachment to the region. Furthermore, the importance of using photovoice research as a creative and participatory approach to uncovering heritage perspectives is highlighted. This research further offers practical implications as well, for heritage management or regional development in Oldambt or similar contexts, for example for new and ongoing projects in the region, such as, the Graanrepubliek Project aiming to enhance broad prosperity in Oldambt and making heritage visible and future proof (Eileen, 2024). Additionally, the research could help the Project Programma Wonen Oldambt (n.d.), for heritage-sensitive urban planning.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Cultural Heritage**

The first concept to be discussed in this thesis is the concept of cultural heritage. Heritage is seen as not only encompassing material things like buildings and artefacts, which are the tangible aspects of cultural heritage (Smith, 2006). Cultural heritage also encompasses the cultural and social processes, as cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible elements (Smith, 2006). Intangible heritage includes the almost invisible things, such as rituals, language,

traditions and folklore, which communities associate with their identity and history (Smith, 2006).

Heritage is not only inherited from the past, it can also be actively constructed in the present. Nature can be an important representation of the past, therefore, natural landscapes can be seen as places of cultural practices and political identity formation, as they are sites of cultural meaning that are actively constructed in the present (Waterton & Watson, 2015). Heritage is a social and cultural construct and contemporary society is more aware of the existence of heritage, as, contemporary, there has been an increased political interest in heritage, since it can be used for very different objectives, for example as a valuable tourism resource (Qiu et al., 2022).

Heritage is shaped by power dynamics, the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), refers to the dominant narratives that are produced by heritage professionals, as many professional heritage institutes were often Eurocentric, heritage experts often have had an elitist, white and patriarchal view in the past (Thouki & Skrede, 2024). This AHD often prioritised monumental and architectural heritage, while overlooking the every day, minority and local perspective on what meaningful heritage is (Hu, 2023). Local and other diverse voices and meanings of heritage often go unheard or unappreciated, therefore, it is important to recognise heritage sites as places where meanings are continuously reproduced and refined (Hu, 2023). This aligns with the participatory approaches to heritage, as it is important to emphasise the voices and everyday practices of local residents (Sokka et al., 2021). Therefore, this research explores the cultural heritage perceptions of long-term residents in the municipality of Oldambt in connection to their sense of place.

## **2.2. Sense of Place**

Before exploring the concepts of sense of place and place attachment in detail, it is important to distinguish between the ideas of space and place briefly. Space is often seen as a

neutral concept, often referring to a geographical or digital context. In contrast, place is when space becomes invested with meaning, values and emotions through lived experience. Places are spaces that have been shaped through interaction and interpretation (Al-Menshawry et al., 2021; Barkley & Kruger, 2012).

Sense of place is a concept explaining how humans are connected to spatial settings that have meaning. The concept can be a useful tool to understand places through the representation of people and spatial settings, understanding these place-people bonds can help to describe the distinctiveness of a place (Dameria et al., 2020; Tuan, 1977). Sense of place is explained as having three interconnected dimensions in the paper by Dameria et al. (2020), place identity, which is more a cognitive component, place attachment, which describes the affection people have with a place, and place dependence, which is a conative component relating to the functional association between a person and a place (Dameria et al., 2020). These dimensions will be further explained in the following paragraphs.

### **2.2.1. Place Identity**

Place identity is defined as the cognitive dimension of the sense of place, as mentioned before, it refers to how people perceive, understand and symbolise a place, it encompasses meanings, beliefs and knowledge that people have about a place (Dameria et al., 2020). In the cultural heritage context, place identity is often tied to the recognition and understanding of the tangible elements, for example, historic buildings, landscapes and monuments, as well as intangible elements, including traditions, stories and cultural practices (Blecich et al., 2024; Nursanty et al., 2023). The revitalisation of cultural heritage buildings can play a significant role in reinforcing the cognitive connection of inhabitants, as this is a tangible link to the past which can strengthen the residents' sense of place concerning their heritage (Chan et al., 2024). Other contributions to place identity can be, the familiarity of a place, including the social environment, everyday landscapes are important in place identity, as the routines of everyday

life lead to more social comfort, commonplace heritage is part of daily life and can be a form of personal heritage as well (Mosler, 2019)

### **2.2.2. Place Attachment**

Dameria et al. (2020), define place attachment as the emotional dimension of the sense of place, it is a description of the emotional bonds people have with a place and this can also include feelings of love, belonging, security and comfort, however, it can also focus on more negative aspects, as a strong place attachment can lead to external factors that change a place can be perceived as disrupting and negatively impacting people's sense of control (Falanga, 2022). Place attachment can be increased by the physical and cultural dimensions of a place, additionally, people can also feel strongly attached to a place because of the close ties within the neighbourhood, generational rootedness, or a strong religious symbolism, these are aspects of social factors in place attachment (Gielsing et al., 2018).

### **2.2.3. Place Dependence**

Place dependence is the conative dimension of the sense of place, this relates to the functional association between a person and a place, it refers to the extent to which a place fulfils the needs, activities and goals of an individual (Dameria et al., 2020; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2005). Furthermore, a place's ability to provide resources, services and opportunities for daily life and well-being can be assessed to measure place dependence (Nelson et al., 2020). A sense of loyalty to a place can be formed when a place meets needs and expectations, this can lead to an unwillingness to move, as the place will be perceived as irreplaceable (Dandy et al., 2019).

## **2.3. Prior Research on Sense of Place and Heritage in Rural Areas**

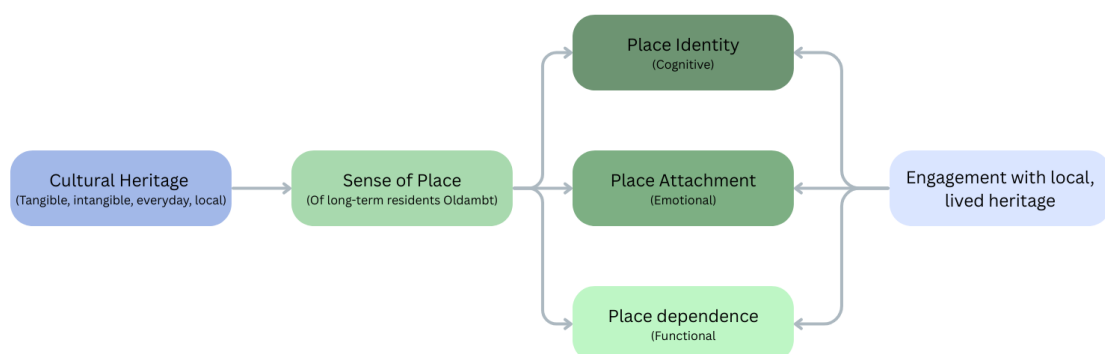
Looking into the existing literature, other studies have discussed a sense of place in rural contexts, for example, in a small Welsh town. Research has found that a sense of place was constructed through the interplay of physical space, community traditions and social

interactions in this town. The paper highlights how events celebrating local traditions, contribute to placemaking and can strengthen residents' place attachment to their surroundings, this emphasises the role of both tangible elements, such as the rural landscape. However, also the intangible aspects of cultural heritage, such as community events in shaping a sense of place (Aquilino et al., 2021). Even though this research takes place in a Welsh town, it is still important to take these findings of both place attachment and the emphasis on cultural heritage in tangible and intangible forms into account in the discussion, as it is an European rural context, similar to the research context. This similarity in context can help to give valuable insights in the discussion section of the thesis. Building on this understanding of a sense of place in rural settings, the paper by Cantillon and Baker (2022), explored through interviews, how the tangible historical environment and intangible cultural memories contribute to a strong sense of place and a strong sense of belonging experienced by local residents on Norfolk Island's Kingston and Arthur's Vale Historic Area. The findings further highlight how residents connect to their area through the recollection of the past and present engagement with heritage sites, as both the tangible historical environment and the intangible cultural memories contribute to a strong sense of belonging, which emphasizes the symbolic significance of the places, instead of the material dimensions (Cantillon and Baker, 2022). Even though the research context is vastly different from Oldambt, the findings are still important to consider and discuss. Together, these two studies explain the complex ways in which, both tangible and intangible heritage shape residents' sense of place in rural areas, which is a dynamic this research seeks to explore in the context of the municipality of Oldambt in the Netherlands.

## **2.4. Conceptual Model**

This literature review examined the concepts of cultural heritage and sense of place, it looked into the interrelated dimensions of place identity, place attachment and place dependence. Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, plays an important role in shaping

how individuals perceive and emotionally connect to their environments. Existing studies in rural contexts highlighted how everyday heritage practices and symbolic meanings of landscapes and memory influence residents' sense of place. However, these studies do rely on more traditional methods of data gathering, limited attention has been on visual or creative methods of these subjects. These creative methods can reveal the more personal, emotional and unspoken dimensions of the sense of place concept, including place attachment (Trell & van Hoven, 2010). Therefore, this study integrates visual participatory methods with textual data, to explore how long-term residents of Oldambt define and experience heritage in relation to their sense of place. The conceptual model developed for this research, identifies cultural heritage and sense of place as the central concepts, with sense of place further conceptualised through the three aspects defined in the literature review, place identity, place attachment and place dependence. The specific context of long-term residents in Oldambt is the background of the conceptual model. The model suggests that individual engagement with local, lived heritage, particularly intangible and everyday forms of heritage, helps shaping the three dimensions of a sense of place, as defined in the literature review, see Figure 2. This leads to the expected outcome of both tangible and intangible heritage, including everyday heritage, as a contributor to the sense of place in this research context.



*Figure 2 Conceptual Model created by author using Canva*



### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Methodological Approach**

##### **3.1.1 Introduction to the Methodology**

This thesis used a qualitative exploratory approach to research how people who have lived in Oldambt for a long time interpret cultural heritage and how this understanding is connected to their sense of place. Qualitative research was chosen for this paper as it fits the aims and objectives of the research question. This qualitative approach allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the residents' sense of place (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Furthermore, the qualitative research allowed for understanding the complexity of participants' lived experiences and discovering how cultural heritage contributed to the sense of place of long-term residents in Oldambt (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

##### **3.1.2. Research Design**

Multiple data-gathering methods were used for the research, such as photovoice and semi-structured interviews. The aim of using multiple methods was to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the sense of place perceptions among long-term residents (Gerring, 2017). A creative method was chosen as the primary data collection tool, complemented by qualitative semi-structured interviews. The benefits of using creative methods to do this research, different from traditional research methods, is that this creative method allowed for new perspectives to emerge and it allowed the participants to be more comfortable in expressing themselves (Von Benzon et al., 2021).

The sampling method used for recruiting participants was a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling, potential participants from the target population were approached through the researcher's network (Ames et al., 2019). This network was used to identify potential participants. The aim of using this method of purposeful sampling is to target

the right population, as it is a relatively small group of people, many of the villages in Oldambt have a low number of inhabitants. This study targets the long-term residents within these small villages, potential participants were invited through WhatsApp, some participants were recruited through snowball sampling as well, in addition, a poster was created to recruit participants through Facebook. The poster stated the aim of the research and the requirements for participating, for example, living in the municipality of Oldambt for at least 10 years and being over the age of 18, this method is defined as convenience sampling (Ames et al., 2019). An argument for the choices of the sampling method is that the target population is specific and small group, as the target group are long-term residents of Oldambt, therefore, purposive and convenience sampling are a good choice, as this can increase the trustworthiness of the data (Campbell et al., 2020).

### **3.1.3. Data Collection**

This research employed a photovoice methodology as the primary method, allowing participants to capture images that represent their personal connection to their environment in the municipality of Oldambt. One of the strengths of photovoice research is that it can show aspects of participants' experiences and lives that might not have come forward during the interviews, as participants are thinking about which picture to take that would fit with their connection to their home region, the photovoice method could have helped to express their knowledge and experience, as they have been living in the region for a long time (Nykiforuk et al., 2011). Therefore, the strength of this research method is that photovoice can show aspects of participants' experiences that might not surface in a verbal conversation, as photovoice allows for self-expression and reflection, furthermore, it can help to provoke ideas and memories during the interview (Von Benzon et al., 2021). Using photography as a creative method had the benefit of making the interviews more comfortable and easy for both the participants and the researcher, as answering questions about the pictures helped to create an

open and more relaxed atmosphere, as a consequence of a diminished pressure of maintaining eye contact (Pyry et al., 2021).

After potential participants were identified, they were sent the invitational poster explaining the aims, purpose, privacy information and instructions on how to participate in the research. Eleven people stated they were willing to participate in this research. Of these eleven people, nine participated in taking pictures and conducting interviews and the other two were unable to participate due to various reasons.

Before the start of the data collection process, the informed consent form was sent online to the participants, they were asked if they understood that the data and pictures they would submit would only be used for this thesis and that the audio recordings would be deleted after the final grades are submitted by the supervisor. They were also made aware of their ability to withdraw from the research before the deadline of June 6<sup>th</sup>.

#### **3.1.4. Procedure**

For this research, the participants have been asked to take a maximum of three pictures in the municipality of Oldambt representing their connection to their surrounding area and their sense of belonging. Furthermore, they were asked to not take any pictures that show private information, identifiable people, or places that can be used to identify them. In addition to the picture taking, individual interviews have been conducted to discuss the meanings and narratives that fit the photographs, allowing for a deeper understanding of how cultural heritage is perceived and experienced in the research context (Novek et al., 2011)

The interviews were conducted to hear the narratives behind the pictures taken, these interviews were qualitative and semi-structured interviews, which allowed for the exploration of the themes that came up during the photography phase of the research, furthermore, the flexible nature of the semi-structured interview allowed for participants to bring up themes that

were not yet identified by the researcher before the start of the interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Most of the interviews were in-person interviews, which was the preference, as it is easier to have the conversation face-to-face, limiting any technological issues that might arise, such as the lack of access to appropriate devices and software (Lobe et al., 2022). The in-person interviews were done in places chosen in cooperation with the participants, to ensure that they were comfortable during the interview. Some of the participants were not able to meet in person, therefore, three of the interviews were conducted online through Google Meet, the online interviews collected valuable data, as online interviews with video offer the ability to capture the essence of the person, minimal connection issues arose in the online interviews conducted (Wakelin et al., 2024). All the interviews were recorded using the Samsung Voice Recorder app on the mobile phone and the interviews started with asking questions about the informed consent form to verify that the participants knew their rights within this research.

In total 32 pictures were collected that represented the participants' connection to their place in the municipality of Oldambt. The semi-structured interviews were between 20 and 40 minutes long, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the data retrieved was correct and in context. Before the start of the interviews, questions were prepared by the researcher and checked by the supervisor, based on the feedback received, the semi-structured, individual interviews began. Participants were encouraged to tell their narratives and to take the lead in the interviews, as it was important to make sure they felt comfortable and were open to talking about the pictures and their experiences living in this region.

### **3.1.5. Participants**

The photovoice method and interviews aimed to get insight into the sense of place in connection to cultural heritage for long-term residents of the municipality of Oldambt. The target population were inhabitants living in the municipality of Oldambt for ten years or longer, these residents are defined in this thesis as long-term residents. This study included an age

restriction, as it was not necessary for this research to include youth who are underage. Therefore, this research only allowed participants who are older than 18 years old, due to ethical considerations when working with children. Participants came from different villages throughout the municipality and were in a broad age range of 19 to 64 years old, see Figures 3,4 and 5 for participant characteristics. Potential participants older than 64 years old were also approached, as they might have had valuable knowledge about the cultural heritage in the municipality. Their connection as long-term residents would have been helpful, however, they were not able to participate due to different reasons.

**Age range percentages participants**

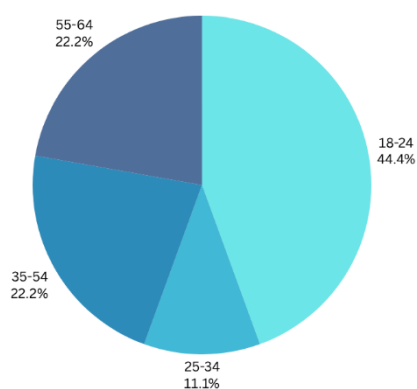


Figure 3 Age Division of Participants Created by Author using Canva

**Gender division participants**

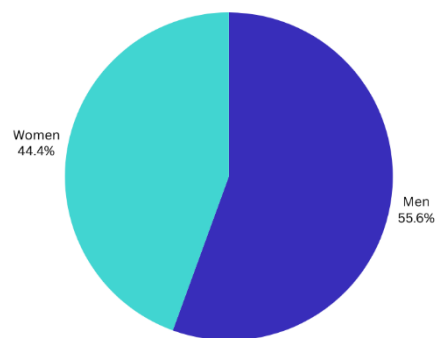


Figure 4 Gender of Participants Created by Author using Canva

**Residential Locations of Participants**

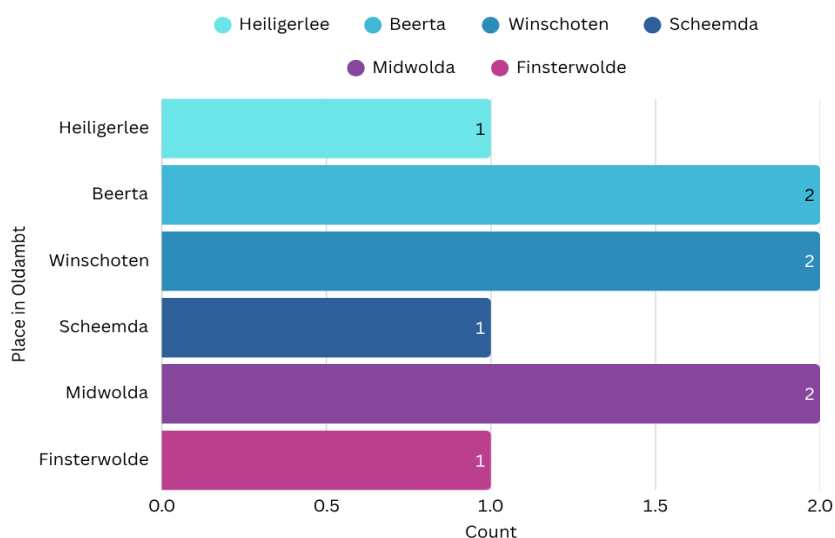


Figure 5 Division Residential Locations of Participants Created by Author using Canva

### 3.2. Positionality

An important thing to consider for this research is positionality, as in qualitative research it is not only important to take into account the participants' positionality, subsequently, the researchers' positionality should also be examined, as the researcher informs the questioning, analyses the data and decides what is important in the results (Reich, 2021). As the researcher is a student at the Cultural Geography Master's at Campus Fryslân, University of Groningen, this positionality shaped the research. Furthermore, the researcher has lived in the municipality of Oldambt for a long time, over 19 years, this could potentially offer a more insider perspective on the connections to certain places in the Oldambt region, as the researcher knows what the interviewees are talking about during the interviews. The cultural geography background has equipped this research with the theories and understanding of the sense of place and cultural heritage concepts, which have guided the development of the research questions, objectives and the choice of a qualitative exploratory approach to this research.

It is important to acknowledge potential biases that might have arisen from this prior experience of living in the research context for more than 19 years, this status does not automatically make the researcher an expert in the region and the researcher recognises that the participants' experiences are filtered through biases and personal experience living in this region. Therefore, it is important to mention that the questions in the interviews were all open questions and steering questions were minimised as much as possible to ensure the gathering of objective data (Shaw et al., 2019).

The role of the researcher might have created a power dynamic with the participants, as most of the participants were from the network of the researcher. To mitigate this power dynamic, the aim was to create a comfortable and open environment during the interviews, as they were mostly done in places the participants had suggested, it was ensured that the interviews were voluntarily and completely anonymous (Prior & Lachover, 2023). The use of

photovoice was intended to empower participants to share their perspectives visually and to authentically explain their narrative (Budig et al., 2018). By acknowledging the positionality and its potential influence in interpreting the data, the aim was to provide a nuanced interpretation of long-term residents' experiences of a sense of place in relation to cultural heritage in Oldambt.

#### **4. Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher by listening to the audio recordings and writing the transcription in Word. This was done to ensure the accuracy of the quotes and to enhance the familiarity of the data. The interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants and the researcher, to make them more comfortable and open in answering questions and explaining their narratives. Additionally, the option was offered to do the interviews in the regional dialect of the province, as it could have been easier for some of the interviewees to express themselves in their regional dialect, however, the participants declined and disclosed that they preferred Dutch for the interview. The quotes used in the results section were translated by the researcher from Dutch to English, to ensure the understanding of the thesis for non-Dutch speakers, the original Dutch quotes are in Appendix A and numbered, to ensure the clarity and authenticity of the results.

To analyse the interview data for this research, the approach chosen was a thematic analysis, this approach allows for the systematic identification, interpretation and organisation of the patterns and meaning of the interview data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). For the data analysis, the transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti, this is a data analysis software frequently used by qualitative researchers, this program is useful for creating codes and exploring emerging themes (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2021). Coding was done line by line, allowing for the categorisation of the data, the coding process was based on an inductive approach, allowing codes and themes to emerge from the data (Chandra & Shang, 2019; Williams & Moser, 2019). Codes and

categories were not predetermined in this research, they were instead named and identified by reading through the data. keeping in mind the aims and research questions of the thesis (Bingham, 2023). The photovoice data, consisting of the photographs that the participants took, were integrated into the analysis as a visual component, complementing and elaborating the thematic findings from the interview transcripts, this involved connecting the visual elements to the narratives told in the interviews (Brown, 2024).

In the results section, the identified themes are presented along with the illustrative quotes from the interview transcripts. Where relevant, the photographs taken by the participants are included to visualise the themes and the participants' perspectives. Each picture is accompanied by a caption that includes the participant's pseudonym, a brief description of the image and the meaning and narrative in the text. This integration of the visual elements in the results section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the long-term residents' experiences living in Oldambt.

## **5. Results**

This section presents the findings of the empirical research, which explored how long-term residents of Oldambt perceive cultural heritage in relation to their sense of place. Nine long-term residents of Oldambt participated in the study, sharing their experiences and perspectives through photovoice and semi-structured interviews. The themes are further explained below, using translated quotes from the participants and exhibiting the pictures that participants submitted, the quotes are numbered in the text and the Appendix. The following themes will be discussed: Theme 1. The Importance of Tangible Heritage in Shaping Sense of Place, Theme 2. The Role of Natural Heritage in Sense of Place, Theme 3 The Role of Intangible Heritage in Sense of Place and Theme 4. Changes and Developments in the Municipality. These themes provide an understanding of how cultural heritage influences the sense of place among the long-term residents in this municipality.



## 5.1. The Importance of Tangible Heritage in Shaping Sense of Place

### 5.1.1. Historical Structures

Participants frequently mentioned tangible heritage, including buildings, landscapes and objects as an important aspect of their connection to the region. During the interviews, the importance of architectural heritage in Oldambt is mentioned. Historical buildings are viewed as tangible links to the past, participants expressed appreciation for these buildings and the historic architecture remaining in Oldambt. Oliver photographed the historic building of Winschoten's city hall, see Figure 6, he described it as the "heart of Oldambt". He emphasised the symbolic significance of the building, he stated in Quote 1: "Winschoten is for me the heart of the municipality of Oldambt and the city hall is nowadays the heart of the region". He explained how this is in the city centre of Winschoten, where many everyday routines happen, it is a place that he visits often and feels connected to, especially because of the markets and the shopping streets.



*Figure 6 City Hall Winschoten, by Oliver*

Noah highlighted the importance of historic buildings further, stating that they "give character" to the area, he took a picture of the "Olle Smidse", see Figure 7, a repurposed historic building in the village of Midwolda, Noah acknowledged that it gives him a sense of pride that the village where he lives still shows the history of the region, which makes his connection to

the place stronger. His photograph and the interview emphasized the importance of preserving these structures, as they contribute to the unique atmosphere and historical narrative of the municipality. Similarly, Thijmen said in Quote 2: “I really like the restaurant in Midwolda, because they show on the placemats in the restaurants how the village used to look like in the past” showing his connection to the village. These findings suggest that tangible heritage provides residents with a visual and physical connection to the history of the region, the preservation of these buildings is seen as preserving the cultural identity of the place.



*Figure 7 Pancake Restaurant the Olle Smidse in Midwolda, by Noah*

Historic built structures are also mentioned as a form of protection against nature, causing a sense of security, Helen mentioned quote 3: “If you think about it, it is very unique to drive past that place, you think, might something happen with that wonderful, beautiful, powerful water, the dikes are there to protect us, yes, might something ever happen”. She took a picture of the Yellow Dike Passage, see Figure 8, showing that this tangible form of heritage, the old dike passage gives a sense of security.



*Figure 8 Yellow Dike Passage, by Helen*

## **5.2. The Role of Natural Heritage in Shaping a Sense of Place**

The natural landscape of Oldambt emerged beyond the historical structures as a crucial component of the tangible heritage that influences residents' sense of place. Participants mentioned the polders, the Oldambtmeer, Beersterkoele, the nature reserve the Tjamme and the Midwolderbos, highlighting the importance of recreation and emotional well-being.

Oliver took a picture of the polder landscape where he often drives his motorcycle, which is important to him, see Figure 9, he described it as a place to “unwind” and “experience freedom” in the polder landscape. He elaborated on the diverse offerings of Oldambt, stating in

quote 4, “Oldambt has a lot to offer, a lot of different things, we have the city, we have good amenities, we also have nature and recreation and of course the Blauwestad watersports.” The opportunities for residents to escape and relax, as well as the connection to nature, are illustrated in this quote.



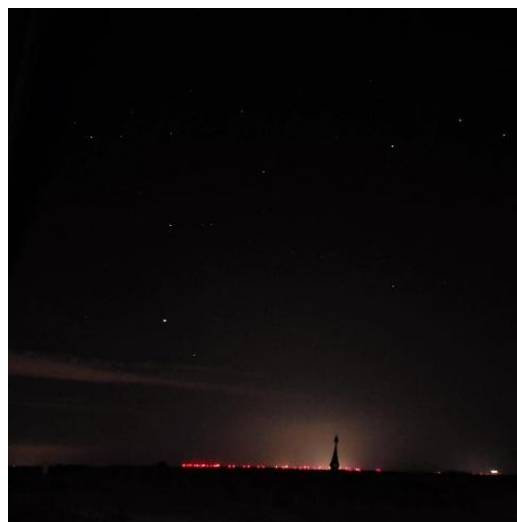
*Figure 9 The polder landscape as place to experience freedom and escape the crowdedness, by Oliver*

Noah’s photographs further emphasised the importance of the region's natural landscapes. He took pictures of the Oldambtmeer and the unique ecological environment of the Midwolderbos, which was crucial to his connection to the area, see Figure 10. He further mentioned Blauwestad and the lake being the centre of the area, he further stated in quote 5: “The Oldambtmeer is as old as I am, you can go fishing and it is beautiful to walk and cycle next to the dike, what I often do, with beautiful sunsets and sunrise and you can see farmlands with sheep.”



*Figure 10 Oldambtmeer by Noah*

Nina also expressed her strong connection to the natural landscapes, she loves the quietness of nature itself and values the natural heritage highly, see Figure 11, stating in quote 6: “I took a picture of the stars at night, you can see the quietness, it is amazing, I love the quiet, but also during the day, when the weather is nice, there is also the Kiekkaaste in Nieuwstatenzijl.” These findings illustrate that the natural landscape is not only a backdrop but is an active component of the resident’s sense of place in Oldambt, as it provides for recreation, emotional recharging and a deep appreciation for the region’s unique landscape characteristics.



*Figure 11 Stars at night in Nieuwstatenzijl, by Nina*

### 5.3. The Role of Intangible Heritage in Sense of Place

#### 5.3.1. Childhood Memory and Nostalgia

Many participants expressed a strong sense of place attachment rooted in childhood and nostalgia, often triggered by specific locations and objects. Many of the participants took pictures of places and objects that gave them a strong place attachment to their region, these pictures represented their connection to Oldambt through memories of the past. Marc's connection to Oldambt is intertwined with his memory of growing up in Beerta, the village he has been living in his entire life. Marc took multiple pictures representing his connection to Oldambt, by looking into the past of living there and connecting the photographs to memories of his childhood, growing up in the village, to illustrate this he included a picture of a red door, see Figure 12, which represents the elementary school he went to as a child. He appreciates that the school has remained the same since his youth and that it is still in the small village, as it was on the verge of disappearing, he further stated, quote 7: "I have a feeling of nostalgia seeing the red doors, it is where we always entered the school in the lower classes of elementary school, it is close to my heart". His words highlight how a seemingly ordinary and everyday object has become a symbol of his childhood years.



*Figure 12 The red doors of the elementary school, by Marc*



Rosie directly linked her childhood to the playground, see Figure 13 and the swimming pool in Scheemda, stating, quote 8: “The first picture I took is of a playground, this was near the first house I lived in, I spent a lot of my youth there” and quote 9 “The second picture is of the swimming pool in Scheemda, you could have seen me there every day, even when the weather was not great and there were thunderclouds”. These locations were central to her daily life in the past and hold a strong association with her youth, making her feel a strong connection to Oldambt. Similarly, Pieter connected the Midwolder Plas, see Figure 14, to family memories from the past, quote 10: “It is a place where we used to live close by, we always went there to swim, later on even with my wife, she has been there as well, I have many memories from the past of this place”. These recollections of memories highlight how shared experiences and personal history contribute to a strong emotional bond with the area.



*Figure 13 Playground in Scheemda, by Rosee*



*Figure 14 What used to be the Midwolderplas, by Pieter*

Noor expressed her strong connection to her childhood street in the city of Winschoten, see Figure 15, quote 11: “I grew up in Oldambt, in Winschoten’s city centre, here started my connection to this place, that is why I took the picture of this street, as I grew up here and did my daily activities in this street and my parents also had a shop here.” Everyday experiences from the past are significant for the participants' attachment to a place, which is illustrated by the many shared stories.



*Figure 15 Street in the city centre of Winschoten, by Noor*

Helen emphasised the importance of her family connections and the stories that were passed on through generations by her grandparents and how this shaped her sense of place, she mentioned the influence of her grandparents and the stories associated with certain places. Helen took a picture of the marshes near the forest and retold the story of the Ambonezenkamp she heard from her grandparents: “ After the war the Ambonezen lived in barracks, the part of the forest is still called the Ambonezenbosje”, see Figure 16, it symbolises how her family history was intertwined with the history of the place. She stated, quote 13: “Yes, that connection with this place is for me that my grandparents used to live here, the past and nature”, which represents the story behind the picture taken. These findings demonstrate how childhood



memories, nostalgia and stories from the past are forms of intangible heritage. connecting residents to their personal and collective past and deepening their emotional ties to Oldambt.



*Figure 16 Marshes behind the Ambonezenbosje, by Helen*

### **5.3.2. Community Bonds and Social Interactions**

Social connections, community events and everyday interactions contribute to a sense of belonging in Oldambt. Oliver emphasised the feel of a small town in Winschoten, despite it being one of the larger places in the region, quote 14: “I always say, we live in the city, Winschoten is a city, however, it is almost like a large village.” He connected this to the nature of social interaction among inhabitants and provided a nuanced perspective, acknowledging social tensions and a feeling of exclusivity in the community, as someone who moved into the community, quote 15: “In some aspects, I feel we have a bit of a close-minded environment or network, there is sometimes a lot of hatred between people and a bit of jealousy and envy when you look at communities differences”. He expressed that he felt a decrease in his feelings of attachment to the community, suggesting that while the small-town atmosphere can contribute to a strong sense of belonging, it can also present challenges related to social inclusion and community cohesion. In contrast, the importance of encountering familiar people and the connection to shared history in the community was highlighted by Pieter, quote 16: “We always

run into familiar faces when I am walking the dog, I am always talking to them for a bit, it is nice to see people in your neighbourhood, people you run into that you have not seen for 35 or 40 years, but share history with”. These shared histories and encounters with people from his past contributed to his sense of belonging and reinforced his connection to the community.

### **5.3.3. Traditions and Cultural Practices**

Local traditions, celebrations and cultural practices contribute to the sense of belonging illustrated by the participants. Multiple local celebrations and traditions were mentioned as important for the sense of belonging in the community. These events provide opportunities for residents to reconnect and celebrate their shared identity. Marc mentioned a specific annual local event, highlighting how this connects to a sense of local history.

It was really about history, I do not know if it was history specifically from the village, however, we always celebrated it with a huge market and the community was dressed up in the style of clothes from the past and in the church, nowadays not a lot is happening in the church, however, during the time of the Dickens’s day celebration, there were performances in the church. (Quote 17, Marc)

While this particular event is not currently active anymore, the description illustrates how the traditions of annual festivals shape the residents’ sense of understanding their past. Noor said in the interviews that she could not take a picture of the event Slag bij Heiligerlee, where the community reenacted the Battle of Heiligerlee in 1568, where she volunteers every year, as it was not in the timeframe of the research. However, she did take a picture of the statue remembering the battle, see Figure 17, she mentioned that the statue represents her connection to the village of Heiligerlee and she appreciates the nature surrounding it, quote 18: “A very beautiful experience route is created, regarding the history of the battle of Heiligerlee, it is all very beautiful, however, for me the most important fact is that there is a forest”.



*Figure 17 Monument Graaf Adolf in Heiligerlee, by Noor*

Other traditions were also mentioned by participants as important celebrations, for example, Adrillen, which used to be a farmers market and changed to a large celebration in the region of the past. Noor mentioned quote 19: “Traditions I think are important for example, Kingsday, which was recent, so that is important and also the Night of Winschoten, it is always a whole happening and of course the Adrillen market and Sint Maarten for the children”. She talked about a lot of festivities she felt were important and unique for the region. These findings show how traditions and cultural practices, both historical and contemporary, contribute to a shared sense of identity and belonging to Oldambt. Similarly, Rosie recalled the first time she went to the Night of Winschoten, quote 20: “I loved to go to the festivities, I remember when I was very young, my first time visiting the Night of Winschoten with one of my friends, her mother and her grandmother, we were super young and it was a whole happening that we could be there until midnight and go to the fair”. The quote illustrates the importance of annual social events like the night of Winschoten for the long-term residents in this research.

## **5.4. Changes and Developments in the Municipality**

Participants expressed their concerns about changes in the region and also highlighted some positive changes they experienced living in Oldambt. Changes and developments influenced the sense of place among the participants, there were shifts in social dynamics, environmental alterations and evolving perspectives, shaping the connections of the participants to their community and cultural heritage.

### **5.4.1. Social and Community Change**

Mentioned multiple times is the social component in the area, participants expressed varying views on how community interactions have evolved, which impacted their sense of belonging. Nina reflected on a shift from an interconnected community in the past to a more individualistic and socially fragmented community now. Nina stated, quote 21: “Everyone could talk with anyone” and “There are now many strangers in the village, there is less contact, less friendliness, limited groups and people are not as willing to help”. Suggesting a perceived erosion of the social ties that characterised the village community. Oliver further acknowledged the complexities of the social dynamics in Oldambt, as mentioned before, describing the “close-minded environment and network”, he further mentioned hatred and envy being present in the community. He elaborated on the difficulties newcomers face in integrating into the established communities, mentioning quote 23: “If you are the odd one out, coming from a few villages away, you can miss out sometimes.” Highlighting that while a small town can foster a strong sense of belonging, it can also create barriers and exclusion. Nina further mentioned the dialect Gronings decreasing in importance, stating quote 24: “It is changing, other people are living in the region, the dialect is disappearing, I’m talking in Dutch now as well, I’m sad the dialect is disappearing.” This quote highlights the awareness of a shift away from the regional dialect, which could potentially be linked to demographic changes. Additionally, an expressed sense of

loss about this shift in language and the disappearance of a form of cultural heritage is acknowledged.

The interviews further reveal a tension between the local and regional identities, as some participants mentioned not being aware of the boundaries of the municipality. Rosie mentioned that the administrative merger that created the municipality of Oldambt in 2010, could be the reason for the lack of awareness among residents of the boundaries of the municipality, and which villages are included within bounds, quote 25: “I would not even know which villages are all in Oldambt, I don’t think you learn a lot about it ... unless you research it”. This suggests that the participants could have stronger ties with their place of residence, however, the connection to the broader municipality can be less meaningful. Participants also mentioned a desire to learn more about the history and cultural heritage of their environment, Rosie stated quote 26: “I would like to learn more about the history of Oldambt, it would have been wonderful if it was taught in elementary schools in local history lessons.”

#### **5.4.2. Change of the Environment**

The physical environment has also changed in the municipality according to the participants, which they stated as having influenced their sense of place. Participants discussed the alterations to the landscape, land use and their relationship with changing nature.

Noah expressed concerns about increasing urbanisation and the loss of the rural character quote 27: “It feels more and more like a city, the urbanisation, houses keep getting built, it does not feel like a rural area anymore.” This idea highlights the concern of development eroding the identity of Oldambt as a distinct region and losing its historic character. Similarly, it was mentioned by multiple participants that losing the historic characteristic buildings as the consequence of budget cuts is eroding the identity of the villages. Nina stated, quote 28: “I am sad that they destroyed the beautiful old buildings, for example, our former town hall in Beerta, the village becomes very sterile and the things I wanted to pass on to further generations, are

all demolished.” Illustrating an emotional response to the changing environment and the loss of cultural heritage.

### **5.5. Chapter Summary**

The findings presented in the previous paragraphs illustrate the diverse ways in which tangible structures, natural landscapes and intangible aspects of heritage contribute to the long-term residents’ sense of place in Oldambt. These elements have been presented distinctly for clarity, however, the participants seem to perceive these aspects of cultural heritage as interconnected. The following discussion section will illustrate these interconnections and their broader implications in more depth.

## **6. Discussion**

This discussion interprets the themes found in the results section using the lens of the conceptual framework and literature review, focussing on previous research conducted on cultural heritage and sense of place. By examining how long-term residents of Oldambt engage with tangible and intangible forms of heritage this research reveals how these forms of engagement contribute to the dimensions of place identity, attachment and dependence for the participants of the research. Furthermore, an aspect that emerged from the participant narratives is the emotional dimension of heritage engagement, the discussion will further elaborate on this.

### **6.1. Cultural Heritage as Foundation for Place Identity**

This research shows in the results a confirmation that tangible heritage, such as historical buildings and natural landscapes, have a central role in how residents perceive and identify with Oldambt. As participants reflected on the characteristic buildings, for example, the Winschoten town hall and the repurposed buildings such as the “Olle Smidse” and their role in symbolising the continuity and a sense of local pride, reinforcing the literature findings on place identity as shaped by familiarity, symbols and architectural heritage, as these provide a tangible link to the

past (Blechich et al., 2024; Chan et al., 2024). The findings of this research further align with the concept of everyday heritage, as participants value commonplace landscapes and objects in their environment, for example, local forests, old playgrounds and primary schools have become personally significant over time, as they trigger memories and nostalgia (Mosler, 2019).

Similarly, many forms of natural landscapes such as the Oldambtmeer and the Midwolderbos were described as meaningful and calming spaces, which contributed to the spatial identity that connects nature, memory and daily routines, making the natural landscapes also function as cultural landscapes, which also came forward in the literature (Waterton & Watson, 2015). This reinforces the sense of rootedness of residents and strengthens the uniqueness of the rural character of the region. Surprisingly, nature was found to be a space of emotional recharge, evoking emotional responses such as calmness, furthermore, it is a source for nostalgic memories and family stories, suggesting an overlap of tangible and intangible heritage.

Participants mentioned the sensory experiences of being in nature as important factors, such as quietness, which directly contributed to feelings of well-being and a sense of emotional connection. These findings highlight that the connection with natural heritage is not purely a cognitive connection or aesthetic, it is also affective. Emotion is a key aspect of visiting heritage sites, and the emotional and cognitive experiences are important for how individuals engage with and acquire meaning from places and their heritage (Smith, 2020). This underscores that heritage is not about what is seen or learned, it is also about what is felt emotionally by the visitors. To ground these unanticipated findings in the literature, the emotional dimension of heritage, this new literature on emotional heritage was introduced from Smith (2020), furthermore, mixed heritage will be introduced in this section, as overlap between different types of heritage is found in the study.

Traditional heritage frameworks often draw sharp distinctions between tangible and intangible elements. However, this division has faced criticism, an understanding of tangible and intangible heritage can exist in a symbiotic relationship, promotion of mixed heritage for cultural spaces and expressions in policies is essential for the identification of these types of heritage (Bouchenaki, 2004). The results of this research show more examples of this interdependency, for example, the Ambonezenbosje being a natural landscape feature, however, the significance for Helen was that it is rooted in the intangible historical narratives and family stories related to this place. Similar is the connection to the Graaf Adolf monument. The picture was taken as a symbol of the green space and community volunteering, rather than the monument itself being a symbol of historical significance. Her connection to the statue and surrounding nature highlights how historical events are memorialised through tangible heritage and celebrated through traditions and how the value of the natural landscapes and environment can play an important role in a sense of place. The green landscape is here more important to her than the historical value of the statue, however, it symbolises the community events for her as well, showing a complex interplay between heritage types. This highlights that the process of heritage-making is often emotionally charged, and the meaning of a place is actively co-produced through different forms of engagement (Smith, 2020).

## **6.2. Cultural Heritage and Place Attachment**

The results illustrate that intangible heritage, including traditions, memories, family narratives and social interactions, is a contributor to place attachment, which matches the emotional dimensions of the sense of place concept (Dameria et al., 2020). The participants often shared their nostalgic reflections on their childhood and family life, linking the specific locations within photographs to their memories. Even ordinary features such as the red door of the primary school and the local playground carried emotional weight for the participants, expressing their personal heritage, this reinforces the idea that attachment is not limited to the



formal heritage sites and emerges from everyday experiences and continuity over time (Mosler, 2019). Particularly in this case, with the participants being long-term residents, supporting the emphasis on the everyday, lived experience of heritage as a link to a sense of place.

This study further found that family stories, such as the narratives and memories of the Ambonezenkamp, illustrate how intergenerational narratives can contribute to place attachment for the participants of this research. This supports the participatory and bottom-up approaches to the heritage that are advocated for in the research of Hu (2023), who acknowledges the importance of recognising heritage sites as places where meanings are continuously reproduced, and additionally, Sokka et al. (2021), emphasises the importance of everyday practices and the voices of local residents, to make sure diverse voices and meanings of heritage are not unheard and unappreciated.

### **6.3. Community, Belonging and Place Dependence**

Traditions and social events such as the annual Adrillen market and the Night of Winschoten were important in creating a sense of community and belonging, which can be linked back to the place-dependence dimension, in addition to the everyday routines of visiting markets and shopping streets. These festivities were valued as moments of collective celebration and also as temporal anchors reinforcing the continuity and local identity of the region for the participants, this is in line with the research conducted in the Welsh town, with the celebration of local traditions (Aquilino et al., 2021). These activities helped create a strong place dependence since the place provides opportunities for daily life and well-being (Dameria et al., 2020; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2005; Nelson et al., 2020).

The findings also reveal tensions in the community dynamics within the municipality borders. Several participants described feelings of exclusion, fragmentation and a loss of social cohesion contributed by changing demographics, change in mentality and the declining use of regional dialect. This exclusion caused by the strong social cohesion in a village and missing

out when outsiders are not originally from the area, highlights how place attachment is not always positive and can be threatening to social inclusion, this fits the paper of Falanga (2022), who states that strong place attachment can be disrupting. A strong sense of belonging for insiders can simultaneously cause the feeling of exclusion by those who are perceived as outsiders, which came forward in the results section and is illustrated by Oliver, as he mentioned feeling excluded in the community as he is not originally from the town he lives in. This aligns with the research from Falanga (2022) and reveals the tension that elements fostering a strong community can also serve as a barrier to exclusion, leading to feelings of alienation and loss of social cohesion for those who do not fit in the established community or are new in the area.

#### **6.4. Perceived Change and Heritage Loss**

A recurring aspect, as presented in the results section was the concerns over environmental and social change in the municipality of Oldambt. Participants expressed emotions such as sadness about the loss of old buildings, the perceived urbanisation and a weakening of community ties. The feeling of cultural loss was strong regarding the demolition of buildings due to limited funds and the erosion of the regional dialect, both were seen as a threat to the region's identity and heritage. A surprising find was the disconnect within the broader municipality of Oldambt and a stronger identification with the immediate village and neighbourhood, despite the administrative unification of different municipalities in 2010, the emotional connections remain localised.

#### **6.5. Theoretical Implications**

The findings show the interconnection of cultural heritage and a sense of place for the long-term residents in Oldambt participating in this research. The integration of photovoice in this paper allowed for the uncovering of emotional and multidimensional perspectives that could have been missed in more traditional approaches as discussed by Trell and van Hoven (2010). The study further highlights the connection between tangible and intangible heritage.

Landscapes are not solely mentioned as important for inhabitants because of their aesthetic and historical features, they are cultural landscapes, as they embody many stories, experiences and emotions. Together, the insights reinforce the need to approach heritage in rural regions and sense of place as multidimensional and co-produced elements, through emotional, sensory and social processes.

## **7. Conclusion**

### **7.1. Conclusions**

This research explored cultural heritage and sense of place in Oldambt to answer the main research question: How do long-term residents of Oldambt perceive cultural heritage in relation to their sense of place? Through photovoice, in combination with semi-structured interviews, the study found different ways in which cultural heritage is experienced, remembered and emotionally valued by the participants of the research. The paper discusses that both tangible and intangible forms of heritage play an essential role in shaping the participants' sense of place through place identity, place attachment and place dependence.

The first sub-question was: What aspects of cultural heritage do long-term residents of Oldambt identify as important contributors to their sense of place? Participants highlighted many different heritage elements, tangible heritage was expressed most often through historic buildings and as dike passages, such as the Winschoten city hall and the Olle Smidse, and also through natural landscapes, including Oldambtmeer, Midwolderbos and the polders. The physical elements were not only valued for their aesthetic and historical importance, they were also valued for being visual links to the past, as participants considered these places as symbols of regional identity and the preservation was tied to feelings of pride, continuity and belonging. Furthermore, intangible aspects of cultural heritage were important for participants, this includes childhood memories, family stories, local traditions and community events. These forms of heritage were emotional in nature and rooted in the sense of place. Adrillen and the

Night of Winschoten were seen as important temporal anchors and allowed for a shared sense of belonging. Participants also valued heritage linked to language, such as the Groninger dialect and expressed concern about the decline. These intangible elements showed how everyday practices, narratives and interactions help to shape and reinforce the emotional connection to their place.

The second sub-question was: How do long-term residents of Oldambt interact with and experience cultural heritage in their daily lives? The participants of the research experienced cultural heritage often as informal, personal and embedded in everyday, routine practices. The participants interacted with heritage by walking through familiar streets, attending annual celebrations, remembering family stories and living in landscapes that carry personal and historic meaning. Heritage is not necessarily experienced consciously and through formal heritage institutions, it was for the participants part of daily life. One important find was that sensory experiences were seen as an important part of visiting nature landscapes, the quietness of the countryside and the night sky in the polder were described as meaningful and a way to unwind, suggesting that natural heritage is experienced through sensory perception.

Answering the main research question, the study concludes that long-term residents of Oldambt perceive cultural heritage in relation to their sense of place as something connected to their emotional bond in the region. Heritage is not necessarily separate from daily life for the participants, it is how they understand, value and feel at home in their surroundings. Cultural heritage is not only experienced through the preservation of landmarks and participation in festivals, it is also experienced through personal memories and local practices.

## **7.2. Limitations and Recommendations**

Some limitations should be acknowledged in this research, the sample size was small and limited to the long-term residents of Oldambt, which might not be able to capture the perspectives of new inhabitants and youth. Additionally, there were no participants over the age

of 60 included in this study. Furthermore, participants did not represent all the villages within the municipality of Oldambt, which could have led to an underrepresentation of certain heritage experiences. Moreover, while participants were asked to submit three photographs for the photovoice, some submitted more than the requested number, nevertheless, this did not negatively affect the data, it offered richer insights into the different aspects of cultural heritage and allowed for more storytelling during the interviews. Lastly, the visual and textual data gathered offered insight into the individual experiences of the participants in this research, however, this data cannot be generalised to the whole population.

Future research recommendations are to expand on the research by including a more diverse group of residents and extending the research beyond the short period available for data collection, another recommendation would be comparing Oldambt with other regions in the Netherlands. Given the strong role of intangible heritage in this study, including personal stories, generational memory and everyday traditions, a final future research recommendation would be to take a narrative approach and community storytelling projects to explore intergenerational perspectives and provide a detailed understanding of cultural memory in placemaking.

### **7.3. Contributions and Practical Implications**

The research contributes to the knowledge of cultural heritage and sense of place by showing how long-term residents in the rural Dutch context of Oldambt, experience heritage as a personal and emotional process, shaped through tangible and intangible elements of cultural heritage. The research used the existing theories on place identity, attachment and dependence while highlighting the value of creative, participatory methods like photovoice in uncovering everyday heritage. The societal importance is the exploration of not only visible monuments but also local traditions, stories and informal heritage practices that should be supported. The findings suggest that policies for rural revitalisation should take the lived experiences and

memories of residents into account. The insights given by this research could be relevant for ongoing and planned future projects in this municipality. For example in the Graanrepubliek Project 2.0, which is a program that aims to enhance broad prosperity in Oldambt, important points in this program are agriculture, heritage, tourism, education, labour market and innovation. This thesis could contribute to the emphasis on how residents view tangible and intangible heritage and provide a focus point for stories that can help in the Collection Oldambt Story Project (Eileen, 2024). Which is a project that helps to make heritage visible and future-proof. Furthermore, it may be beneficial for the Programma Wonen Oldambt, which aims to enhance housing quality and construct more houses in the municipality (Programma Wonen Oldambt, n.d.). This research highlights residents' emotional responses to the loss of historic buildings and the need for heritage-sensitive urban planning in the region to preserve the area's character.

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## Appendix A. Dutch Quotes

1 “Winschoten is voor mij het hart van Oldambt en het gemeentehuis is tegenwoordig ook het hart van de regio.” (Oliver)

2 “Pannenkoekenhuis vind ik ook in Midwolda best wel leuk. Omdat ze op die placemats vertellen hoe het in Midwolda er vroeger uit zag.” (Thijmen)

3 “Eigenlijk, als je er heel goed over na denkt. En heel bijzonder dat als je daar langsrijdt, dat je denkt van... Ja, mocht er ooit wat gebeuren, dat mooie, prachtige, krachtige water. Dan zijn die dijken er altijd om ons te beschermen. Dat gevoel heb ik dan ook altijd.” (Helen)

4 "Oldambt heeft veel te bieden, veel afwisseling, we hebben de stad, we hebben goede voorzieningen, we hebben ook natuur en recreatie en natuurlijk mede door de Blauwestad watersport." (Oliver)

5 “Het Oldamtmeer geeft verbondenheid, het al bestaat sinds 2005 en is daarom bijna evenoud als ik, je kan er pracht varen en vissen wat ik vaak deed met mijn ouders toen we een eigen boot hadden. Je kan er mooi fietsen en wandelen langs de dijk wat ik vaak doe waar je prachtige zonsopgangen en ondergangen ziet als akkers en schapen een centraal middelpunt van Oldambt.” (Noah)

6 “En de sterretjes nacht, nou gewoon de rust, alleen gewoon ook heerlijk, ik hou van rust. Ja. Maar ook overdag, als het mooi weer is, dan is daar ook de Kiekkast, dat is bij Nieuwstatenzijl.” (Nina)

7 “Nou ja, ik heb wel nostalgie vooral met die deur waar groepen 1, 2, 3 en 4 vaak heen gaan. zo dacht ik zelf aan heel vroeger, de eerste paar jaren van die school, dat je daar zo langs gaat. Dat lag mij wel dichtbij het hart.” (Marc)

8 “Nou, foto 1 is van een speeltuin. Deze speeltuin was vlakbij het eerste huis waar ik heb gewoond. Daar heb ik heel veel van mijn jeugd doorgebracht.” (Rosie)

9 “Foto 2 is van het zwembad in Scheemda, de Ringberg. Daar heb ik ook een groot gedeelte van mijn jeugd doorgebracht. Het was elke dag een zwembad te vinden, weer of geen weer, zelfs met onweer.” (Rosie)

10 “Het is een plek waar we vroeger in de buurt woonden, we gingen daar altijd heen om te zwemmen en later zelfs met [Naam vrouw], ze is daar ook geweest, ik heb veel herinneringen van vroeger op deze plek.” (Pieter)

11 “ik ben opgegroeid in Oldambt, in Winschoten centrum, hier begon mijn connectie met de plek, daarom heb ik een foto gemaakt van deze straat, ik ben opgegroeid hier en al mijn dagelijkse activiteiten waren in deze straat, daarom heb ik hier de foto genomen, mijn ouders hadden hier een winkel.” (Noor)

12 “Na de oorlog woonden de Ambonezen in de barakken daar, dat gedeelte bos heet nogsteeds het Ambonezenbosje” (Helen)

13 “Ja, die verbondenheid is met mij gewoon puur inderdaad grootouders, verleden, natuur.” (Helen)

14 “Ik zeg altijd, wij wonen in de stad, Winschoten is een stad, maar eigenlijk is het gewoon een groot dorp.” (Oliver).

15 “En dat sommige denk ik een vrij bekrompen omgeving of netwerk hebben. Is er soms ook veel haat en nijd. Wij hebben dit allemaal gebouwd met onze eigen centen. En de burens laten iets komen met een architect van een ton. En die hebben zoveel geld en een dikke auto. Omdat het hier natuurlijk het inkomen maar ook de kennis wat lager ligt dan gemiddeld. Zit je daar ook wel eens mee.” (Oliver).



16 “We komen altijd wel bekenden tegen wanneer ik aan de wandel ben met de hond, gewoon even een praatje maken en dingen, dat het toch wel leuk is wanneer het een beetje een eigen omgeving is. Allemaal mensen uit je jeugd die je dan toch weer tegen komt. Zon 35, 40 jaar geleden dat je die mensen hebt gezien.” (Pieter).

17 “ Het was echt gewoon geschiedenis. Ik weet niet per se of het hier weg kwam, maar we deden het wel altijd hier in de buurt met een grote markt, dat mensen verkleden in de stijl van die jaren, en dan verder de kerk. Er gebeurt niet heel veel in de kerk, maar het is wel een dingetje dat ze vroeger ook rond die tijd een soort optreden hadden ofzo daarin.” (Marc)

18 “Een heel mooie belevingsroute is er aangelegd. Met betrekking tot de nagedachtenis. Van de slag bij Heiligerlee. Allemaal hartstikke mooi. Maar het gaat mij meer om het bos.” (Noor)

19 “Tradities vind ik wel heel belangrijk, Koningsdag in het algemeen die hebben we net gehad. Dus dat is natuurlijk ook iets wat heel belangrijk is, maar dan ook altijd de nacht van Winschoten, dat vind ik ook altijd wel een happening en de Adrillenmarkten natuurlijk. Moet ik even nadenken wat hier in het noordelijk iets is het Sintmaarten gebeuren natuurlijk ook. Wat ook heel belangrijk was.”

20 “Ik weet ook nog van toen ik heel jong was, mijn eerste keer naar de nacht van Winschoten was met een vriendin van me en haar moeder en haar oma. En toen waren we echt nog super jong. En was het zeg maar een hele happening dat we tot twaalf uur op mochten blijven om naar de markt te gaan.” (Rosie)

21 “Iedereen kon met iedereen.” (Nina)

22 “Er zijn nu heel veel vreemde mensen het is toch minder contact, minder vriendelijk, weinig groepen, minder behulpzaam.” (Nina)

23 “Als je dan net die vreemde eend bent uit een paar dorpen of plaatsen verderop. Dan mis je af en toe wel de boot” (Oliver)

24 “Ja, maar dat verandert eigenlijk ook al. Dan komt dat zo steeds meer. Andere mensen die komen wonen en het Gronings ook een beetje weggaat, dus dat vind ik ook wel jammer, het Gronings, ik praat nou ook Nederlands, ja, dat het Gronings weggaat” (Nina)

25 “Ik zou zelf niet heel veel weten welke dorpen er precies allemaal bij Oldambt passen en ik denk ook niet dat je er heel veel van meekrijgt ... tenzij je je er zelf in gaat verdiepen.” (Rosie)

26 “Ik zou het erg leuk vinden om meer over de geschiedenis van Oldambt te leren, het zou fijn zijn als het op de basisschool werd geleerd, in lokale geschiedenislesjes” (Rosie)

27 “We gaan steeds meer in richting naar de stad. Die verstedelijking. Steeds meer huizen, en dat soort dingen gebouwd. Het voelt niet echt meer als een buitengemeente.” (Noah).

28 “Ik vind het jammer dat alle oude panden, zoals het vroegere gemeentehuis, al die mooie oude gebouwen, dat dat allemaal gesloopt is. Ik vind Beerta, dat word een strakke, een beetje, juist de mooie dingen die je eigenlijk zou willen bewaren, dat ze dat juist allemaal gesloopt heeft”. (Nina)