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Collective Healing and Transformation from a Dehumanizing Past through Personal Dialogue: The Ketu Ketu Table Dialogue Method

Abstract: This chapter presents how the Ketu Ketu Table approach can be used to explore the potential of personal dialogue to heal the deep emotional and relational wounds caused by the shared legacy of slavery. This dialogue-based ritual was developed by the authors to foster mutual understanding and empathy among individuals of different backgrounds, addressing the transgenerational trauma of slavery and its continuing influence on contemporary racism and discrimination. With the theme and questions determined to foster transformative change in participants in a specific context, Ketu Ketu Tables combine personal dialogue with plenary exchanges, and are set against a wider socio-cultural background that spans micro, meso and macro-levels. This chapter features a narrative account of an experience of the Ketu Ketu Table followed by a “do-it-yourself” guide to support those considering implementing their own modification of the Ketu Ketu Table to facilitate healing from historical and societal traumas.

Keywords: Ketu Ketu Table, collective healing, transgenerational trauma, legacy of slavery, dialogue

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Acknowledgement: The authors would like to acknowledge that this project originated in the work package ‘Healing’ that is part of the larger project ‘Re/Presenting Europe: Popular Representations of Diversity and Belonging in the Netherlands’ which is funded by the Dutch National Science Foundation.

Introduction: The Transgenerational Trauma of Slavery

Tragically, the history of transatlantic slavery and the slave trade is far from over. The (great-)great-grandparents of two authors of this text, Durwin Lynch and Mercedes Zandwijken, were born in slavery in Dutch and French colonies in the Caribbean. Both authors can indicate how this legacy has affected their families, upbringing and societal contexts, with interrupted and broken family histories, repeated migrations between colonies and the “homeland”, traumatizing experiences of racism and discrimination, disadvantaged socio-economic, educational and other positions, and more. Living in a country that can trace the origin of its current wealth and status back to its colonial and slavery history, the three authors of this chapter have invented, developed and engaged with the Ketí Kotí Table: a dialogue initiative that for almost 20 years has demonstrated its impact in addressing this history across communities in a constructive and future-oriented way, with more than 42,000 participants in the Netherlands and beyond.

The long and traumatic history of dehumanization and exploitation, and its legacy, has ongoing implications at multiple levels. At the micro-level, it is still affecting the lives, experiences, emotions and insights of individuals—not just the descendants of former enslaved people, but also those who live in the societies involved in this history. Indeed, the macro-level entails this shared history and legacy, which has influenced the structures, culture and other dimensions of the—many—societies connected to this history. Finally, this history has deeply affected not only black communities but also other groups at the meso-level regarding their societal status, their internal and external relations, and so on. Given that this history has consequences at multiple levels, an adequate healing method should equally aim to address these levels in some way.

The Ketí Kotí dialogue table has been developed to address multiple levels at once, with its primary focus being to effectively foster mutual understanding and empathy in its black and white—and all colours in between—participants when they exchange their personal experiences, emotions and insights with racism, discrimination, exclusion, prejudices, and more. Yet, as these personal dialogue exchanges occur in larger and diverse groups, and against this historical and societal background, the interactions between the three levels are also relevant.¹

¹ Broekroelofs et al. (2018). De Ketí Kotí Tafel: een dialoogtafel over de hedendaagse gevolgen van het gedeelde slavernijverleden. Interventiebeschrijving [The Ketí Kotí Table: a dialogue table about the contemporary consequences of the shared history of slavery. Intervention description].

In this chapter we will first offer a brief sketch of this background, the transgenerational traumas it has caused and how dialogue can be part of the necessary healing process. We then proceed with a description and explanation of the Ketī Kotī Table and its main elements. Finally, we provide a concise “do-it-yourself” guide that invites and encourages readers to adapt our Ketī Kotī Table to their own contexts and aims.

History of Slavery and the Lasting Impact of Dehumanization

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, more than 12 million Africans were abducted and enslaved to the Americas. It is estimated that the Netherlands was responsible for bringing approximately 600,000 enslaved Africans to the Caribbean and Suriname.² Although there have been varying forms of slave trade and slavery throughout human history, the transatlantic slave trade and slavery was an unprecedented form of brutality in its scale, violence and transgenerational nature. Enslaved Africans were treated as commodities, chattel and properties, while their black bodies were subjugated to unimaginably cruel conditions of labour and life.³ Slavery was an act of dehumanization as it entailed an assault on the humanity and dignity of those Africans and their descendants.⁴ Dehumanization is not an act of removing humanity from a person, which is impossible, but rather of not recognizing it. People can suffer tremendous harm and trauma from natural causes like disasters and calamities, but it is quite different to receive these deliberately at the hands of other people. The brutal acts of transatlantic slavery were part of an emerging and expanding capitalist system sustained by individuals, groups, institutions and even the political system as whole. Besides enduring physical violence, enslaved people were also deprived of their homes, their families and other meaningful social relationships, and of their cultural heritage and spiritual practices.⁵

The Dutch legally abolished slavery in the Caribbean and Suriname on 1 July 1863, with this date now celebrated as “Ketī Kotī”, which, in its original Surinam language, means the chains have been cut. However, the legal abolition was followed by an apprenticeship period of 10 years, during which former enslaved people were compelled to work for their former enslavers or risk imprisonment.

2 van Rossum et al. (Eds.) (2023). *Staat en slavernij: Het Nederlandse koloniale slavernij en haar doorwerkingen*. [State and slavery: Dutch colonial slavery and its legacies].

3 Gill (2021). *Legacies of slavery and their enduring harms*.

4 Cooper (2012). *From slavery to genocide: The fallacy of debt in reparations discourse*.

5 van Rossum et al. (Eds.) (2023).

After this, indentured contracted labourers from India and Java were brought to Suriname to work on the plantations.⁶ The abolition of slavery thus caused an increase in other forms of forced labour.⁷

Ongoing research and debates today address the many ways in which Dutch slavery and colonialism, and the related economic, social and cultural development of the Dutch nation, have impacted African diaspora populations.⁸ It is also crucial to acknowledge that racism intertwines with other structures of oppression.⁹ The cultural legacy of Dutch transatlantic enslavement is present and institutionalized in Dutch society in many ways; however, not everyone is ready to accept this perspective, leading to the denial of racism through the politics of Dutch exceptionalism and the ever-present myth of the Netherlands being a colour-blind nation.¹⁰

Colonial powers often established hierarchies and privileges based on skin colour in societies that have historically dealt with slavery. During slavery this judgment based on skin colour, also called colourism, influenced their social status and the treatment they received. These beliefs and attitudes about skin colour persisted after slavery and continued to influence (post) colonial societies and all their communities.¹¹ Cultural analysts refer in this context to a shared “cultural archive”, which contains not just associated stereotypes, prejudices and images, but also attitudes and emotions tainted by the insidious racism stemming from this history.¹² Both black and white communities are subject to this cultural archive, despite being impacted in different ways.

6 Choenni (2016). *Hindostanis in Suriname 1873–1920: Indenture, plantations and beyond*.

7 van Rossum et al. (Eds.) (2023).

8 Van Stipriaan (2006). *Between diaspora,(trans)nationalism, and American globalization: a history of Afro-Surinamese Emancipation day*.

9 Essed & Hoving (2014). *Innocence, smug ignorance, resentment: an introduction to Dutch racism*.

10 Özdil (2014). “Racism is an American problem”: Dutch exceptionalism and its politics of denial; Rose (2022). “Dutch racism is not like anywhere else”: Refusing color-blind myths in black feminist otherwise spaces; Weiner (2014). *The ideologically colonized metropole: Dutch racism and racist denial*.

11 van Rossum et al. (Eds.) (2023).

12 Said (1993). *Culture and imperialism*; Wekker (2016). *White innocence: Paradoxes of colonialism and race*.

Trauma: Historical and Transgenerational

Recognizing the wide-ranging consequences across different communities of long-term injustices, the notion of “historical trauma” has emerged in recent years.¹³ It has been applied to the long-term effects of colonization, slavery, genocide, systemic oppression and apartheid on entire communities as well as individuals.¹⁴ Going beyond immediate historical events, historical trauma theory delves into the long-term consequences that impact the formation of social structures and identities throughout generations. The profound experiences of grief, depression, loss and post-traumatic stress disorder are central to this tragedy, leaving a lasting mark on both individuals and collective awareness.¹⁵

Given that the attention being paid to healing processes is quite recent, the harmful effects of historical slavery have continued today as unhealed trauma, transmitted from one generation to the next and sustained through continuing acts of dehumanization.¹⁶ This trauma has had a significant impact not only on descendants of the former enslaved, but also on people of European descent and on the interpersonal and intercommunal dynamics in contemporary Western societies. The harmful effects of the trauma and wounds experienced by the descendants of enslaved people have various dimensions:

1. **Historical:** This dimension concerns the shared ignorance or recognition of atrocities of the past.
2. **Personal:** When addressing the historical dimension it may implicate a personal dimension, which concerns the acts of dehumanization that were part of that history and that can indirectly still affect the emotional self-perception and self-appreciation of individuals, and their emotional responses to external events.
3. **Relational:** This dimension is evident from the manifestation of racism, discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes in contemporary society in interpersonal relations.
4. **Structural:** This dimension entails the institutional and political racism responsible for structural inequalities in education, healthcare and housing.

¹³ Mohatt et al. (2014). Historical trauma as public narrative: A conceptual review of how history impacts present-day health.

¹⁴ Swanson, Nygård & Saus (2022). Native American social work—Including family and community.

¹⁵ Swanson, Nygård & Saus (2022).

¹⁶ Gill & Thomson (2021). Collective healing to address legacies of transatlantic slavery: Opportunities and challenges.

This multidimensional trauma has been found to have such an impact on the lives of many descendants of former enslaved, that some refer to it as a “post-traumatic slave syndrome”, with symptoms including a lack of self-respect, a general self-destructive outlook, internalized racism, extreme feelings of suspicion and anger, and so on.¹⁷ Comparison with similar traumas suggests that this multidimensional trauma can be transmitted across multiple generations. Moreover, transgenerational trauma can make victims more vulnerable and responsive to the racist incidents they experience or witness due to a complex interaction between their stress mechanisms, epigenetic dispositions and personal conditions. As a result, such transgenerational trauma does not always decrease over time but can become reactivated, even in younger generations, when exposed to racist incidents, as has been demonstrated in post-holocaust populations.¹⁸ This risk is particularly strong if a sub-dominant group has suffered historical trauma by a dominant group, with disparities between those groups continuing.¹⁹

Healing from the History of Slavery

Recognition of slavery’s history and long-term consequences is often intertwined with the struggle for autonomy and the right to self-determination, both at the individual and collective levels. This can manifest in a quest for and restoration of lost cultural identities, the acknowledgement of economic injustices, and demands for legal justice in the form of compensation, restitution payments or other forms of legal recognition and redress that serve (legal) restoration and healing.²⁰ The process of healing from Dutch colonialism is complex, and there is no clear road to healing, or a healed society. In recent years, the Netherlands has begun to recognize the need to not only address its colonial legacy but also to take the initiative in implementing policies and strategies to combat racism and dampen the effects of intergenerational trauma.²¹ Intensified public demands in recent years from several sections of Dutch society have triggered the examination and re-examination of chattel slavery and its legacies. A series of mobilizations, primarily led by Dutch black communities, has pushed discussions

17 DeGruy (2017). *Post traumatic slave syndrome: America’s legacy of enduring injury and healing*.

18 Keestra (2023). Transgenerational trauma and worlded brains. An interdisciplinary perspective on ‘post-traumatic slave syndrome’.

19 Sotero (2006). A conceptual model of historical trauma: implications for public health practice and research.

20 van Rossum et al. (Eds.) (2023).

21 Omlo et al. (2022). *Racism at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. An exploratory study*.

of chattel slavery and its legacies into the public domain, opening up debates that were previously stifled and leading to unprecedented exhibitions, museum transformations and political debate.

As a result, there have been two historical and significant public apologies for slavery. First, on 19 December 2022, the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, issued an apology on behalf of the state for its historical involvement in slavery. He ended his speech expressing hope that those involved can collectively face the past with recognition, dialogue and healing. This was followed by a public apology for slavery by the Dutch King, Willem-Alexander, on 1 July 2023 at the Ketí Koti commemoration and public ceremony in Amsterdam. Significantly, the King also asked the audience for forgiveness for his predecessors' lack of intervening in this systemic crime against humanity. A shift in perspective was acknowledged by both, as they were moving away from viewing enslavement as solely a thing of the past to recognizing the ongoing impact and the need for apologies. Moreover, they recognized that dealing with this past is a matter for the entire Dutch society.

However, while these apologies have happened at a macro (systemic) level, they do not automatically bring about healing at meso (community) and micro (individual) levels. At the micro level, the individual descendants of enslaved people are still coping with a variety of transgenerational trauma effects. At the meso level, different groups still experience tensions among each other as they have been affected differently by the history of slavery. A need to engage in healing through dialogue on a more personal and community level is an essential complement to the progress made at the macro level. Collectively addressing slavery's past via dialogue is a form of reparation as it contributes to shared recognition and mutual understanding of the impact and after-effects in the now.

In order to heal from slavery, we need to first understand wounding. The concept of "healing wounds" has both evaluative and factual aspects: healing is good and wounds are bad. The critical job that communities face is the deliberate processing of traumas to limit their impact on future generations. This process of healing the community is called "collective healing".²² Collective healing is a sophisticated and intricate process that carefully knits together the restoration of cultural identity,²³ the strengthening of communal relationships²⁴ and the acceptance of historical traumas.²⁵ Within this dynamic framework, collective

22 Theisen-Womersley (2021). *Collective Trauma, Collective Healing*.

23 Swanson, Nygård & Saus (2022).

24 Cox, Mond & Hoang (2022). 'We're also healers': Elders leading the way in Aboriginal community healing.

25 Waddell et al. (2021). *Healing journeys: Indigenous men's reflections on resources and barriers to mental wellness*.

healing appears as a dynamic interplay between individual well-being, community cohesion and the revitalization of cultural practices. This emphasizes the interdependence of personal and collective transformation in the years following historical traumas. Recognizing historical trauma is the first step towards collective healing, indicating the start of a transformative journey that can resonate throughout generations.²⁶

A useful four-fold framework for understanding collective healing is presented by Thomson and consists of: (1) acknowledgement of historical dehumanizing acts; (2) addressing the harmful effects of dehumanization; (3) embracing relational rapprochement; and (4) co-imagining and co-creating conditions for systemic justice.²⁷ Thomson argues that healing must be a holistic and collective endeavour involving distinct processes, including coming to terms with historical woundedness, working through the resulting trauma and its harmful psychological effects, and reconciling towards more congenial and humanizing relationships. He further critiques the individualistic tendency in the dominant—psychotherapeutic—approach to dealing with trauma, suggesting that the societal features under structural dehumanization must also be confronted as part of our collective healing.

As will become evident from the following sections, the Keti Koti Table does not aim at either individual or collective healing, but at individual and collective healing simultaneously. This interplay between micro, meso and (indirectly) macro levels of healing is unique and powerful, as we will show below after briefly introducing personal dialogue as a promising healing method.

Personal Dialogue and its Potential for Healing

Although public and official apologies are valuable and powerful, they cannot solely resolve the transgenerational trauma experienced by descendants of the enslaved individually and/or collectively. Moreover, mitigating ongoing racism requires engagement by all societal groups, not only descendants. Following Thomson's framework, all groups must recognize both the historical and contemporary effects of dehumanization, create opportunities for interactions across

²⁶ Benjamin (2018). Multilevel connection as a pathway to healing in a low-income South African community; Ndagijimana (2022). Kongera Kwiubaka (rebuilding ourselves again): Culturally responsive and contextually relevant collective healing in post-genocide Rwanda; Waddell et al. (2021).

²⁷ Thomson (2021).

groups, and set out a shared commitment towards a just society.²⁸ However, with slavery's history and legacy contributing to long-lasting rifts and polarization in society, it is uncertain how we can turn this into a shared responsibility. What medium or form of interaction is available in which individuals and groups divided by different historical and social backgrounds, and consequently having different perspectives on the history of slavery and its aftermath, can address these in a productive way and co-create a situation that overcomes this history and aftermath?

Increasingly, societal movements, governments and other parties are embracing dialogue methodology as a medium to support conflict resolution, peace work and collaborative social justice.²⁹ In contrast to this, discussions and debates about the history of slavery and its consequences often have opposite effects. Given that such discussions often focus on historical, political, cultural or economic aspects in a more general sense, these tend to lead to increasing divergence and polarization among participants and listeners.³⁰ This is partly explained by the fact that exposure to differing opinions usually causes people to defend their own views even more strongly or to oppose people with a different opinion.³¹ Due to the focus of the Ketu Koti dialogue table on personal experiences, emotions and insights, this hardening of positions does not occur so easily. On the contrary, as Allport's psychological "contact theory" predicts,³² the voluntary personal contact during this table actually contributes to the willingness to take someone else's perspective and thus gain more empathy and understanding for that other person.

In contrast to debate and discussion, dialogue "can be understood as a meaningful interaction and exchange between people (often of different social, cultural, political, religious or professional groups) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increase understanding".³³ From this definition, taken from the first editorial of the *Journal for Dialogue Studies*, we can learn that increased mutual understanding between dialogue partners—at the personal or micro level—includes their communal identity and experiences of being part of different groups, bringing in additional

²⁸ Thomson (2021).

²⁹ Dessel (2011). Dialogue and social change: An interdisciplinary and transformative history.

³⁰ Lord (1979). Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence.

³¹ Sears, Freedman & O'Connor (1964). The effects of anticipated debate and commitment on the polarization of audience opinion; Wojcieszak (2011). Deliberation and attitude polarization.

³² Allport (1954). *The nature of prejudice*.

³³ Weller (2013). Editorial introduction, p. 5.

dialogues and insights from the meso level. Hence, when mutual understanding and empathy emerge in a personal dialogue, these can simultaneously contribute to understanding and empathy across group boundaries—for example across the “colour line” that separates descendants of enslaved people from other groups in society, and which also connects to the macro level.

An important ingredient of dialogue as a multi-level interaction are the narratives that dialogue partners share about their experiences, actions, insights and motivations. Narratives are also a universal mode of communication, used across the globe for recounting such content in a structured way.³⁴ Philosopher Marya Schechtman refers to a “narrative identity”, which relates to the fact that we not only use narrative to explain ourselves to others but in so doing even develop our personal identity or self as such.³⁵ With dialogue partners presenting each other their personal narratives to which they reciprocally listen and respond, it is not surprising to find that this interaction often leads to a modification of personal perspectives and even identities. The confrontation with someone else’s perspective and the interpretation of oneself by someone with another perspective, as well as the recognition of similarities and differences between these perspectives, enhance mutual understanding and empathy, as well as enrich each individual’s self-reflection.³⁶

Whereas debates about racism often derail into heated exchanges of accusations and defences, dialogues containing narratives and counter-narratives can instead serve as bridges. They can invite listeners into unfamiliar worlds by providing, for instance, both the actual, racist reality of a person of colour and of someone living in a colour-blind reality who is unexposed to racism. Both dialogue partners may consequently learn not just about each other’s personal experiences and insights, but also about how mechanisms of racism affect groups in different ways. This has been referred to as “counter-storytelling”.³⁷ Moreover, by stepping into the shoes of someone else to include the emotions they experience, a dialogue partner usually experiences enhanced empathy with that person. As participants of our Ketu Ketu dialogue tables report, this combination of understanding and emotional empathy supports their increased awareness

34 Cronin et al. (2021). Anti-racist interventions to transform ecology, evolution and conservation biology departments; Polletta et al. (2011). The sociology of storytelling; Ricœur (1984–88). *Time and narrative* (vols. 1–3).

35 Schechtman (1996). *The constitution of selves*.

36 Keestra (2020). Van narratieve tot dialogische identiteit. Identiteit en refiguratie tijdens de Ketu Ketu Tafel [From narrative to dialogical identity. Identity and refiguration at the Ketu Ketu Table].

37 Delgado & Stefancic (2001). *Critical race theory: An introduction*.

and determination to fight racism and discrimination in their environment, and respond to it adequately.³⁸

Ketí Kotí Table: Creating Collective Change Through Dialogue

When co-author Mercedes joined co-author Machiel at his Jewish Passover table two decades ago, she realized with some envy that while Jews around the world celebrate and commemorate their liberation from slavery that took place in pharaonic Egypt around 3,000 years ago, such a shared and meaningful ritual was lacking in her Surinamese community, which only experienced emancipation in 1863. The pair then decided to develop the Ketí Kotí Table, taking additional inspiration from the Ramadan festival, during which the Muslim community break their period of fasting, the Afro-American Kwanzaa festival, during which African Americans celebrate their family, community and culture, and the communal dialogue tables that were held after the political murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam in 2004.³⁹

The Ketí Kotí Table is an “invented tradition”,⁴⁰ with more than 42,000 people in the Netherlands, United States and Germany having joined in its rituals to share meals and personal dialogue. In times of increasing polarization and ongoing segregation between communities, more than 400 organizations, including museums, libraries, municipalities, ministries, universities and churches, have hosted a Ketí Kotí dialogue table to facilitate and foster mutual understanding and empathy between participants. With the shared colonial and slavery histories and their legacies providing the background for the Ketí Kotí Table, it explicitly brings people “across the colour line” into personal dialogue with each other. Participants are invited to reflect and exchange about their personal experiences, emotions and insights regarding topics such as discrimination, racism, exclusion, apologies, family secrets, healing and remembering. As (almost) all people have some experience with these phenomena, participants share and compare their personal stories, exploring whether differences in their stories are due to differences in their identities, backgrounds or skin colour, or due to their gender, class, age, etc. This process helps to uncover and address the implicit biases, prejudices and stereotypes humans tend to have about each other and about

³⁸ Keestra (2020).

³⁹ Zandwijken & Keestra (2018). ‘A tori’—*The story. Manual of the Ketí Kotí Table*.

⁴⁰ Hobbsbawm (1983). Introduction: Inventing traditions.

different groups, while recognizing that these are rooted in shared colonial and slavery histories. More fundamentally still, participants are often surprised about the intimacy and trust they experience at the Ketu Kotu Table.

Although developed as an intervention to primarily mitigate racism and discrimination, for some people participating in this dialogue table restores their basic trust in humanity and dialogue. It is therefore unsurprising that the Ketu Kotu Table is recognized as an “effective intervention” against racism and discrimination, and is included in a national database on anti-discrimination interventions.⁴¹ It is also recommended in an advisory report to the government of the Netherlands as a creative method that helps to mitigate polarization while strengthening exchange and dialogue in society.⁴² Encouraged by these recognitions and several public awards and honours, the Ketu Kotu Table foundation has been invited to apply its expertise and methods to other societal domains in which discrimination, stereotypes and exclusion are prevalent.

Experiencing Transformative Healing at the Ketu Kotu Table

In the narrative that follows we present the Ketu Kotu Table experience of one recent participant, our co-author, Durwin. As our purpose here is to encourage readers to organize or co-organize with us a Ketu Kotu Table themselves, or to adapt our dialogue table to their own purposes, they will find throughout this first-person narrative references to relevant elements of the subsequent do-it-yourself guide, which is meant to support such adaptation.

Narrative from Durwin

After years of dodging the opportunity—mostly because my upbringing was one where I was taught not to look back into our history of slavery, colonialism and oppression—I decided to sign up for a Ketu Kotu Table. I was interested to experience how the Surinamese history and culture would be integrated and discussed in this Dutch contemporary setting (see DIY Guide element §3.i).

⁴¹ See <https://www.kis.nl/database-antidiscriminatie-interventies/ketu-kotu-tafel> (accessed 16 December 2024).

⁴² Governmental Advisory Committee (2023). *Koester de democratie! Een dringende oproep om de democratische rechtsorde weer voor iedereen te laten werken* [Cherish democracy! An urgent call to make the democratic rule of law work for everyone again].

I was nervous, excited and hyper aware of my emotions. This Ketu Kotu Table was organized by the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights and took place at the National Archive in The Hague. I perceive both the organizing party and the location as two significant institutes: one holding deep information of our colonial past, and the other striving for equality in the present (see DIY Guide element §3.ii).

At the entrance I was welcomed by Mercedes and Machiel—the co-founders and main facilitators of the Ketu Kotu Table—and was asked to choose with which group I identify myself: “white” or “black, mixed or coloured”. As a male, Surinamese mixed-race individual, I had no issue with that question, belonging to the second group. I did notice some people found it difficult to choose between one of the two groups, but they were then asked to make a choice for this occasion. The room was well set up: long tables with Afro-Surinamese culturally traditional clothing to connect the pairs who would later go into dialogue with each other. Once all 100+ guests were seated, the event began!

First, a Surinamese choir sang a libation song, invoking assistance from mother earth and all our ancestors, followed by a welcome song. I was immediately moved by their voices, the rhythm of the drums and the 400-year-old mourning songs they performed later, bringing me as close as possible to plantation life in Suriname. The songs were meaningful as they contributed to a certain emotional synchronization between all participants who were present—transcending language barriers (see DIY Guide element §3.vii).

We were then guided to take part in an unusual collective opening ritual. With much attention and dedication, my dialogue partner and I took turns rubbing each other’s palms with coconut oil while chewing on a piece of Surinamese bitterwood. This symbolizes tasting the bitterness of the ugly past and rubbing away its lasting pain. During this ritual the choir sang *A Boro Gron*—a song that tells the story of an enslaved woman who sheds tears that pass down her cheeks and her heart and finally make a hole in the ground. It was a vulnerable and intimate moment between me and my white dialogue partner, who I barely knew. Yet I felt comfortable. I experienced this as an extraordinary, mystical and sacred moment of the Ketu Kotu Table (see DIY Guide element §3.vi).

The evening proceeded with the facilitators introducing themselves and briefly narrating the history of the Ketu Kotu Table (see above). Preceding the personal dialogue, we were offered a first *Kon Na Leti*—a short personal reflection on the dialogue theme by a black individual from the hosting organization. After that it was time for three rounds of dialogue questions, each presented during one of the three courses of the reconstructed Afro-Surinamese meal. As is well known, food also serves as a form of comfort when discussing sensitive topics such as those featured at the Ketu Kotu Table (see DIY Guide element §3.viii).

Table 1: Dialogue Structure

The Ketu Koti Table Dialogue Structure	
Preparation	1. Forming couples
	2. Theme presentation and dialogue question
	3. Silence—for 1 minute
Dialogue Part I	4. First speaker—for 3 minutes
	5. Silence—for 1 minute
	6. Listener speaks—for 2 minutes
Dialogue Part II	7. Second speaker—for 3 minutes
	8. Silence—for 1 minute
	9. Listener speaks—for 2 minutes
Conclusion round of dialogue	10. Shared reflection—for 5 minutes
	11. Plenary discussion
	12. Goodbye—and possibly change of dialogue couples
Next round of dialogue	Repeat from step 2 with next dialogue question

The personal dialogue turned out to be very structured and timed, ensuring equal speaking time while also emphasizing the importance of attentive listening and reflection (see Table 1). The overall dialogue theme of the evening was “Civic Courage versus Silence”, which encouraged me to reflect on my personal experiences with speaking up against injustices, and the culture of fear and silence within my community (see DIY Guide element §3.iii).

During the first course, peanut soup was served, and we were introduced to the first dialogue question: “Can you share an event with your dialogue partner when you silently witnessed someone being discriminated against, or actually making a discriminatory comment in your environment? What feelings does that memory now evoke in you?” I shared for the first time how a white Dutch “friend” of mine expressed that I did not belong in this country, and that I would not achieve my dreams here because of my ethnic background. I never shared that with anyone before because I felt so disappointed and offended by that remark. It did, however, have a huge impact on me, and I suddenly felt comfortable enough to share it with my Ketu Koti Table dialogue partner, who I barely knew. My dialogue partner was very understanding towards the feelings I expressed and also became upset that I had to go through this. I felt such a relief

sharing this situation for the first time. The dialogue questions and the setting helped me to articulate a lived experience which I found otherwise difficult to express (see DIY Guide element §3.iv).

The final stage of each dialogue round consisted of a joint reflection by the dialogue partners, who were asked to first identify a striking similarity or difference in their stories and then to explain this similarity or difference with reference to a factor such as their skin colour, migration background, gender or age. After this reflection the facilitators invited participants to share plenary what they had discussed in pairs. It was then that I heard other stories that also resonated with me and made me realize how the choice between “civic courage versus silence” emerges in many occasions. Impressive was the story of an elderly Surinamese lady, dressed in traditional Koto Missie, who reported how she had for the first time in her life admitted to her dialogue partner, a young white female, that she has always hated white people for what they did to black people. Instead of being rejected or feeling personally attacked, her dialogue partner understood and empathized with this feeling of hatred. For the Surinamese lady, this recognition of her deep-seated feeling amounted to a big relief (micro level), creating room for other feelings towards white people (meso level). It made me realize even more how we all, black and white descendants, share in this challenging cultural archive and history. The facilitators played a pivotal role in fostering this individual healing (micro) in the context of our group experience (meso), as they offered interpretations against the background of socio-cultural history and change (macro) (see DIY Guide element §3.v).

During a brief intermission the choir sang a song about a slave trade boat that arrived in Suriname, from which those enslaved who were sick were not sold but thrown overboard. The song offers consolation and rest to the souls of these poor victims, making it very powerful and spiritual. We were then offered the second *Kon Na Leti*, now prepared by a white participant. The second dialogue question was more linked to the present, asking us to share a memory or experience with our dialogue partner of discrimination towards myself or someone else when I did take immediate action. It made me realize that I find it easier to speak up in the moments when it concerns discrimination against gender, sexuality or someone with a disability, but that I find it very difficult to act or speak-up when it concerns discrimination based on race or ethnicity. I felt ashamed, blocked, yet relieved to be able to speak that out. Some comfort was offered by the *Heri Heri* meal, consisting of root vegetables such as boiled (sweet) potato, yam, cassava and plantain served with salted fish, long beans and a boiled egg.

The third question was geared towards our joint future and asked if we as a dialogue couple could think of what we would need to create more inclusive and

just societies that are free of discrimination. We shared hopeful ideas while eating *bojo*, a sweet cake made of grated cassava, coconut, sugar and cinnamon, which was very welcome at that point. When closing the Ketí Koti dialogue table, we were offered a final choral song about freedom. My dialogue partner stood up, took my hands, and together we danced on the rhythms of this song. Going home that evening, I knew I had started a deeper conversation with that man I see in the mirror: myself. That was very healing. I felt the urge to participate again in a Ketí Koti Table only one week later, bringing along three friends as I wanted them to also experience this healing intervention. A few months later I was invited to be trained as a co-facilitator of Ketí Koti Tables, and I gladly accepted the opportunity.

Developing the Ketí Koti Table

As mentioned above, the Jewish Passover table has been the main inspiration for the Ketí Koti Table. This is not exceptional, as many versions of it exist that generally share the core of the Exodus story. Geographic and socio-cultural contexts have influenced different versions, as have contemporary societal topics such as feminism, ecological awareness and civil rights. Hence, our initiative of creating a version of this ritual and its manual for the explicit purpose of commemorating slavery history, its abolition and legacy is in line with this tradition.⁴³ Indeed, our Ketí Koti dialogue table can be considered as a “Juneteenth Haggadah”, which has been called for to celebrate the abolition of slavery.⁴⁴

In the almost 20 years of its existence, the Ketí Koti Table itself has been a source for similar “invented traditions” and manuals. Most of these adaptations address comparable histories of colonialism and slavery from other regions and populations, containing facilitated personal dialogue as a core ingredient. Examples are the Tula table, named after the freedom fighter from Curaçao; the Pelita Dialogue Table, which addresses the colonial and slavery heritage of the former Dutch East Indies; the Allekondre table, which brings together different ethnic groups in Suriname; and an Afro-American Liberation table. However, some adaptations have addressed other challenging topics, for example gender-based violence, and the Campus Dialogue sessions that we have held on various university campuses for students affected by the war in Israel and Palestine.

⁴³ Stoutjesdijk offers an insightful comparison of the manuals of the Passover and Ketí Koti Tables, showing how both contain rituals that fulfil similar functions: Stoutjesdijk (2019). Judaism, slavery and commemorative ritual in the Netherlands.

⁴⁴ Keestra & Zandwijken (2020, June 29). *A Juneteenth Haggadah for a new ritual meal*.

With these adaptations and variations in mind, we are here offering brief presentations and reflections on the main elements of the Ketikoti Table that readers may consider modifying when developing their own version⁴⁵:

1. **Focus and larger context:** As a first step, you might want to define the historical, societal and cultural focus of the version, presenting its macro level. What contentious event or social tension needs to be addressed? What populations or groups could be involved in this table? What obstacles between them, like racism and exclusion, could be mitigated with mutual understanding and empathy?
2. **Immediate context:** The potential significance of the time and place of a dialogue table deserves to be considered by its initiators. Important commemorations or celebrations invite ongoing reflection and exchanges between citizens, which might be facilitated at the table. We ourselves prefer to locate these tables in halls and buildings with a historical or societal significance, such as museums, city halls, churches and police stations, as this contributes to the extraordinary and ritual impact of the participants' experience.
3. **Dialogue theme:** It is this core element that you need to spend time and careful attention on, preferably determining it together with a diverse group of prospective participants. As it frames the table and dialogue, you may want it to be personally relatable for all participants irrespective of their skin colour, background, gender, etc. It should also have a relevance for the macro level context. Previous Ketikoti Table dialogue themes have included: "Making apologies: How do you do it?", "Civil courage and silence", "Remembering, recovering, healing" and "From exclusion to inclusion".
4. **Dialogue questions:** The facilitated personal dialogue addresses the chosen theme in three questions, each being the topic of a separate dialogue round (see the dialogue structure schema above). The first of these usually asks participants to narrate an experience from their personal past while the second focuses on a different, more recent, experience. Finally, the third question usually invites dialogue partners to consider together (now in an unstructured conversation) how they can support each other in changing their experience or attitude in the future. Crafting this sequence of questions

⁴⁵ Permission for making use of our (modified, or not) dialogue method can be obtained by notifying us in time of your intended adoption. The request, with relevant information, should be sent to info@ketikotitafel.nl. This enables us also to learn from your initiative and share it with others. Moreover, it allows us to comment on and offer suggestions for your initiative. In addition, we expect adequate reference to "Zandwijken, M., & Kestra, M. (2018). 'A tori'—The story. *Manual of the Ketikoti Table*. Ketikoti Tafel Foundation" in all associated materials. See <https://www.ketikotitafel.nl/keti-koti-table> for more information.

may take some rounds before you settle on a triplet that might foster a personal transformative experience or increased awareness about the dialogue table's focus and dialogue theme—which for the Ketu Koti Table is the shared colonial and slavery history and its aftermath.

5. **Dialogue facilitation:** Addressing the micro, meso and macro levels at which dialogue theme and questions are relevant, dialogue facilitation is a complex task. The facilitation duo (preferably representing different backgrounds) should be capable of not only historically and socially contextualizing what is being shared by dialogue couples in the plenary, but also of holding the space for all participants. This implies providing a safe “container” for their emotions and experiences, assisting them in further exploring these and the similarities and differences between them.
6. **Rituals:** Several rituals contribute to the extraordinary—sometimes even referred to as sacred—character of the Ketu Koti Table. Reinforcing the larger historical context is the libation ritual that is performed as a starter, invoking mother earth and the ancestors of all participants and asking their assistance in building a future of solidarity and justice for all. Next, preceding the personal dialogue, is a ritual for creating a safe and confidence-inspiring connection. Dialogue partners rub away each other's pain by using coconut oil to gently and silently rub each other's wrists—a historical reference to shackles—while chewing on a piece of bitterwood representing the bitterness of the past. Adapting this for a dialogue table focusing on war in the Middle East, we used olive oil and a bitter black olive instead.
7. **Music:** As music contributes to the “emotional synchronization” between participants, selecting meaningful songs related to the dialogue table's focus and its macro-level context is important. Typically, a table is partly structured by a welcome song at the start, a thoughtful and meditative song accompanying the connection ritual preceding the dialogue, a meaningful song as intermission, and finally a more positive, liberation or freedom song to support the future that the dialogue partners have explored together. Performed by a traditional Surinamese choir with percussion, who also announce them, these traditional songs that were sung at the plantations also help participants of our dialogue tables to imagine life in that context.
8. **Food:** To commemorate the history and abolition of slavery, participants at the Ketu Koti Table enjoy a three-course meal that could have been on the menu of the enslaved in Suriname. We inform participants about its cheap and simple ingredients and the mixed European-Surinamese background of the sweet dessert cake that accompanies the future-oriented last dialogue round. Preferably, the meal is prepared by members of the communities involved in the dialogue table.

As this list suggests, adapting a dialogue table to a new focus and context requires careful preparation that should involve members of relevant communities, demanding several meetings over a period of time. If done well, this process contributes to the overall impact of our dialogue table as it actively engages and connects these communities, who will jointly reflect upon their—shared—perspectives, histories and backgrounds. We are happy to offer advice and support to this process.⁴⁶

Final Outlook: Healing Together Through Dialogue

With four centuries of transatlantic and Asian slave trade alone being responsible for between 20 to 30 million victims, and involving populations across the world until today, it is no exaggeration to conclude that all nations and countries are still affected by this global history of dehumanization and exploitation. While a part of the population is a direct descendant of former enslaved or of former enslavers, no one is unaffected by a shared global “cultural archive” that contains stereotypes, prejudices, images, attitudes and emotions tainted by the insidious racism stemming from this history.⁴⁷ According to the UN, “Racial discrimination and the legacies of slavery and colonialism continue to destroy lives and curtail opportunities, preventing billions of people from enjoying their full human rights and freedoms.”⁴⁸ It is therefore no surprise that the call for recognition of this plight and for adequate apologies and reparations by those communities and nations that benefited from this history is only getting louder and being heard more widely.

Such reckoning with this horrific past should equally involve and affect all communities. Since its legacy is visible in disparities in health, wealth, freedom and more between communities at the local and national level, as well as internationally, all of us are tasked with addressing it in order both to understand its

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⁴⁷ Said (1993); Wekker (2016).

⁴⁸ This observation was made in the context of the 2024 International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: United Nations (2024). *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 21 March*.

continuing presence and to overcome and repair its consequences. This process will require numerous uncomfortable conversations at multiple levels, which should preferably lead to intersubjective understanding and empathy instead of silence, denial, misplaced blame games and more.

Above we have presented the Keti Koti Table, a ritualized and facilitated dialogue method developed explicitly for this goal in one of the main former colonizing and enslaving countries. Embraced by hundreds of governmental, educational, cultural and societal organizations in the Netherlands and beyond, and with more than 42,000 people having so far participated in this facilitated and ritualized dialogue table, we recommend our readers to adopt and adjust this “post-slavery reconciliation table” to their contexts and aims.⁴⁹ Engaging in such dialogue cannot undo the past, but it may help us to engage with our shared history in such a way that we can together shape a just and inclusive future.

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⁴⁹ Permission for making use of our (modified, or not) dialogue method can be obtained by notifying us in time of your intended adoption. The request, with relevant information, should be sent to info@ketikotitafel.nl. This enables us also to learn from your initiative and share it with others. Moreover, it allows us to comment on and offer suggestions for your initiative. In addition, we expect adequate reference to Zandwijken, M., & Keestra, M. (2018).

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