

# Dutch Academia and Government on Slavery and Its Afterlives

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In 1934, Anton de Kom published his now famous book *Wij slaven van Suriname*, published in an English translation as *We Slaves of Surinam* in 1987. Shortly before its original publication, De Kom had been briefly imprisoned in Suriname and then banished to the Netherlands. There, he faced continued obstruction from the authorities and ended up so traumatized that he had to be admitted to a psychiatric ward for a time. Approximately three generations later, in 2020, De Kom was inducted into the national historical Canon of the Netherlands. The canon is set by a government-appointed committee and guides schools in which aspects of history they are to teach. Hence, with the inclusion of De Kom, it seems the government is developing a new, more inclusive attitude toward the history of slavery.

However, the path leading up to this point was twisted and treacherous. The changes in the Dutch government's attitude toward slavery and its legacies could also be characterized as unreliable, oblivious, disengaged, and strongly influenced by political winds. A prime example of this was the strained process that led to the Dutch government's apologies for slavery in December 2022 and the paternalistic stance that the government adopted when the decision to apologize was finally made.

We should consider the fact that governments also take their cues from what academia has to say about slavery and its history. However, academia is not a monolith. Scholarly insights are continually evolving and subject to debate. Therefore, describing how academia and the government in the Netherlands have approached the history of slavery in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is no straightforward task, but one which requires nuance, definition, and delineation.

## Historiography

Dutch involvement in slavery unfolded in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Netherlands. It was an integrated system, but varied significantly from place to place. Historians writing about slavery have not paid equal attention to the different regions where it took place, while the focus of their research has also shifted substantially over time.

Until the 1970s, Dutch historiography always linked slavery to the West India Company (WIC) and sometimes to the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The slave trade was a core activity of the WIC for a long time. Colonies under WIC control were entirely based on slave labor and enslaved people comprised the majority of the population. As a result, slavery and the slave trade have gone down in the history books as primarily associated with the Atlantic region. In the historiography of the VOC, slavery remained more of a footnote in an otherwise glorified narrative of “how a small country can achieve great things.” Moreover, it was long believed that slavery in the colonized Asian societies mostly involved the local population. Slave labor was only discussed in the context of the Indonesian Banda Islands.

Within the transatlantic triangle (the trade between Europe, America, and Africa), Dutch historians have devoted most attention to slavery in Suriname. Some examined the brief Dutch presence in northeastern Brazil, but hardly any studied slavery in the Dutch Caribbean, New Netherland (the Dutch colony in North America, centered in New York), and Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo (present-day Guyana). West Africa was only mentioned as the point from which the enslaved were shipped off. In this narrative, the Netherlands figures merely as the administrative headquarters of the WIC and VOC, and as a staple market for tropical products.

Until the 1980s, historiography mainly analyzed the slave trade as an economic and therefore geopolitical activity and viewed it from an exclusively Netherlands-centric perspective. Slavery and the colonies only came up where relevant to the history of the (colonial) elite. Enslaved people were reduced to an amorphous, faceless, economic and political category. The abolition of slavery, the only other related topic that Dutch historians sporadically published about from the 1950s on, was also generally discussed from an exclusively Netherlands-centric perspective. Two very early exceptions to this were the work of Surinamese authors: Anton de Kom’s *We Slaves of Surinam* from the 1930s and a dissertation written by Rudolf

van Lier in 1949. But a more typical example is the work of historian Johan Hartog, who lived in the Caribbean for nearly forty years and wrote hefty histories of the region. Of the 640 pages he wrote on the history of Curaçao until 1863, less than 8 percent were devoted to slavery and the slave trade. As was often the case in older historiography, even that 8 percent was mainly written from an economic perspective, focusing on how slavery and the slave trade were organized. The bigger picture was absent altogether; not a single historian wrote about slavery and the slave trade in West Africa, South Africa, or the Indian Ocean.

## Academic Emancipation

In the 1970s and 1980s, historians began to shake off the predominantly Eurocentric and nationalist narrative of “great white men and their wars.” Various universities started offering the option of studying non-Western history in addition to existing courses on colonial history. A steadily growing stream of publications critically examined the WIC and VOC and their role in slavery. Slavery was no longer studied solely in terms of its impact on the Netherlands itself but also on its colonial territories, which now also included South Africa and Indonesia. However, these histories were still primarily socioeconomic narratives that shed little light on the lived experiences of the enslaved.

Gradually, non-Dutch researchers gained influence, and scholars from outside the field of history, such as anthropologists, began to study the history of slavery. To a great extent, it was non-Dutch scholars who initiated the research into slavery in Indonesia and the Cape Colony in South Africa. The study of slave resistance and marronage in Suriname also received a significant boost from international scholarship and anthropology. One of the changes this brought about was that historians now traveled to the *locus delicti*, the countries where the crimes against humanity had occurred. Another change was that some scholars of color entered the field of historical research and began focusing on the topic of slavery, a trend resulting partly from immigration to the Netherlands.

All of these shifts culminated in the recognition of slave resistance and revolt as an important new theme that highlights the agency of the enslaved. This did not replace the more traditional approach to research through the study of the VOC and WIC, but it did make room for new perspectives. The new researchers abandoned the colonial perspective and

stepped into the historical arena of the (former) colonies to study slavery from there. Archives were increasingly critically examined and read against the grain. Moreover, from the 1990s onwards, the search for new, non-colonial sources took off as researchers drew knowledge from oral history, musical culture, and material culture, a process catalyzed by anthropologists and historians of color.

At the same time, historiography continued to emancipate itself by putting culture—particularly folk culture and popular culture—front and center. Concepts such as sense-making, representation, creolization, and so on became key methodological concepts in historical research and also made their way into the historiography of slavery. Purely descriptive history, which certainly has its biases, has given way to a more analytical and critical approach. This process is still ongoing and has gained momentum from the movement to decolonize academia. This movement entails not only a critical stance toward the colonial dimensions, perspectives, and assumptions still present in the current narrative about slavery, but also questions the research methods used and the researchers themselves. The new history of slavery is not just about what happened up until the abolition in 1863/1873, but also about the processes, legacies, and repercussions resulting from that history that are still felt today, both in the colonized societies and in the Netherlands. Researchers and organizations of color play a key role in these changes.

Contemporary research on Dutch slavery, which allows for cultural and decolonial research methods, is still primarily focused on Suriname. The historiography of Dutch slavery in Asia still mainly deals with social and economic history. Although enslaved individuals are part of the picture, their culture is not (yet) the focal point.

A recent development is this history's "homecoming," i.e., a reckoning with slavery in the Netherlands itself. This started in the early twenty-first century with the creation of the National Slavery Monument and with various exhibitions and audiovisual productions in which historians played a part. The homecoming gained momentum with studies that resulted in the 2013–2014 Mapping Slavery project, which identifies the links between specific locations in the Netherlands and slavery. Since 2018, several city and provincial government bodies have decided to investigate their ties to slavery and colonialism. Within just a few years, these efforts have yielded several new, accessibly written books about the complicity of the Netherlands as a whole in slavery, raising questions about its continued impact on

the present. In short, both the research and the researchers are becoming more diverse.

It is therefore important to begin a large-scale study of the culture of slavery in the Indian Ocean, including South Africa, and its impact both there and in the Netherlands. Moreover, it is time to conduct a large-scale study into the impact of the Dutch slave trade in West Africa. In addition, Dutch funds should be used to support research and researchers in the former Caribbean and South American colonies, especially in the geographical areas about whose history little is known.

## Dutch Government

Several government ministries have been involved, in one way or another, in efforts to explore the history of Dutch complicity in slavery. Their pace, choice of words, and engagement have varied. At the national level, this includes the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (OCW), a heterogeneous entity that deals with education, research, heritage, and monuments related to this topic; the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW), which is responsible for the Dutch implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent;<sup>1</sup> the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK), which initiated research into this topic and is often reminded of the history of slavery in the Caribbean Islands when dealing with ties within the Dutch kingdom; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BuZa), which established an Anton de Kom Chair with the University of Suriname and the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam and was involved in the Durban Declaration in 2001, where Roger van Boxtel, then Minister for Major Cities and Integration Policy, expressed “deep remorse about the enslavement and slave trade” on behalf of the Netherlands.

Various ministries were also involved in the Elmina Heritage Project in and around the city of Elmina in present-day Ghana, the former WIC headquarters of the Dutch slave trade. The Dutch government wanted to show its responsibility for the shared past by helping to restore the slave fort and parts of the surrounding city. It was at the start of this project in 2002 that then Crown Prince Willem-Alexander, speaking on behalf of the Dutch government, said: “We now look back on that dark era of human relations with remorse and remember the victims of that inhuman trade.”



On December 19, 2022, at the National Archives, Prime Minister Mark Rutte offered an official apology for slavery.

Until recently, government at the provincial level paid little attention to the history of slavery. This is not entirely surprising given Dutch provincial administration's relatively limited scope, which does not include education and only rarely touches upon cultural heritage. However, an increasing number of provinces are currently reflecting on how to deal with the slavery issue, and South Holland has already started research into its role in the history of slavery and colonialism. The province of North Holland had previously commissioned two exhibitions and a research publication and formally apologized for slavery in 2022. The States Provincial of Holland (now divided into North and South Holland) was found to have had direct ties to, and investments in, slavery.

Developments are more rapid at the municipal level, where we see a flurry of activity among the 344 cities and towns in the Netherlands. The four largest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague) have instituted active policies regarding the history of slavery and have made formal apologies. Many other municipalities, including Middelburg, Arnhem, Haarlem, Gouda, Groningen, Tilburg, Nijmegen, Dordrecht, Delft, and Hoorn have taken steps including conducting their own research, fa-

cilitating annual Keti Koti celebrations and similar events, and initiating discussions on removing controversial monuments and changing street names.

Altogether, government at all levels determines to a great extent whether there is space for recognizing, commemorating, and processing the history of slavery and dealing with its present-day repercussions. For example, any cultural or cultural heritage institution that has links to the history of slavery or wants to highlight these links, is to some degree dependent on the various levels of government for their funding. The collections of national museums are the direct property of the state. Also noteworthy is the societal initiative to establish a national Trans-Atlantic Slavery Museum. This plan has been adopted by the municipality of Amsterdam and embraced by the national government. The opening of the National Slavery Museum in the former port of Amsterdam is expected around 2030.

Meanwhile, the national government has come to realize that there is also a history of Dutch slavery in the Indian Ocean and Indonesian archipelago and has commissioned research on this.

## Afterlives

Very little fundamental research has been done on the impact or afterlives of slavery in contemporary Dutch society. Nevertheless, there are a few elements that consistently come up in the debate on (Atlantic) slavery and that can be used to create an operational definition of “afterlives” or “repercussions”:

1. During and after slavery and colonialism, a cultural archive took shape among—or to put it differently, a mental legacy was produced by—white Dutch people and descendants of the enslaved, that created a culture in which these groups internalized feelings of assumed superiority and assumed inferiority, respectively.<sup>2</sup>
2. As a consequence, there is anti-Black racism in all layers of Dutch society, as part of, but not synonymous with institutional racism.
3. The descendants of enslaved individuals may experience intergenerational trauma that impedes (self-)development. Following the American example, this is also referred to as Post-Traumatic Slavery Syndrome, a psychological/psychiatric disorder acquired during slavery and thereafter.

What constitutes “afterlives” can also be derived from the ten-point plan formulated by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in 2013.

They demanded that the former slave nations in Europe offer: 1) full formal apologies; 2) repatriation to Africa if desired; 3) an Indigenous Peoples Development Program; 4) assistance with the establishment of cultural institutions to educate the inhabitants of the Caribbean on crimes against humanity committed by Europeans; 5) assistance in alleviating the African-descended population’s public health crisis; 6) assistance with the eradication of illiteracy; 7) assistance with an African knowledge program; 8) assistance with psychological rehabilitation; 9) technology transfer and sharing of scientific knowledge; 10) debt cancelation.<sup>3</sup>

In January 2016, the CARICOM chairman approached then Prime Minister Rutte with the ten-point plan and asked what the Netherlands intended to do about it. Almost a year later, the prime minister responded with a list of activities, including (support for) the annual Keti Koti commemoration, the Black Achievement Month, a website, and an essay competition for children. In his letter, he acknowledged the concerns and deep feelings of the Caribbean countries, including the territories of the Dutch kingdom, about the impact of slavery. The prime minister expressed a need for his country to do everything it could to ensure that the horrors of slavery are not forgotten or repeated. Therefore, he stressed, the Netherlands would need to focus on building a shared future and seek ways to cooperate and continue a dialogue with the Caribbean countries through CARICOM.

However hopeful the initiatives and intentions expressed by the prime minister might seem, they fall far short of the profound and structural changes demanded by CARICOM. If the prime minister’s initiatives do not explicitly acknowledge the links between slavery in the past and contemporary anti-Black racism, they will prove to have been hollow words. At the same time, however, it is noteworthy that the Netherlands is one of the few European countries to have adopted the United Nations’ Decade for People of African Descent.

Not everyone likes the term “repercussions.” Some descendants prefer to speak of the “legacies” of slavery. They emphasize their ancestors’ resilience, their ability to survive and struggle for freedom, as well as the cultural and socioeconomic contributions that they have made to the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> Among the legacies of slavery are the Afro-cultures that evolved, comprising languages, spirituality, music, a system of norms and values, and more, which are increasingly expressed and visible, in the Netherlands and else-



where. Sometimes, these cultures rise to prominence spontaneously, as in the case of the strong influence of Sranan Tongo and Papiamentu—the former creole languages from Suriname and some of the Caribbean Islands—on contemporary Dutch slang.

“Black achievers” are a source of pride in Dutch society, but the prevailing feeling is that Afro-Dutch people are still underrepresented in many sectors. The only places where this group is substantially and visibly represented are in the national and international arenas of sports and entertainment. This is a typical imbalance in many former slave-holding nations, incidentally. All of this leads me to recommend that encouragement and support be given to large-scale, fundamental research into slavery’s legacies and repercussions that are still affecting people today.

## Slavery and the Dutch Government

It is by now undeniable that the Dutch authorities at all levels have been complicit in, and have benefited and profited from, slavery and the slave trade. However, this has only recently dawned on the authorities, and their subsequent actions vary widely.

The Dutch government determines the content of the schools’ curricula by specifying the learning outcomes everyone must achieve by the end of primary and secondary school. It does so by setting core objectives in primary education and final attainment targets in secondary education (see Chapter 3 by Tom van der Geugten). Since 2006, these have also been reflected in the Dutch Canon, another national government initiative. This provides a guideline for teachers, especially in history and citizenship education. Logically, textbook publishers follow suit and also focus on the canon, with varying results. The government does not monitor how teachers use these textbooks in the classroom. In terms of academic research, it is not just the universities that determine the topics and direction of research. These are also influenced by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), both of which are largely government-funded. They develop many of the major research programs in the Netherlands. So far, they have not initiated a comprehensive, multidisciplinary research program on Dutch slavery and its afterlives. However, they have subsidized various substudies or subprograms, such as *Church and Slavery in the Dutch Empire: History, Theology and Heritage*, a recent NWO project.



On Ketikoti day in 2021, people demanded apologies from King Willem-Alexander.

Following a campaign by the (Afro-)Dutch community, the Dutch Parliament instructed the government in 1998/1999 to study the options for a national slavery monument and to possibly erect such a monument. This resolution in parliament came during the second cabinet led by Prime Minister Wim Kok (1998–2002), a coalition of Social Democrats and two Liberal parties, when there was clearly political support for this initiative. With the support of several ministers, the Prince Claus Fund (an NGO supporting arts and culture in countries where cultural expression is under pressure), set about publishing two volumes of essays on the topic of how best to commemorate slavery, written by various national and international white and Black stakeholders. Significantly, this collection of essays was presented to the government in the then freshly renovated Second Chamber of the Dutch Parliament.<sup>5</sup>

The government had made it clear that it only wanted to discuss the erection of a monument with a single representative stakeholder party. Therefore, almost all advocates had united in one platform. Apparently, the government was wary of its own policy and tried to establish a buffer between this platform and itself by creating a group of “ambassadors” that was made up in large part of Dutch celebrities known to hold moderate political views. Although many stakeholders, and the platform in particu-

lar, grew suspicious of the government's motives following the creation of this unexpected additional buffer, the process in which they engaged did lead to the dedication of the Dutch National Slavery Monument in Amsterdam's Oosterpark in 2002. The following year saw the opening of the monument's dynamic dimension, the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and Its Legacy (NiNsee).

Every year on July 1, the National Slavery Monument hosts the commemoration of Ketikoti, the day in 1863 on which the Netherlands abolished slavery in the Atlantic region. Government representatives attend the ceremony annually and express their grief and regret about slavery. It took until December 19, 2022, however—rather than July 1, Ketikoti day—for the prime minister to offer apologies for slavery on behalf of the state and to promise that the state's engagement on this issue would not end with these apologies. The term “afterlives” was repeatedly mentioned in connection with the apologies, which hopefully will lead to the establishment of a concrete program to address these afterlives. Even after Minister Van Boxtel expressed “deep remorse” at the UN Racism Conference in Durban in 2001, it took all of twenty-one years for the government to make real apologies. It is a slow process.

In 2012, ten years after NiNsee was established, the national government, due to budget cuts, pulled the financial plug on this institute. Many stakeholders saw this as another stab in the back and new evidence of the state's unreliability. Thanks to continued support from the municipal government of Amsterdam, NiNsee was able to survive. However, they did have to rehouse the institute, shut down the successful slavery exhibition that schools frequented, and lay off part of their staff.

Now, another decade later, the national government is co-funding NiNsee projects, employees are invited to advise the government, the national government co-finances Black Achievement Month, initially a NiNsee initiative, and the city of Amsterdam and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science are helping to pay for the establishment of a National Slavery Museum in Amsterdam. Again, this initiative originated in the stakeholder community, was adopted by the Amsterdam city council, and then found its way into the national coalition agreement. It seems that the government has now earmarked a substantial amount of money for the establishment of this museum. And apparently, there is also going to be a fund, initially of 200 million euros, intended in part for education. That is valuable, but reparation it is not.

Additionally, the Dutch government, through Prime Minister Rutte, has admitted to understanding that Black people may feel discriminated against by Zwarte Piet, the character in blackface who plays a prominent role in Saint Nicholas Day celebrations. This was a significant shift from the prime minister's earlier stance that Zwarte Piet is "simply black," a shift that had a lot to do with the wave of Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020. However, this change in attitude has not yet led to a ban on public parades featuring people in blackface dressed up as Zwarte Piet, or to an urgent appeal to municipal mayors not to receive Zwarte Piet figures in public gatherings.

In short, the attitude of "the" Dutch government toward "slavery"—to the extent that the government speaks with a single voice and that slavery can be seen as a single history—is mixed and diffuse, although there seems to be an increasing awareness of slavery's serious and continuing impact. Many people perceived the prime minister's carefully chosen words in the nation's apologies on December 19, 2022, and the stronger statement in which the Dutch king asked for "forgiveness" during the commemoration on July 1, 2023, as valuable and historic. Now, it will be essential to further promote and solidify this process of awareness raising, processing, restoration, and healing.

Clearly, such processes, resulting from the Dutch state's 250 years of active complicity in what is now recognized as a crime against humanity, followed by its 150-year-long active silence, cannot be settled in a short time. This may take decades, maybe even several generations. Every government initiative must therefore be geared toward, and guaranteed for, the long term. This will also foster trust. Short-term projects and one-time financial contributions do not resolve the structural inequalities that descendants of enslaved individuals experience in social, economic, cultural, medical, and other societal domains. Redressing these inequalities is a continuous process that must be continuously sustained.

## Notes

- 1 This Decade, proclaimed by the United Nations, calls on member states to take action against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and other types of intolerance (based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin) in order to protect and promote the fundamental rights and freedoms of people of African descent. The Decade focuses on three themes: recognition, justice, and development.
- 2 See Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Combined Academic Publishers, 2016) and Alex van Stipriaan, "Caribisch erfgoed in de Nederlandse Black Atlantic," *OSO. Tijdschrift voor Surinaamse taalkunde, letterkunde en geschiedenis* 35 (2016): 11–38.
- 3 CARICOM, "CARICOM Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice – CARICOM," CARICOM, July 10, 2020: [caricom.org/caricom-ten-point-plan-for-reparatory-justice](http://caricom.org/caricom-ten-point-plan-for-reparatory-justice).
- 4 Nationaal TransAtlantisch Slavernij-museum, *Met de kracht van de voorouders* (Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam, 2021).
- 5 Gert Oostindie, ed., *Het verleden onder ogen: Herdenking van de slavernij* (Amsterdam: Arena, 1999); Gert Oostindie, *Facing up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001).

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## Abstract

In 2021 and 2022, the mayors of the four biggest municipalities in the Netherlands—Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague—offered apologies for their cities' historical complicity in slavery. This chapter describes the developments that gave rise to these gestures: studies commissioned by the municipal authorities, preceded by the concerted efforts of local activists, politicians, and organizations. The pressure they applied set in motion a mostly reactive administrative process that resulted in apologies and the erection of monuments. This process has yet to run its course.

**Keywords:** apologies; recognition; local politics; local initiators; afterlives