Chapter

# 13. Languages and Literatures of the Former Dutch Colonies

*Michiel van Kempen*

## Colonial Babel in Brief

Walking around in Amsterdam in 2023, one overhears conversations in numerous European languages, as well as Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Persian, and Indian languages. A similar tower of Babel could be heard in the colonial centers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Batavia (present-day Jakarta), languages from all corners of the empire were spoken, along with Chinese, Tamil, Portuguese, and many other European tongues. In the same period, Paramaribo's streets rang out with the sounds of Dutch, French, German, English, Swedish, and "Negro-English." All major European languages could be heard on the quays of Saint Eustatius in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when the Windward Island known as "the Golden Rock" served as a free port and trading hub for colonial maritime nations. In the Leeward Islands, Spanish predominated, but Portuguese, French, and Dutch were also part of the linguistic palette.[1]

Language, like education, was an instrument of imperial domination. Language policy took on two radically different forms in a colonial context. When language policy was aimed at assimilation, the colonized peoples were expected to adopt the language and culture of the colonial elite as thoroughly as they could. However, sometimes language policy was geared toward preserving the diversity of languages and cultures as much as possible, which could stem either from respect for those cultures or from a strategy of divide and conquer. Both language policies existed in Dutch colonial history. The East Indies is typically seen as a region where the colonizers respected cultural diversity, while the West Indies is looked upon as

an area where a divide-and-conquer policy was the rule. In reality, however, the situation was far more complex, with both types of policy being pursued in different places at different times.

Essentially, the linguistic situation in all these far-flung colonial territories was characterized by only one constant: the idea that any local language was too simplistic to adequately express complex thoughts and ideas. Dutch—however marginal in some areas—was seen as the superior language, capable of elevating the people. Local languages were generally denigrated, if not banned outright. Surinamese and Antillean students were told to "Go wash their mouth out" if they spoke Sranan Tongo or Papiamentu on school grounds, a practice which persisted until well into the twentieth century. In the late nineteenth century, when the division between the Dutch and the colonized in the Dutch East Indies became sharper, the widely spoken Malay language was suddenly stigmatized as uncivilized, a label it had not previously been given.[2] Due to the lack of investment in the development of local languages (with the exception of the East Indies around 1900 during the Ethical Policy era, when linguistic purity was advocated for all languages), the linguistic situation almost always confirmed the status quo: Dutch remained a pillar of colonialism and a vehicle for conveying the idea of white superiority. At the same time, this situation also reinforced the strong sense of authenticity and uniqueness of the local languages, which persisted despite neglect and repression.

## Multilingualism in the Former Colonies

The presumed linguistic homogeneity of the colonial elite is questionable. To be sure, in government and the judiciary, the Dutch language played an important role, but in everyday life, multilingualism prevailed.

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the colonial elite in "the East" consisted of people of European and (to a lesser extent) non-European nationalities, and Asian languages were key in communication. Dutch barely played a role. Portuguese and Malay were the lingua francas between groups, classes, and islands. Asian language influences also crept into a Dutch variant known as Petjo, a creole language used in everyday interactions, which contained numerous grammatical and lexical elements borrowed from Malay and Indonesian-Chinese. In the twentieth century, Petjo was championed by writer Tjalie Robinson. The fact that Dutch never penetrated deeply into the Indonesians' psyche, serving only

as a veneer for administration and education, became clear after the 1950 revolution when Bahasa Indonesia rapidly replaced Dutch in every area of society.

In the Cape, creolization processes (mixing of cultures and languages) were complicated by the emergence of Afrikaans—a variant of Dutch—alongside English; these two languages became dominant among the white elite by around 1900. It should be noted that over time, 90 percent of Afrikaans speakers came to be the so-called "colored" people of the Cape. The Black and Colored populations used a range of local languages, but it was not until the late twentieth century that some of these languages gained official status.

In Suriname, entirely different processes unfolded. Sranan Tongo, a lingua franca based on West African languages, English, and Dutch, emerged in the slave depots in Africa, on the slave ships, and in the colony. In the eighteenth century, the influence of Jewish planters in plantation society grew, reflected in the use of Portuguese, German, French, and, to a lesser extent, Yiddish in addition to Dutch. Dutch was the language of a minority of Dutch planters, the Church, and the law, but communication with the slave population was in "Negro-English," or Sranan Tongo as it is known today. By the time slavery was formally abolished in 1863, two-thirds of all plantations belonged to people of mixed descent and "Negro-English" was also spoken in elite circles. When compulsory education was introduced in 1876, Sranan Tongo did not get much recognition. It was disparagingly called "taki-taki." While twentieth-century Surinamese schoolchildren were told to go and wash their mouths out with soap for speaking it, the literature in Sranan Tongo flourished in the 1950s and 1960s. "The poets made Surinamese independence," wrote Surinamese lawyer and writer Hugo Pos.[3] A verse by one of those poets, Johanna Schouten-Elsenhout—about the strength of women—was quoted by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton in a 1999 speech.

In Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao, the situation was completely different: initially, the upper crust of society used mainly Portuguese and Spanish, but from fairly early on, Papiamentu took a firm hold as a spoken language and from the late nineteenth century as a written language as well. By the twentieth century, the majority of Curaçaoans, Arubans, and Bonaireans, regardless of their social status, called Papiamentu their mother tongue; any other language would have been unthinkable. In the interbellum, an attempt was made in Curaçao to inject as much Dutch as possible into

daily life, language use, and culture. But precisely during this period of *Hollandisashon*, a pride in Papiamentu developed, culminating in the work of Curaçao's still unrivaled greatest writer: Pierre Lauffer. Repression can backfire.

## The Situation in 2023

Despite all the variability, the current linguistic situation in all former Dutch colonies has one common denominator: it is in many respects the product of centuries of colonialism. This not only holds true for Indonesia, which adopted a radically anti-colonial course after World War II, but also for Ceylon (Sri Lanka), South Africa, Suriname, and the Dutch Caribbean islands. The fact that the linguistic situation is the product of colonialism does not automatically mean that Dutch is still important; that is only the case in Suriname. What it does mean is that the languages of all these countries have been shaped by the colonial era, both in their interrelations—dominant or marginal, official language, lingua franca, or minority language—and through processes of creolization. In Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia has become the official language with many recognized major "group languages" spoken by tens of millions, such as Javanese. Dutch no longer plays any role there. Relics of *Indisch-Nederlands* can still be found in the literature of Dutch writers with Indonesian roots, such as Marion Bloem, Adriaan van Dis, Alfred Birney, and Otto de Kat.

South Africa granted official language status to no less than eleven languages in 1994, but even this was a simplified reflection of a much more complex cultural diversity that survived colonial times. Zulu and Xhosa are larger languages than Afrikaans, while English, as the fifth-largest language, trails behind the Northern Sotho language group. Tswana, Southern Sotho, Tsonga, Swazi, Venda, and Southern Ndebele complete the group of eleven. The lived experiences of brown South Africans in the Cape—which are shaped by colonialism, racism, and poverty—are articulated by young writers like Ronelda Kamfer, Nathan Trantraal, and Ashwin Arendse. Traces of colonial history can also be found in the English-language works of authors like André Brink, Dan Sleigh, Karel Schoeman, and more recently, Koleka Putuma, Yvette Abrahamse, and Rayda Jacobs.

In Suriname, Dutch is still the only official language, although it is spoken in a variant with its own vocabulary, pronunciation, and often also syntax:

Surinamese Dutch. Sranan Tongo serves as the lingua franca for all population groups, while Sarnami is the language spoken by the largest group, the Hindustanis, descendants of British-Indian contract laborers. The written variant of Sarnami only blossomed in the Dutch diaspora after Suriname's independence in 1975, particularly in The Hague, also known as "Bollywood on the North Sea." Suriname also has many other languages. The Maroons (descendants of escaped slaves) are now divided into six tribal communities, five of which have their own Maroon language, while one uses Sranan Tongo.

Surinamese artist Marcel Pinas makes use of Maroon culture in his work. This monument in Hoorn, erected in 2021, features symbols from the Afaka script, a unique early twentieth-century writing system that the Maroons used as a secret means of communication.

Additionally, outside the demographic center of Paramaribo, there are various indigenous languages like Carib, Trio, and Wayana, which continue to thrive far from the capital. Other languages include Surinamese-Javanese, two variants of Chinese, and Portuguese, which has been added to the linguistic palette in recent decades by Brazilian gold miners. The group lan-

guages used closest to the capital Paramaribo, such as Arawak and Javanese, are feeling the most pressure from urbanization and globalization processes: young people have already traded these languages in for Dutch, Sranan Tongo, and English. With the Maroons growing in every census and now forming the second-largest population group, it remains to be seen whether the status of Maroon languages like Ndyuka and Saramaccan will follow this demographic surge. The recently published *Album van de Caraïbische Poëzie* (2022) about Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean islands demonstrates the versatility of literature that stems from this multilingualism. It prominently features all folk languages, not only in old oral traditions but also in poetry, folk songs, rhymes, and contemporary rap and spoken word.

In Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao, Papiamentu (spelled *Papiamento* in Aruba) has a strong position among all segments of the population. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it was recognized as an official language that can also be used within the legal system, politics, and education. However, this official status simply confirmed a long-existing de facto situation. Dutch is still frequently used—especially in formal situations—but is not very popular. Spanish had already gained a strong foothold in Aruba due to the influx of people from other islands, but now English is becoming more prevalent due to the influence of American tourists. The islands of Saba, Saint Martin, and Saint Eustatius have been English-speaking for a long time, with Dutch having a marginal, almost exclusively formal role there. The fact that political decisions in The Hague can still have a big impact on the linguistic situation in the islands is most evident from what happened after the Dutch government declared Bonaire a special municipality of the Netherlands on October 10, 2010. This decision was followed by a large influx of Dutch citizens in Bonaire. As a result, the Dutch language is currently gaining in importance in Bonaire, leaving many Bonaireans feeling discontented and powerless.

## The State of Research

Over the last thirty to forty years, linguistic research into the Dutch colonies has surged. In Suriname, studies on creole languages, which had been shaped over centuries by the great isolation of certain population groups, have yielded interesting linguistic insights. On the islands, Papiamentu was studied as a vehicle of a developing national identity. Partly based on these

studies, the authorities in the Dutch Caribbean islands formulated a new language policy. Two framework agreements with the *Taalunie* [Dutch Language Union—an international regulatory institution that governs issues regarding the Dutch language, including spelling reforms] were drawn up. One agreement was meant to promote Dutch, which is considered important because it is the kingdom's administrative language and because Dutch fluency can improve students' future prospects. The other was aimed at promoting Papiamentu. However, due to a lack of resources and expertise, the important recommendation to promote Papiamentu has not been implemented.

Literature studies have also grown significantly, with numerous literary histories emphasizing the decolonizing power of the colonies' own literatures. Wim Rutgers wrote about the Netherlands Antilles (1996), Michiel van Kempen about Suriname (2003), and Henry Habibe (2014) about Aruba. Various studies explored the Dutch East Indies literature (Dutch-language literature of colonial and postcolonial Indonesia), and Alfred Birney provided a unique counterpoint with his selection of texts in the monumental *Oost-Indische inkt: 400 jaar Indië in de Nederlandse letteren* [Indian Ink: 400 Years of the East Indies in Dutch Literature] (1998) and his *Yournael of Cyberney* (2001). The re-reading of Dutch East Indies literature from a postcolonial perspective was tested in twenty-six essays in *De Postkoloniale Spiegel* [The Postcolonial Mirror] (2021), edited by Rick Honings, Coen van 't Veer, and Jacqueline Bel. Other studies have focused on literature from specific periods, like Jan Voorhoeve's work on Dutch colonial literature of Suriname, Wim Rutgers' research on the colonial era in Curaçao, or Adrienne Zuiderweg's studies on VOC literature in Batavia. There are also histories that highlight literature in one particular language in the colonies. An impressive series of anthologies has been published, documenting texts from the earliest colonial literature to the present day. These publications hold particular significance for younger generations exploring their cultural roots.[4]

## Recommendations for Further Research[5]

Since the languages of the former colonies have been shaped and influenced by centuries of colonialism, it follows that the Netherlands has a postcolonial co-responsibility for the great variety of languages and not just for Dutch, and should support research into those languages and litera-

tures. Let us first establish that there is still too little research on counter narratives. From the earliest attempts at colonization, there has always been a history of resistance and obstruction, and there have always been counter narratives to the mainstream colonial voices, often in languages other than Dutch. There is a handful of studies on how the colonized have "written back," such as René Rosalia's research on the repression of the dance, music, and poetry genre known as *tambú* in Curaçao and Rose Mary Allen's study on the importance of songs and proverbs among Afro-Curaçaoans.[6] However, there is still a disproportionate amount of research conducted by Dutch researchers compared to researchers from the former colonies.

There is an odd paradox in Dutch academia. On the one hand, Dutch universities show a great theoretical openness to the perspective of the Other and an appreciation of the added value of multiperspectivity. On the other hand, Dutch academics show little understanding for the enormous practical barriers faced by researchers in the former colonies, and have scant regard for types of research that do not align with the Dutch academic tradition (e.g., a more regional focus, inclusion of oral traditions, a less hierarchical valuation of various types of text). Dutch universities have created relatively few research chairs focused on colonial and postcolonial cultures, literatures, and history. In this regard they compare unfavorably to American universities, for instance, which have a large number of Black Studies chairs. Postcolonial readings of the literatures of the former colonies are still in their infancy in the Netherlands. Three largely overlooked areas that deserve extra resources are:

1. Processes of cultural marginalization and inclusion of colonized population groups; within this, much research still needs to be conducted on oral literatures, their significance for identity preservation and colonial resistance, and their function within national literatures;
2. There has been only sporadic research on the interactions between different colonies and almost no comparative research on language policies, forms of creolization, and the development of the literary enterprise. A significant area of focus here is the influence of West African languages on koinés, pidgins, and creole languages of the Caribbean, which obviously requires collaboration with African native speakers;

3. Research by the inhabitants of the former colonies on colonial literature in Dutch, in order to gain a different perspective on Dutch East Indies, Dutch African, and Dutch Caribbean literature, has never been conducted. Research into missionary literature as a colonial tool is still in its infancy.

The Dutch, for their part, have done little to investigate ideas born from colonial relationships and slavery, such as prejudices, misjudgments, and the inability to see the other side of the coin. Suriname and the Caribbean Islands have been researching the continued impact of Dutch colonial slavery on language and literature since the 1950s. This has resulted in many reports full of recommendations, but the implementation of these has often been thwarted by obstacles such as changing policies, lack of resources and expertise, and poor political coordination with The Hague. The Dutch are also not very supportive of innovative language policies in the Dutch Caribbean islands. It is high time to really implement the framework agreements already signed by the countries in the kingdom. This would signal real recognition of the highest cultural asset on the islands: Papiamentu as the commonly spoken language of the islands.

Understanding what impact colonialism and slavery have had on the linguistic situation and the often precarious situation of folk languages (creoles) is important. Acknowledging that fact would be a good starting point for finally supporting language policies that are often well-formulated on paper but rarely put into practice, mainly due to a lack of structural resources. In terms of literary studies, much more research is needed on the effect of literature in dominant languages (Dutch, English, Afrikaans) and in other languages on decolonization and nation-building. Perhaps collaboration between researchers of different nationalities and the prioritization of research into non-dominant languages and literatures is more important for the formerly colonized areas than for the Netherlands. But that should never be an argument for the Netherlands not to actively initiate such collaboration. Let this be part of the Netherlands' "debt of honor."

## Notes

1 In this chapter, the term "Leeward Islands" refers to the Dutch Antillean collective name for Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao (*Benedenwindse eilanden)*. The Dutch Antillean distinction between *Bovenwindse eilanden* and *Benedenwindse eilanden* is generally translated as Windward and Leeward Islands, but does not coincide with the English-language distinction that goes by the same name.

2 Henk Maier, "Nederlands-Indië en het Maleis," in *Koloniale taalpolitiek in Oost en West: Nederlands-Indië, Suriname, Nederlandse Antillen en Aruba*, ed. Kees Groeneboer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1997), 13–54.

3 Michiel van Kempen, *Surinaamse schrijvers en dichters* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1989), 80.

4 Rick Honings, Coen van 't Veer, and Jacqueline Bel, eds., *De postkoloniale spiegel: De Nederlands-Indische letteren herlezen* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2021); Jan Voorhoeve and Ursy M. Lichtveld, eds., *Suriname: Spiegel der vaderlandse kooplieden* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980); Wim Rutgers, *Het nulde hoofdstuk van de Antilliaanse literatuur: Koloniale poëzie in de Curaçaosche Courant* (Oranjestad: Charuba, 1988); Adrienne Zuiderweg, "Batavia berijmd: Een geschiedenis van de Compagniesliteratuur en een overzicht van de Compagniesdichters in Batavia" (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2017).

5 I would like to thank the following people for their input for this paragraph: Jeroen Dewulf PhD (Berkeley), Liesbeth Echteld PhD (Curaçao), Rick Honings PhD (Leiden), Eric Mijts PhD (Aruba), Hilde Neus MA (Paramaribo), Joyce Pereira PhD (Aruba), Olf Praamstra PhD (Leiden), Wim Rutgers PhD (Aruba), Ronnie Severing PhD (Curaçao), Margriet van der Waal PhD (Amsterdam/Groningen), and Pam Zuurbier PhD (Paramaribo). Els van Diggele MA edited the entire text.

6 Richard Price and Sally Price, *Two evenings in Saramaka.* (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); René V. Rosalia, *Tambú: De legale en kerkelijke repressie van Afro-Curaçaose volksuitingen* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1997); Rose Mary Allen, *Di ki manera? A Social History of Afro-Curaçaoans, 1863–1917* (Amsterdam: SWP, 2007).

Caroline Drieënhuizen

# Research Method: Slavery and Visual Sources

At first glance, slavery seems almost absent from drawings, watercolors, prints, book illustrations, maps, and oil paintings. This apparent omission is remarkable, to put it mildly, because slavery was ubiquitous and, in all its violence, powerfully evocative. And yet, the early modern and nineteenth-century images of Surinamese sugar cane plantations, Indonesian households, and cityscapes from both colonies—featuring white mansions, huts, and palm trees—look positively idyllic to the casual viewer. Appearances are deceptive, however. To see the slavery, we need to look more closely, more broadly, and above all differently.

Images of the colonies are not representations of a historical reality, but derivatives of that reality. Most visual sources are the product of the mainly male, white, dominant gaze in a hegemonic colonial regime. It is through that gaze, infused with (colonial) ideas, beliefs, and desires, that we now look at the visualizations of the colonial world. These may give us some information about the living conditions and traditions of that time, but what they mainly show us is how the colonizer looked at slavery, how social class distinctions were imposed in a colonial context, and how the world was organized. Paradoxically, they tell us less about the people and the world they purport to represent. Therefore, we should be aware of our own positionality and the blind spots which go along with it. Our way of seeing is determined by a certain historical, geographical, cultural, and social (meaning class, skin color, and gender) position.

Elmer Kolfin, the first art historian to exhaustively research the imagery of slavery in Suriname, pointed out that images of the enslaved are the product of Western views of slavery and thus reinforce those views in our perceptions. Compared to Suriname, where there was an active abolitionist

debate in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was much less discussion of slavery in Asia. Images of slavery in Asia were produced, but the subject of slavery seemed less present there. Moreover, Dutch abolitionists did not make use of images of enslaved Asians. In fact, these images were used to sway public opinion in the opposite direction; just like in Suriname, the enslaved in Indonesia were turned into caricatures in ethnographic albums about the peoples of different countries, a genre that was wildly popular in the mid-nineteenth century. In some of those albums filled with representations of the various social groups in the colonies, an archetype called "the female slave" was depicted to defend the existence and continuation of slavery in Indonesia. This is how the perception of the Dutch colonies in Asia with their supposedly "mild" domestic slavery, was constructed—a perception that still exists to this day, incidentally.

To recognize Asian slavery in these images, you need to be aware of the history of slavery in Asia. If you look at these images with an understanding of the intentions and colonial ideology behind their creation, you can see that the enslaved in Asia have been portrayed numerous times. They appear as decorative elements in the margin of early modern maps of the colonies, in colonial domestic scenes, and standing in the shadows of prominent figures portrayed in early modern oil paintings. It is far less common to see the enslaved depicted as the central figure in an image, and only rarely do we learn their names.

In his 1997 book *Van de slavenzweep & de muze* [About the Slave Whip and the Muse], Kolfin compiled images of the enslaved in Suriname. He persuasively shows that there were three phases in the Dutch portrayals of slavery. In the seventeenth century, he notes, the enslaved were portrayed only in a supporting role in art. They were depicted on maps and in books as part of colonial landscapes and industrial scenes. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, they were more frequently depicted as victims, by showing them undergoing cruel punishments, for instance, or by portraying them as representatives of a social group in Suriname, such as "the slave." Only in the course of the nineteenth century, Kolfin argues, were slaves portrayed as humans, as individuals, and were they positioned as the autonomous subject of the artwork and not merely as part of a landscape or an illustration of a text. Although it is more than a quarter century old, Kolfin's work is still considered the standard work on the depiction of slavery in Suriname. To my knowledge, no research has been done into illustrations of the enslaved in the Dutch Caribbean colonies. Research into

the imagery of slavery in the Asian colonies is gaining momentum. In 2021, the first book on this topic was published: *Re-visualizing Slavery: Visual Sources about Slavery in Asia.*[1]

If we look at images of slavery with an eye to the power relations, social differences, and representation found in this imagery, we can begin to identify the presence and character of slavery in both the Atlantic and Asian worlds. What these images of slavery and the enslaved mainly reveal, however, is the historical roots of Dutch perceptions and ideas about slavery and the enslaved, both of which continue to have an impact to this day. Research into this worldview and perception should therefore take into account not only the visual aspects of such images, but also their social aspects and effects. Why was a given image created? For whom was it created? And how was a given illustration disseminated and connoted over the course of time? To name just one example, Kolfin concluded in 1997 that sexuality and slavery frequently coincide in illustrations, but to this day, there is no thorough study of how and why these images were produced. Traditional art historical research, which pays attention to artistic styles, schools, and development in a broader international context, might generate some valuable insights. In short, by looking at images of the enslaved and their social circumstances with a critical eye, we can discover a treasure trove of new and important information.

## *Note*

1 Nancy Jouwe, Wim Manuhutu, Matthias van Rossum and Merve Tosun, eds., *Re-visualizing Slavery: Visual Sources About Slavery in Asia* (Edam, LM Publishers, 2021).

## Abstract

For centuries, the world order and groups within it have been visualized hierarchically in art and artifacts. In the Netherlands, this happened from the founding of the colonial trading companies in the early seventeenth century until well after slavery was abolished in 1863. While objects from the colonized world were placed in ethnographic museums, the Rijksmuseum and its collection are primarily visual carriers of ideas about Dutch power and wealth. Yet, in those ideas, one can also discern colonial constructs and the role of ethnicity. This chapter explores what art and artifacts tell us about the ideas of the colonial elites that commissioned them and about the experiences of Black individuals in the Netherlands.

***Keywords:*** art; colonialism; slavery; the Netherlands; Rijksmuseum