



Resisting Slavery

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Resisting slavery

Slavery has existed since ancient times in all kinds of cultures. From the 15th century, Europeans started buying people in Africa for their plantations in North, South and Central America. These people were transported across oceans, sold, branded, forcibly employed and often brutally mistreated. In this transatlantic slave trade - lasting some 350 years - an estimated 12 million people were traded as commodities.

The Dutch participated fully from the late 16th century, although slavery was banned in the Netherlands itself. Under the Dutch flag, more than 600,000 Africans were shipped across the Atlantic to colonies in North, Central and South America. In Asia, the Netherlands trafficked between 660,000 and 1.1 million people to build forts or work in households or on plantations.

There has always been opposition to slavery. Primarily by enslaved people themselves: they sabotaged, delayed or refused work, fled and rebelled together.

In the Netherlands, little was spoken or written about slavery in the colonies for a long time. But there was occasional public criticism in sermons, books and plays. A few major slave revolts penetrated the Netherlands and influenced public opinion. From the 19th century, anti-slavery movements emerged, in which many women and young people were active.

Resistance to slavery was everywhere, including the colonies in Asia. This first exhibition of the National Slavery Museum in development, created together with the Resistance Museum, is about resistance to transatlantic slavery. How did enslaved people revolt and who in the Netherlands fought to abolish slavery?

Images:

Life on Surinamese plantations, after drawings by plantation owner Théodore Bray, 1840-1850: Making music, Women on the plantation, Funeral, Harvesting sugar cane, Plantation houses

Display case

Sales survey, Suriname, 1683.

For one enslaved person, the seller received 3000 pounds of sugar.

John Gabriël Stedman, *Narrative, of a five years' expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 1796.

From 1772, Scottish-Dutch Gabriel Stedman fought as a soldier in Suriname against Boni's Marroon group, which, together with among others Jolicoeur and Baron, attacked plantations from the interior, freeing enslaved people and carrying weapons.

Stedman fell in love with the enslaved woman Joanna, and tried to buy her freedom, which failed. Back in Europe, he published this book denouncing brutal slavery

Marten Douwes Teenstra, *The Negro slaves in the colony of Suriname and the expansion of Christianity among the gentile population*, 1842.

Portraits of the Maroons Cojo, Mentor and Present who set a fire in Paramaribo in 1832. Almost fifty wooden houses burnt down. A month later, they were arrested. They confessed and were burned alive.

September 1789, thirty to forty enslaved people tried to take over a plantation in the Dutch colony of Demerara and then conquer the colony. The revolt failed. 'Raad Fiscaal' (Public Prosecutor) Petrus Gerardus Duker wrote about this in this letter : *"In my last [letter] I briefly reported that in this colony a revolt of the Negroes had taken place and was fortunately smothered..."* Gerardus helped track down the insurgents, and also described the cruel punishments.

Authorisation of an insurer from 1736, stating that the enslaved people on the ship *La Valeur* on the coast of Guinea in Africa, *"collectively revolted"*. The crew immediately reached for their weapons *"...and afterwards several slaves jumped into the sea, some of them drowned and were killed & eaten by the sharks."*

Rebellions

Long before the rise of anti-slavery movements, enslaved people resisted slavery. There are hundreds of examples of resistance on slave ships, but little is known about them. And enslaved people escaped from the plantations. These 'Maroons' lived in the inlands where they built their own life in freedom. This was tough and uncertain, as they owned virtually nothing and soldiers hunted them down. Sometimes Maroons plundered plantations.

There are small and some large rebellions on the plantations, in resistance to the horrific living conditions. News of uprisings spread like wildfire through the slave communities, but in Europe only major uprisings reached the news.

Tula: "We desire our freedom"

"*My slaves refuse to serve*", Caspar van Uijtrecht wrote to the governor of Curaçao in 1795. Some fifty enslaved people from the Kenepa plantation demanded freedom. Led by Tula, they moved towards the capital city Willemstad. Two thousand people from other plantations joined them; plantation owners fled.

The rebels made camp at Porto Mari plantation and repelled an attack by the colonial army there. The colonial administration sent a priest to negotiate. Tula was inspired by a major slave rebellion in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) led by Toussaint Louverture. There, they had succeeded in forcing the abolition of slavery. Since the Netherlands was occupied by France at this time, Tula argued, "*The French Negroes have gained their freedom, Holland has been taken by the French, then we must be free here too.*" He also appealed to Christian faith: "*Sir Pater, do not all men come from a father Adam and Eve (...). Once I was tied up (...) blood gushed out of my mouth, I threw myself on my knees and cried out to God: (...) Is it Your will that we should be mistreated like this? Ah Father one takes more care of a beast...(...). We desire nothing but our freedom.*"

Reasonable arguments did not help. The governor of Curaçao had the rebellion put down. Dozens of insurgents were executed on the spot. Others, including Tula, were publicly tortured and killed in the following weeks.

Hereafter, plantation owners were ordered by the Dutch authorities in Curaçao to treat their slaves better from now on.

Quote

'We are very mistreated...'

Tula, leader of slave revolt Curaçao, 1795

Image:

Toussaint Louverture

Negotiating for freedom

On a timber plantation by the Tempati River in Suriname, enslaved people revolted in 1757 when their owner wanted to forcibly transfer them to a sugar plantation. After a 12-hour battle, the rebels defeated the colonial army. Enslaved people from other plantations joined in and the 'Tempati Rebellion' became Suriname's largest slave rebellion. In response, the colonial administration burned down the area. Four hundred insurgents withdrew, joining a group of Maroons: the Okanisi (Aukaners). A years-long battle with the colonial army ensued. One of the insurgents was Boston Band, who had been brought from Jamaica to Suriname around 1750. He could read and write. Boston knew that both sides did not want an endless war. When raiding plantations, he left letters calling for peace. This is how negotiations got started.

In 1760, peace was achieved. The Okanisi (Aukaners) got their freedom, plus weapons, tools and food, so they no longer had to plunder. In exchange, they had to help fight other Maroon groups and hand over escaped enslaved people. Later, the colonial administration also made peace with other Maroon groups.

Image:

Map of the expedition against the insurgents in Tempati

Mass rebellion

Berbice, part of present-day Guyana, was a Dutch colony in the 17th and 18th century. In 1760, 350 Europeans lived there, keeping 4,000 enslaved Africans down by a reign of terror. Led by the young Cuffy, a major rebellion was organised in 1763. With captured weapons, more and more insurgents moved from plantation to plantation. Europeans fled or were killed. After taking the capital, Cuffy proclaimed himself governor of Berbice.

He wrote to the Dutch governor that the insurgents *"do not seek war"*. He proposed to divide the country and demanded freedom for the insurgents. He also wrote: *"The Negroes Your Excellency has on his ships - they can remain slaves."*

The Dutch governor did not respond. Cuffy continued to send letters, to the frustration of insurgents who wanted to continue fighting. The following of this group grew. Cuffy committed suicide, disillusioned.

A Dutch fleet with some 6,000 soldiers arrived at Berbice. In bloody battles, more than 1,800 insurgents were killed. In the summer of 1764, the colony was recaptured by the Dutch. As punishment, 119 rebels were horribly tortured and murdered. An eyewitness account was published in the Netherlands, causing disgust at the violence and admiration for the courage of the rebels.

Rebellion at sea

In 1784, the ship *The Neptune* left the Dutch town Zierikzee, via Amsterdam, for Africa. Along the African west coast, the captain bought a total of about two hundred people from African human traffickers.

The journey across the Atlantic and past the African coast took longer than planned, up to a year and a half. The enslaved people were trapped in the hold, for months and months, in terrible conditions. One evening, the captain went ashore. The prisoners managed to break free from their chains. They revolted! A crew member wrote: "*...meanwhile, some of the slaves had broken away the bulkheads and taken possession of the powder room and guns.*" After a fight with the crew, the insurgents took over the ship.

News of the rebellion spread along the coast; all kinds of ships sailed towards *The Neptune*. A fierce battle ensued. Then the ship exploded. About 400 were killed. A few insurgents survived. They were recaptured and put up for sale.

Slave rebellions against Dutch transatlantic slavery

This list is incomplete. There is still much research to be done on resistance to slavery. Only one of the Maroon groups is highlighted here.

Ca. 1690-1750

'Kaásimarrons' in Suriname, led by Kaási Pumbu until 1736, attacked plantations to plunder and free enslaved people. Thereafter, other Maroon troops took over the battle.

1716

On Curaçao, some 80 enslaved people revolted. The rebellion was put down, but it remained unsettled on the island.

1750

Well-organised uprising of about 100 insurgents on Curaçao. 60 of them were killed.

1757

Tempati rebellion, the largest slave rebellion in Suriname's history.

1763

Rebellion in Berbice where bloody fighting killed more than 1,800 insurgents.

1780

Enslaved people took over the ship *Vigilante* and escaped.

1785

Rebellion on slave ship *The Neptune* in which the ship exploded and about 400 people died.

1795

Rebellion of some 2,000 people on Curaçao led by Tula. Tula was inspired by a great slave revolt in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti). The rebellion was harshly put down.

1795

On Aruba, some 30 enslaved people revolted. The leader Thico was captured.

1823

Rebellion in the former Dutch colony of Demerara, where many plantations were still owned by the Dutch.

1834

Revolt of enslaved people working in the salt pans on Bonaire.

1848

On the French part of the island of St. Maarten, slavery was abolished. Enslaved people in the Dutch part ceased work and fled to the French part, after which slavery was abolished in practice on St. Maarten.

1848

Following St. Maarten there was a rebellion on St. Eustatius, which was put down.

Display case

Letters from Frits' father, Pierre Moquette, to his wife, 1839.

Pierre Moquette wrote, among other things, about the abuse of enslaved people, which shocked him. In his last letter before he died in Suriname, he wrote about his 3-year-old son: *"Take care of that sweet frits, make sure that no accident happens to him..."*

These letters later inspired Frits to oppose slavery.

Photo portrait of Frits Moquette at a young age, daguerreotype.

Travel document Frits Moquette, 1839, with his description.

Letter to Frits Moquette from Louis Alexis Chamerovzow, president of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, about his visit to the Netherlands. Frits has a lot of contact with Chamerovzow. Together they travel the country giving lectures.

Draft bill to abolish slavery by Frits Moquette, addressed to parliament 1855.

Poem by Frits Moquette about Suriname.

Frits felt connected to Suriname, even though he had never visited the country. He wrote:

"Oh Suriname land of beauty."

(...)

"There rests a much-beloved Father,

There he fell victim to death

O Suriname, it brings me closer to you

Now that he slumbers there in Your bosom"

Abolitionists and defenders

For a long time, only individual voices spoke out against slavery. That changed in the late 18th century. Due to the ideas of the Enlightenment, more and more citizens fought for democracy and equality. For the first time, there were also political calls for the abolition of slavery. But for most Enlightenment thinkers, freedom and equality applied only to white men.

Around 1840, the anti-slavery debate revived, because news facilities improved and under the influence of British abolitionists. They inspired liberals and people from the Protestant Christian *Réveil* movement, who, among other things, focused on Christian charity. Slavery had been defended for centuries on the basis of the Bible, but now it was Christian conviction that was also opposing it..

Image:

Plate made for Dutch anti-slavery committee

Defenders

Divine approval and preservation of the colonies

Amsterdam silk merchant Abraham Barrau made a detailed argument in favor of slavery in 1790. Slave traders, by *"buying and selling them, would do Africans no injustice, but (...) often a (...) service."* According to Barrau, they would often have it even better in Suriname than many Amsterdam servants.

Like most people at the time, Barrau saw it as a 'God-given order' that there were different ranks and positions. Slavery had existed for so long that it also had to have Divine approval.

Moreover, slavery appears in the Bible. And through slavery, Christianity could be taught to *"so many thousands of unhappy and blinded Gentiles."*

Finally, Barrau believed that slavery was essential to preserving the colonies: *"that trade can, may, and must be tolerated,"* because otherwise the colonies *"would be ruined in very few years..."*

Africans were not ready for freedom

As a result of the quest for greater equality, national elections were held in the Netherlands for the first time in 1796. One of the elected parliamentarians, Pieter Vreede, wanted a total ban on slavery and the slave trade in the new constitution. But most parliamentarians wanted nothing to do with it. Leading politician Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck thought abolition was too great a risk. It could lead to an uprising like in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) and that would mean the end of the colonies.

Most parliamentarians believed Africans were not yet ready for freedom. They believed white Europeans were at the top of civilization. This was based on racist theories. For example, Africans' brain capacity was said to be smaller than that of Europeans. Although researchers had refuted that in the late 18th century, the prevailing idea remained that Africans were far from being equal.

Nothing about the abolition of slavery in the colonies appeared in the Constitution.

Images

First National Assembly, 1796, Pieter Vreede, Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck

Abolitionists

This is a selection of people and movements that were committed to abolishing slavery in Netherlands, not a complete overview.

1615

In the popular play *Moortje* by the famous writer Bredero, a protagonist called slavery an “*inhumane use!!*” He also mentioned the role of Amsterdam people: “*There are also those in the city, doing such business.*”

1662

Philosopher Francis van den Enden argued for a new colony without slavery.

1774

Nicolaas Simon van Winter wrote the play *Monzongo or the Royal Slave* in response to the great slave rebellion in the Dutch colony of Berbice. The preface stated that he wanted to convey the “*unbecomingness of slavery*”.

1790

Betje Wolff translated a book by the Swiss Benjamin-Sigismund Frossard: *The Case of the Negro Slaves, and of the Inhabitants of Guinea*. It was an indictment of slavery.

1790

Pastor Jan Konijnenburg believed slavery was against God's will and the ‘natural right’ to freedom. Even good treatment of enslaved people did not make up for the “*glaring injustice*” of lost freedom, he believed.

1791-1792

Elisabeth Maria Post wrote the novel *Reinhart* in which slavery was questioned.

1794

Louise van Ommeren-Hengevelt expressed her anti-slavery stance in embroidery.

1797

Parliamentarian Pieter Vreede wanted a ban on slavery in the constitution.

1798

Johannes Kisselius translated a French play about the slave rebellion in Haiti. It was never performed in the Netherlands because it was too controversial.

1840-1841

Elizabeth Fry and several other British abolitionists from the Christian society The Quakers visited the Netherlands.

1842

Marten Douwes Teenstra wrote in his book on slavery in Suriname: "...the slave trade and slavery are to be abhorred to the highest degree."

1842

King William II received three petitions for the abolition of slavery: from Rotterdam women, from liberals and from the Réveil movement. The king asked the abolitionists to wait and take no action for the time being, to which they complied.

1844

Jan Ackersdijck and other abolitionists founded an anti-slavery journal.

1853

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe appeared in Dutch.

1853

The Netherlands Society for the Promotion of the Abolition of Slavery (NMBAS) was founded in 1842, but not active until 1853. Only men were allowed to become members. They published brochures, organised meetings and sent petitions to parliament. The

700 members were moderate and considered mass actions to be indecent.

1853

17-year-old Frits Moquette founded the Young People's Society for the Abolition of Slavery. He saw slavery as a constitutional error, an affront to humanity and a sin before God.

1853

Julien Wolbers found the NMBAS too moderate and sought affiliation with Frits Moquette's Young People's Society. He argued that being a Christian and keeping slaves do not go together. He quoted the Bible text that you should treat others as you want to be treated yourself.

1853

Nicolaas Beets wrote 'A song for liberation': "Let the chains fall! Break, break the yoke! Freedom is for everything, Necessary to happiness."

1853

At the king's behest, a state commission was set up to investigate if, how and when slavery should be abolished.

1853

The liberal arliamentarian Wolter Robert van Hoëvell addressed a book to the state commission investigating the possible abolition of slavery. He referred to slavery as a 'national sin'.

1855

733 working-class women from Amsterdam offered a petition to the king: "because of everything that has become known in recent times about the condition of the slaves (...) the minds of the undersigned are so shaken (...) that they can no longer (...) resist turning directly to Your Majesty with the urgent plea to put an end to this state of affairs soon."

1855

Anna Bergendahl established the 'Ladies' Committee to Promote the Proclamation of the Gospel and the Abolition of Slavery in Suriname'. They prayed together for abolition and sold handicrafts to buy enslaved people's freedom.

1855

The report of the state commission was published recommending the abolition of slavery and a shift to paid labour to preserve the Surinamese plantations.

1855-1863

Various groups continued to campaign for the end of slavery until abolition in 1863 with leaflets, petitions and speeches.

Image:

Building on Elandstraat in Amsterdam where both Anna Bergendahl and Frits Maquette come together with their societies.

Display case

Nicolaas Beets, *Speech on the liberation of the slaves*, 1856.

In his speech to the Netherlands Society for the Promotion of the Abolition of Slavery, Beets stated, "*The time of admission is over.*"

Anti-slavery medallion.

Made from 1787 by the British Josiah Wedgwood. He distributed them at his own expense at meetings of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in England and America.

Betje Wolff wrote in this 1798 letter that she did not want to stay with a family in Vlissingen because of her "*...natural aversion to slave merchants.*"

Gravure van *Monzongo of de koninglyke slaaf*.

Nicolaas Simon van Winter, *Monzongo or the king's slave*, 1774.

In the preface of *Monzongo*, Van Winter wrote that the play was a response to the slave revolt in the Dutch colony of Berbice (1763). But it is set in a Spanish colony, probably because otherwise it would not be allowed to be played.

In 1852, the American Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which stimulated the anti-slavery debate worldwide. Translations appeared in languages including Dutch (1853) German, Russian and Welsh.

Quotes

"When we talk about enslaved people, we talk, for example, about my mother's grandmother (...) That was not long ago at all. We still talk about her."

Sylvana Simons, former politician and presenter

"It is strictly forbidden in our country to exploit children. But importing chocolate, phones or shoes for which children have been mistreated and exploited? That is no problem at all."

GertJan de Jong, employee International Justice Mission

After 1863

On 1 July 1863, slavery was officially abolished by the Netherlands. But enslaved people were not immediately free. In Suriname, they were obliged to work on the plantations for another ten years. Plantation owners were compensated. In Suriname, they received three hundred guilders for each enslaved person, on the Dutch Caribbean islands between one hundred and two hundred guilders.

On the Caribbean islands, freedmen were not obliged to continue working. But in practice, it was almost impossible to buy land or find work outside the plantations. Most remained living and working on the plantations by necessity. In Curaçao, they were required to work for free a number of days a year. This was called *paga tera* ('pay ground'). The rise of the oil industry in the early 20th century

provided new opportunities. Then many Surinamese also emigrated to Curaçao.

Quote:

'...for the obvious lack of action against this crime against humanity, I ask (...) forgiveness.'

Speech King Willem-Alexander apologising for the slavery past, 2023

Indentured servitude

In Suriname, indentured workers were brought in from mainly Asia to work on the plantations. They had contracts for five to fifteen years. Working conditions were poor, wages were low and corporal punishment persisted, although the cruelest punishments had disappeared. There was resistance from indentured workers through sabotage, work refusal, running away and rebellion. Anton de Kom wrote in his famous book *We Slaves of Suriname* about indentured workers that they were treated "*utterly like slaves*".

"When they resisted this, they (...) were punished with cane strokes..."

In 1939, the last indentured workers were shipped to Suriname. Due to contract labour, Suriname has large Chinese, Hindu and Javanese communities.

Impact of the past

In 1934, Anton de Kom published *We Slaves of Suriname*. He described oppression and great inequality even after the abolition of slavery. And that years of oppression have an effect: "*No people that remains hereditarily burdened with a sense of inferiority can reach maturity.*"

For a long time, the Netherlands paid little attention to the history of slavery. It was hardly a topic in education or in public and political discussions. There is now more recognition of the suffering caused by slavery. With Ketikoti - 'breaking the chains' - the abolition of slavery is commemorated annually on 1 July. In 2023, King Willem-Alexander offered his apologies for the slavery past.

Images:

Harvest of sugar cane on Suriname plantation, Keti Koti in the Oosterpark in Amsterdam, 2023, Javanese indentured workers on their way to Suriname, 1900-1930

Quotes:

"No people that remains hereditarily burdened with a sense of inferiority can reach maturity."

Anton de Kom

"Feeling guilty about slavery? No, that is not your personal responsibility, but you do need to know the history to understand the consequences in our society today."

Maartje Duin, podcast documentary creator of *The plantation of our ancestors*

Display case

In 1863, Willem Bosch Reitz managed the plantations of his parents, who lived in the Netherlands. After the abolition of slavery, plantation owners received compensation for every enslaved person. This authorization states that Willem Bosch Reitz may receive the compensation.

Anton de Kom, *We Slaves of Suriname*, 1934.

Cap and button with 1873 on it, invented by Perez Jong Loy. Activist Perez Jong Loy (1954-2019) invented this cap and button to draw attention to the forced labor that continued in Suriname for ten years after 1863.

Quotes:

"There was hardly any discussion after the abolition of slavery about the inequality between whites and blacks and the backwardness we had suffered from three centuries of slavery. (...) That still has an impact generations later."

Peggy Bouva, podcast creator of The plantation of our ancestors

"Slavery back then was remote and there were big economic interests. So it is with slavery nowadays. We too are doing very little against it, just as back then."

Liesbeth van der Horst, director Dutch Resistance Museum