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The Transnational Remembrance of Slavery: The Dutch Atlantic

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All over the Caribbean, we witness a virtual explosion of public remembrance of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. Of course, the memory of this long and tragic episode is nothing new and has been transmitted in oral traditions by enslaved Africans and their descendants over the centuries. The institutionalisation of commemoration, however, does seem to have achieved a momentum of its own. I will briefly discuss three issues: the background to this new culture of remembrance; contrasts within the Caribbean; and the specific case of the Dutch Atlantic.

While the twentieth century witnessed a seemingly unending series of devastating, often genocidal wars, its *fin de siècle* was also marked by a remarkable tendency to weigh the atrocities of even the remote past against the contemporary moral standards mankind seems to share but at the same time

fails to live up to. The Holocaust has become a central point of reference in this respect – both the gruesome episode itself and its subsequent commemoration.

Decolonization has been of crucial importance to the international recognition of a host of dreadful periods and events from the colonial era as low points in the history of mankind. Once decolonized, the former colonies acquired both the liberty and the international position to put colonialism and its excesses on the agenda. Moreover, postcolonial migrants in the former European metropolises brought history home. Their very presence was bound to raise metropolitan awareness of the shared past.

The discussion on the economic, political, social, and moral costs and benefits of colonialism is anything but completed. Yet few question that the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas qualify as a nadir in the history of mankind. This recognition is relatively strong throughout the Americas and in the major West-European slave-trading countries. Remarkably, neither Portugal nor Spain are lagging behind in this respect.

Public remembrance of the Atlantic slave trade seems to be more ambivalent in Africa. This may partly be explained by reference to the complicity of Africans in this episode. Noteworthy too is that from all types of slavery through the ages all over the globe, it is precisely the Atlantic variant which is singled out. Within Africa, for example, the Arab slave trade is much less discussed. Or, to cite just one more example, the equally large-scale early modern slave trade within and to Asia, partly run by European traders again, seems to be largely forgotten outside of academia.

The Caribbean is a colonial construction and from the early days of European colonialism, African slavery has been pivotal to its history. This applies to the entire region, as it incidentally does to much of the circum-Caribbean and Brazil. Nonetheless, divergent colonial trajectories, in addition to differences in scale, resulted in a deep fragmentation of the region. So in spite of major parallels in economic, social and cultural development, the Caribbean has remained divided among itself.

This applies to the memory of history in general, and to the public remembrance of slavery as well. While there may be a general awareness of commonalities, memory is tied to specific postcolonial relations. There may be some vague ideas about 'Africa', about the global and certain regional significance of the Haitian revolution, and so on. But in the end slavery in the Commonwealth Caribbean is remembered as an Anglo phenomenon, and much the same applies to the former Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies.

Within the Caribbean, slavery has divergent meanings and is ascribed uneven importance according to local specificities. Where there is a strong – in most cases even constitutional – relationship with the former colonizer, slavery has become a recurrent theme for often ritualised debate; this is particularly the case for the French overseas departments and the Dutch Caribbean. Where Caribbean societies are ethnically segmented, as in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname, the remembrance of slavery may function as internally divisive. Where the state sets the agenda for public discourse, as in Cuba, slavery and race issues may be discovered and suppressed again as the leadership sees fit.

Where a state is poor and holds no external power, as in the case of Haiti, the raising of the awareness of its slavery past may seem to be of little practical value. Some Caribbean islands may opt to downplay the issue of slavery as their leadership fears for a potential threat to sea, sun & sex tourism – others may precisely want to cater for cultural heritage tourism in stead. And so on.

At the same time, general ideas about the slave trade and slavery seem to be increasingly understood in the wider framework of a Black Atlantic heavily dominated by U.S. actors – be it mass media, popular artists or intellectuals. American images and interpretations of Atlantic slavery therefore seem to leave a mark on the general understanding of slavery disproportionate to the numerical significance of American slavery in the wider Atlantic.

Against this backdrop, a few words on the case of the Dutch Atlantic. The crucial impetus to the ‘rediscovery’ of Dutch Atlantic slavery has been given by the exodus from the Dutch Caribbean – Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles – to the Netherlands. While the total population of the former Dutch colonies still residing in the Caribbean amounts to 750,000 people, the number of metropolitan citizens with Dutch Caribbean roots is approaching half a million. Virtually all of this ‘history coming home’ dates from the last four decades. In my presentation, I will discuss the following statements:

- postcolonial migrants have been instrumental in raising metropolitan awareness of the Dutch history of Dutch Atlantic slavery as well as metropolitan willingness to contribute to remembrance
- paradoxically, this postcolonial pressure serves to strengthen the metropolitan role in defining, preserving and remembering this past
- strong national differences between the former colonies persist, also in the commemoration of slavery; this applies to Suriname and the Antilles, but equally to former and shorter-lived Dutch colonies and trading posts such

as Ghana, Brazil, Guyana, Manhattan U.S.A., and indeed to the Caribbean community in the Netherlands

- there is wide consensus over the question of what historical data need to be preserved, what oral testimonies need to be recorded, what kind of research needs to be done, what kind of educational materials need to be developed
- at the same time, there is significant dispute over interpretations, ownership, 'Black' vs. 'White' interpretations, and so on; this debate is particularly evident in the Netherlands and may be interpreted as a struggle between immigrant actors deploying ethnic identity politics and prominent institutions often rooted in the colonial era struggling to redefine their position and role; the divides between these two circuits and their constituencies are still deep.