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Commemoration and Commemorators: The Dutch Case

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In response to the abolition of slavery in the Dutch orbit on 1 July 1863, a Dutch editorial newspaper made the following comments. “We must always commemorate 1 July as the happiest day in the reign of King Willem III”.

However, it took more than 150 years before the abolition of slavery was commemorated on Dutch soil. To be precise, the official and formal monument to commemorate Dutch slavery was erected only five years ago. Why did it take so long?

It must be said, however, that before the official monument, there was an unofficial commemoration and there were commemorators. In other words, before the official monument for commemoration, there were commemorators. Who were these commemorators?

With the mass migration from the former plantation colony of Suriname that took place when the country gained independence in 1975, the Netherlands had its legacy of slavery literally delivered to its front door. The migrant population included many hundreds of thousands of descendants of slaves. This Afro-Dutch community was the seed bed for the development of organisations in the major cities of

Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague that organised events on 1 July with the primary aim being to commemorate the slavery legacy and celebrate the abolition of slavery

One of the organisations that organises activities relating to 1 July is the Nationaal 30 juni/1 juli Comité (national 30 June/1 July committee). This committee has established the tradition of commemorating slavery in the Dutch colonies by holding an evening vigil on the Surinameplein in Amsterdam on 30 June each year. In 1993, the committee declared 30 June to be an annual day of reflection to mark the 130th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Keti Koti, the abolition of slavery, is celebrated the following day, on 1 July. A plaque was unveiled on the Surinameplein during the seventh commemoration, held in 1999.

The name of the organisation, the Nationaal 30 juni/1 juli Comité, was chosen intentionally as an analogy of the Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei, which organises the annual commemoration of the victims of the Second World War on 4 May and the liberation of the Netherlands from occupation by Nazi Germany on 5 May. The message is clear, slavery is just as much a part of Dutch history as the Second World War. The implicit message is more provocative – slavery was also a holocaust, with the Dutch in the role of the perpetrators, not the victims.

Another high profile organisation is the Stichting Eer en Herstel, Betaling Slachtoffers van de Slavernij in Suriname. In 1996, this organisation had a tree planted on its behalf in the gardens of Gethsemane in Jerusalem as a monument to commemorate all the indigenous peoples and Afro-Surinamese in the slavery era. This gesture was also intended to be a symbol of reconciliation with the Jews, who had been major slave-owners in Suriname. In July 1998, the Stichting Eer en Herstel sent an open letter to the Lower House proposing a series of activities, including the

establishment of a memorial in order to aid the acceptance of the repressed history and to 'repair' the suffering.

In 1998, the Afro-European Womens' movement Sophiedela created plans for a national monument. Sophiedela presented a petition to the Lower House. The petition, entitled *Sporen van slavernij (traces of slavery)*, requested a national monument to commemorate the Dutch slavery legacy. This petition was discussed in the House in February 1999.

1 July committees have since been established in other major cities, such as Rotterdam. The annual *Bigi Spikri* ('big mirror') parade, where the descendants of slaves parade past shop windows (mirrors) in traditional costumes in order to display their beauty, always attracts thousands of visitors. On 1 July 1999, the Rotterdam committee presented a petition to the municipal council requesting that it use its influence in the Cabinet to declare 1 July a national holiday.

The many initiatives at the grass-roots level went into high gear when the Cabinet granted the request in the Sophiedela petition and the new Minister for Integration, Rogier van Boxtel, adopted the idea of a national slavery monument and made it a spearhead of his policy geared to the promotion of the social integration of ethnic minorities. The various Afro-Surinamese, Antillean, Aruban and African organisations and organisations of Maroons and Indigenous peoples joined forces at the insistence of the Ministry of the Interior. This umbrella organisation – het Landelijk Platform Slavernijverleden (LPS) (National Bureau Against Racial Discrimination) – then consulted with the government during the process.

The developments in the Netherlands relating to the slavery legacy ran parallel with international moves to combat repression and exclusion. During the World Anti-Racism Conference held in Durban, South Africa in 2001, the then Minister for

Integration Van Boxtel spoke on behalf of the Cabinet on the approach to the struggle against racism and racial discrimination. His speech included the following:

'This World Conference in Durban is in our view a necessary monument to state to all people that racism and discrimination must be eradicated. But we can only be credible if we recognize the great injustice of the past. We express our deep remorse about the enslavement and slave trade that took place. But an expression of remorse as such is not enough and cannot be used as an excuse for not taking any action in the present. It is important to take structural measures that have effects for the descendants of former slaves and next generations [...] Next year the Netherlands will unveil its national slavery monument, a symbol of national remembrance, in Amsterdam, our national capital. This monument is created in close cooperation with the descendants of former slaves. The monument as a whole will represent past, present and future. Madam, Excellencies, besides the unveiling of a monument we will also create a center of expertise on slave history, as a dynamic slavery monument. Together with better education, these centres form a path for the youth to more understanding and tolerance.'

The efforts of the black community in the Netherlands put the Dutch slave legacy on the political agenda. This brought the discourse on the slavery legacy into the public domain and simultaneously gave it an emotional charge. Once in the public domain, this culminated in the unveiling of the Nationaal Monument Slavernijverleden (national monument to the legacy of slavery) on 1 July 2002 in the Oosterpark in Amsterdam. This static monument was unveiled in the presence of Queen Beatrix, and the ceremony had a dramatic conclusion. The crowd, consisting mostly of descendants of slaves, was denied access to the immediate vicinity of the monument due to reasons of safety. Barriers and high, plastic-covered walls were positioned in order to keep the crowd away from the VIPs and invitees. Police on horseback rode into the crowd to disperse it. This safety measure led to an explosion of emotion and anger amongst the descendants. They felt excluded, while the national monument was intended precisely to bring groups closer together. The black

population was deeply humiliated and protested loudly that 'the age of slavery is not yet over'.