Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe  
edited by Gert Oostindie

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The Long Road to a Monument

After years of more or less marginal attempts at making the history of slavery and its contemporary legacy heard in Dutch society, finally in 1998/99, the time was right and the issue took centre stage. On an international level, several activities in this sphere had proven to be quite successful, and in the Netherlands the lobby of black citizens and organizations had become sufficiently strong to forward the issue of founding a commemorative monument onto the national political agenda. This event was paralleled by the initiatives of several Dutch intellectuals. A few members of parliament actively supported this 'movement' and asked the Prime Minister formal questions about his ideas and plans on the commemoration of the slave trade and slavery in the Netherlands.

Some time later, in the Old Hall of the Dutch parliament, the presentation of the book *Het verleden onder ogen*, focusing on the necessity for a slavery monument, was attended by members of the cabinet and the Royal Family. This was another clear sign that the Dutch history of slavery was now officially taken seriously. A further help, undoubtedly, was that the socialist-liberal government had made the multicultural society in all its aspects one of its priorities. Economic prosperity, moreover, made it possible to spend time and money on this project. One of the outcomes of these circumstances was the appointment of a minister specifically responsible for large cities and minority policies, who showed a willingness to listen to black organizations. By a favourite coincidence, one of the main advisors at his ministry was of Surinamese descent and in favour of a national monument. All in all, therefore, the time was right.

Upon opening the 'slavery dossier', one of the first problems the minister was confronted with was the diversity of black initiatives. Therefore, one of the organizations which had presented a petition to parliament about a commemorative monument, was asked to unite all initiatives. The minister reported to parliament that 'in principle the cabinet is willing to speak with a representative committee and the discussion may lead to the founding of a national monument to commemorate the abolition of slavery'.

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1 Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Het verleden onder ogen. Herdenking van de slavernij* (1999). See also Adriaan van Dis, 'Coming to terms with the past', *Prince Claus Fund Journal* 3 (December 1999), pp. 9-12.

2 Letter to the chairman of the Lower House of the States General, May 26, 1999; [translation AVS].
The minister’s request was only the final push in a process that had started long before that time: various organizations involved now quickly and easily formed a national Platform. Both Platform and ministerial staff vigorously went to work; within four months of negotiations – bilateral and unilateral – a first, detailed plan of action was presented to and accepted by the minister. Both parties agreed that the monument would have to consist of two elements. The ‘static element’, i.e. a memorial at a representative location, will intend ‘to give to people a public place and symbol where the horrors of, and struggle against slavery can be commemorated’.\(^3\) The dynamic element will consist of an institute aimed at coping with the history of slavery in a way orientated towards the future. According to the plan of action this institute will have a threefold function: reflection, education and scientific research. All in all, these plans went a lot further than the mere creation of ‘a national monument in commemoration of the abolition of slavery’.\(^4\)

Hopes were high, and everything was geared towards unveiling the memorial at July 1, 2000, 137 years after the abolition of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean. However, since that date much time has passed. By now, the exact location of the memorial (in Amsterdam) has been established and nine selected artists, mainly from African or Afro-Caribbean backgrounds have submitted their proposals. It is, however, still uncertain whether the memorial will be unveiled before July 1, 2002. The opening of the institute will, no doubt, take place even later. Obviously, it will take more time (and money) to develop this element than to erect the memorial.

By now, we have probably passed the point of no return in relation to the two elements of the monument; the Platform has become the official negotiating partner of the government in all related matters and for the first time in history, the Dutch government has officially commemorated the abolition of slavery on July 1, together with the Platform. Still, one could wonder why, after more than a year of combined initiatives in a favourable political climate, no clear goals have been reached. The reasons for this are threefold and apply to both parties

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4. These changes, as well as discussions on what the Platform should be doing, are also reflected in the changing names of the Platform between its founding day, May 14, 1999, and the day it became a registered foundation: National Platform National Anti-Slavery Monument -> National Platform Commemoration Abolition of Slavery -> National Platform Commemoration Victims of Dutch Slavery Past -> National Platform National Monument Slavery Past and since December 8, 1999: Foundation National Monument Dutch Slavery Past, also known as National Platform Slavery Past, or just ‘the Platform’.
concerned, i.e. the Dutch government and the Platform: fear of loosing touch with ‘the people’, division by ‘professionalization’ and ‘officialization’, and the clash of two opposing discourses. As will be shown hereafter, these three factors are closely interlinked.

As soon as the Platform was founded and talks with the government had started, the latter somewhat shrank away from what was set in motion. Time and time again the rhetorical question was asked, either implicitly or explicitly, whether the Platform was representative of the Afro-communities in the Netherlands. Of course it was not, the process of uniting all organizations was – and still is – under way, not to mention the fact that there are some black people in the Netherlands who do not want to be reminded of slavery at all. However, the Platform made the effort to unite many ideologically and ethnically diverse organizations. This succeeded: within months, more than twelve organizations had joined the Platform, representing people of Surinamese, Antillean and Aruban, West-African and Amerindian descent, who were working on grass roots as well as professional levels. Although one organization decided not to join the Platform – it had been fighting for a slave monument longer than any of the others and boasts quite a large, mainly Afro-Surinamese following – during the negotiations its interests were also taken into account and it remained welcome to officially join the process. I was asked to become a member of the Platform to give my advise, despite the uneasiness some other members felt at first about the presence of a white professor of History. Therefore, it was unfair to blame the Platform for not being representative. What more could have been done?

The real fear of the government was probably not the alleged unrepresentativeness of the Platform, but the feeling that they had ‘created’ a partner which could become much too radical to deal with, not to mention the consequence of having to promote such radical ideologies through a monument to Dutch society at large. As a result, the minister started distancing himself from the Platform by creating a rather autonomous Committee of Recommendation which was given the task to advise him and to promote the idea of founding a monument to slavery in society at large. This committee consists of intellectuals and artists – black and white. Its moderate views make it a buffer between the government and the Platform, which is probably exactly what the minister had in mind. However, since from the start the committee was never consid-

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5 At least three of these organizations are a union of organizations themselves.
ered by anyone within or outside the Platform as ‘we’, but always as ‘they’, and vice versa, which complicated things immensely.

Apart from this, a steering committee was constructed in which representatives of several ministries, the Committee of Recommendation and the Platform participated. This steering committee is intended to be a forum where negotiations take place and decisions can be prepared under the supervision of the the minister’s representative. As a result of this, the Platform was not only put at some distance, but also its delegates became more bound to the government’s objectives, as content and fundamental discussion were more and more overruled by procedures, time schedules and budgets.

Meanwhile, the only ideology all organizations in the Platform had in common was the aspiration to give the history of slavery and its contemporary legacy a ‘rightful’ place in Dutch history and society by the foundation of a monument of two elements. All other questions, including the ethnic composition of the Platform, the contents of the monument, or the exact meaning of the legacy of slavery today, was, and for a great part still is, under discussion. This is exactly the reason why the Platform is representative, because it shows it is a platform for everything relating to this issue in the Afro-Dutch communities. These discussions are part of the process of coping with a history of slavery and racism. However, in delicate matters such as these, discussions and processes are far too complicated for a government to deal with. They need concrete opinions, which can lead to actual political results.

Under these circumstances, a situation has been created which is not at all encouraging any concrete results, precisely because there is not (enough) room for dialogue and debate. Not only has content been overruled by procedures, the debate also seems to have lost its dynamics, as a result of the diversity having been reduced to an institutionalised, two-party system. On the one hand you find the moderates, the Committee of Recommendation backed by the government, on the other hand the Platform, which has been – or has allowed itself to be – pushed into the corner of ‘radicalism’. Hardly any substantial debate between the two takes place, and probably not even within the two. Both ‘parties’ take position and pretend to know how the other thinks.

This situation has been complicated by the fact that founding a commemorative monument, not to speak of founding an institute, or changing history school books, calls for long and complex judicial and official procedures, which are hard to explain to ‘the public’. Moreover, part of the (mainly white) public is not interested in the issue at all, whilst another part – white
and black – is interested, but wants it to be settled quickly, in view of the many other projects in multicultural society; yet another part of the (mainly black) public is mistrustful, fearing that white dominance is taking over by trying to ‘whiten’ black initiatives along the procedural way.

As a consequence of these developments, much time is devoted to formal discussions and procedural questions in settings which are far removed from ‘the public’, and too little time and energy is spent on communicating with that ‘public’. The result is that the (opinion-)leaders in the process sometimes feel obliged to express firm statements, otherwise images of radicalism or conservatism are ascribed to them by others, in order to keep in touch with ‘the people’. Consequently, schisms within the movement at large, and misunderstandings between the ‘generals’ and the ‘troops’ are an immanent danger and threaten the common goals and continuation of the process.

Despite all this, the realization of the static element of the monument, i.e. a memorial statue, has come into sight. But even in respect to this, a lot of issues still need to be solved. For example, whose monument is it going to be and what should it be an expression of? Such questions, when related to the dynamic element of the monument, i.e. the institute, create double the amount of discord. Will the institute, and the processes and debates it is going to initiate and stimulate, be primarily aimed at empowering the Afro-communities in the Netherlands, or will it be aimed at society at large? What kind of history will it be ‘promoting’?

These and other related questions have to be answered or at least debated upon in an early phase, because they have already turned up today and they are fundamental to the dynamic monument. Terminology seems to reflect a clash of discourses in this respect. For example, in one discourse a deliberate choice is made to use phrases such as ‘trauma’ and ‘detrimentation’, ‘black holocaust’, ‘reparation of history’ and ‘Afrocentrism’ in order to be able to fight for the future. In another discourse the use of such phrases is absolutely ‘not done’, they are avoided at all costs and even talk of ‘victims’ or ‘guilt’ are considered to block the way to a more harmonious or open minded future.

It will be of crucial importance to understand why people are part of one discourse or the other, and why they experience and represent history, the present, and the road to the future the way they do. Without efforts towards an understanding and a respect for others, combined with a critical look at oneself, it will be difficult to erect a real monument.