THE “VEIL” IN POST-SLAVERY SOCIETY.
NEW CHALLENGES FOR HISTORIANS:
THE CASE OF SURINAM, 1808–2008

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Introduction

How did former slaves and their descendants grapple with post-slavery society, and which strategies did they use to redefine their position in society, both in Surinam and in the Netherlands, against the background of colonial and post-colonial challenges and problems? Until fairly recently, their history was not – or at best marginally – incorporated in Dutch mainstream history.

In the 1970s and 1980s, just before and after Surinam became an independent Republic (on 25 November 1975), many Surinamese people left their country – for two main reasons. In the 1970s, it was the hope for a better future in the Netherlands (a “pull factor”), while in the 1980s it was the military Bouterse regime (1980–1987) that drove people away (a “push factor”). Nowadays, circa 350,000 Surinamese live permanently in the Netherlands, whereas the number of inhabitants of Surinam is circa 450,000. The (family) ties between the two countries and the ethnic communities are still very strong.

Recently, a public debate on the slave trade, slavery, post-colonialism, neo-colonialism and racism took shape in the Netherlands, largely initiated by actively participating “descendants of slaves” living in the Netherlands, and joined by those living in Surinam. In this highly politicized debate, that has sometimes looked more like a battlefield, historical knowledge is the main weapon. What the core argument boils down to, from the initiators’ point of view, is that in mainstream academic historiography an historiographical “veil” still exists, to use a metaphorical term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903. In this central

1 The “veil” consists of several layers, and it shades the views of both blacks and whites. Black people are, as Du Bois writes, “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this
argument, historical phenomena such as the slave trade and slavery, colonialism and post-colonialism (also termed as neo-colonialism) are held to blame for this “veiling”, as well as for a wide range of other injustices, socio-economic problems and racism.

This specific debate is part of a broader post-colonial debate, and of a national public debate on history as a political means of (re-)defining what it means to be “Dutch”, in all its multicultural complexities (a process of inclusion), and of formulating a renewed definition of citizenship (a process of exclusion, because of the dominant Dutch culture at its base).

The participants in the debates are the concerned descendants of slaves, politicians of all stripes, both “professional”2 and “public” historians, and journalists, and last – but not least – basically everyone who wants to participate: the public at large. Especially for members of “the public”, the internet provides a medium that offers ample opportunities to voice their opinions, and to interact with the rest of the world on these and other matters. Their identification with history, whatever history that might be, is gradually but unsystematically, unevenly and often in a biased way taken into account, and sometimes accepted as being of value. In this outer academic world, commemorations, monuments, museums and public gatherings (lectures, cultural festivals and the like) play an important role in fuelling the debate, and in disseminating the arguments at stake. They are a powerful means to mobilize ideas and people.

One of the main questions is: how do historians deal with the challenges of rethinking and rewriting mainstream history from a more inclusive multicultural view, taking into account the heritage and history of

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2 Of importance in the academic field is the joint project ‘Bringing history home; postcolonial identity politics in the Netherlands’ (participants are: the International Institute of Social History (IISH), the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) and the Meertens Institute) which has “as its focuses, the interplay of identity politics among postcolonial migrants in the Netherlands, the growing receptivity of the host society to such strategic appeals, and the changing objectives for which these are being used.” <http://www.kitlv.nl/home/Projects?id=11>. See also Gert Oostindie, “History brought home. Post-colonial migrations and the Dutch rediscovery of slavery.” Paper for the conference of MESEA – The Society for the Multi-Ethnic Studies (Leiden, June 2008).