

*The Last Convulsions of Colonialism: The Suriname Experiment in the 1930s*

**Rosemarijn Hoefte**

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On February 7, 1933 police bullets killed 2 and wounded 23 people at a protest in Paramaribo. It was the low point in a 2-year period of social unrest caused by economic misery and unemployment. Earlier, in July 1931 thousands marched peacefully to the gubernatorial palace to hand the governor a petition requesting economic and political reform. The so-called hunger riot in October of the same year was less peaceful. Police intervention following the looting of shops and bakeries and other forms of protest resulted in one shooting death and 2 wounded. In the next months a number of action groups and unions with different political and socioeconomic goals popped up and disappeared again. Hundreds attended protest rallies. Special meetings for women attracted between 800 and 1500 attendants.

It was in these turbulent times that Anton de Kom set foot again in Suriname. He was born in the colony and after a 12-year residence in the Netherlands returned to his native land in 1933. Dutch authorities had already warned the colonial government in Suriname about this ‘troublemaker’. We are not completely sure about his exact activities in Suriname; certainly he was in contact with hundreds of laborers and unemployed, who complained about the lack of work, taxation, low wages, and the lack of affordable health care. In De Kom’s own words: ‘Under the tree, past my little table, passes the parade of misery...Amerindians, bush negroes, Creoles, British-Indians, Javanese...’<sup>1</sup>

De Kom’s actions thus resonated with all population groups. It struck the colonial authorities with fear and on February 1 he was arrested. A week later a mass of people tried to free him resulting in the bloodbath of February 7, 1933. The authorities expelled De Kom without a trial from his birth country. (Later they admitted that there was insufficient proof to convict him of sedition.) De Kom would never see Suriname again; in late April 1945 he died in a Nazi-concentration camp. In those years in Europe he was active in anti-imperial circles and he wrote

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<sup>1</sup> Anton de Kom, *Wij slaven van Suriname* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1934), p. 210.

*Wij slaven van Suriname (We Slaves of Suriname)*, the first history of Suriname by a Surinamer from a Surinamese perspective.

As usual, the sad outcomes of the protests were labeled as ‘incidents’, but state violence was one of the corner stones of colonialism, not just in Suriname. In other words: violence was not incidental, but structural, that had been the case for centuries. Only the hard hand of Europeans would develop the colony, in favor of the metropole, or so was the underlying thought. Another corner stone was racism. Coupled with a divide-and-rule-policy, the colonial authorities put a big mark on life in Suriname.

However tragic, the protests and their aftermaths were certainly not unique in the region. The British Caribbean, in particular Jamaica and Trinidad, also experienced mass protests against colonial policy, albeit somewhat later. In Jamaica alone dozens of victims were counted. Suriname was not only earlier in protesting unemployment and rising prices, but the outcome differed from the British islands as well. The police also acted hard, but there was also a flanking social policy, such as poor relief and the incorporation of the labor movement. The trade unions were better organized and more effective in the English-speaking Caribbean, and also in Curaçao, than in Suriname,

where the unions were fragmented and lacked long-term goals.<sup>2</sup> According to the British-American historian Nigel Bolland, the agitation in the Anglophone Caribbean, led by the unions, ‘had a profound and lasting influence on the political culture of all these former colonies’.<sup>3</sup>

In Suriname the political and social effects of the disturbances was noticeable as well, but the reaction was (very) different when compared to the islands in the region.

Suriname experienced a conservative backlash. The Hague replaced the unpopular governor Rutgers with Johannes Kielstra.<sup>4</sup> Kielstra educated at Leiden University started a career in the Netherlands East Indies where Hendrik Colijn was his mentor. In 1915 he returned to the

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Scholtens, *Opkomende arbeidersbeweging in Suriname: Doedel, Liesdek, De Sanders en de werklozenonrust, 1931-1933* (Nijmegen: Masusa, 1986), p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> O. Nigel Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean: The Social Origins of Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Labour Movement* (Kingston: Ian Randle / Oxford: James Curry, 2001), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> For a description of Kielstra’s career, see Hans Ramsøedh, *Suriname 1933-1944: Koloniale politiek en beleid onder gouverneur Kielstra* (Delft: Eburon, 1990).

Netherlands to become professor at the Agricultural University of Wageningen and later at the University of Utrecht, where he headed the new department of Netherlands East Indian studies. In 1933, after the arrest of De Kom, Kielstra became governor of Suriname with the mission 'to put the house in order'. Colijn, now Colonial minister and prime-minister, was his superior once again.

When Kielstra arrived in Suriname in 1933, the colonial economy was at a low. The global crisis had great impact in the Caribbean. High unemployment and rising prices led to poverty. In 1933 an estimated 20% of the boys and 15% of the girls in Paramaribo were malnourished.<sup>5</sup> In the so-called districts, areas outside of the capital, missionaries described malnourishment and 'numbness due to disappointment and despair'.<sup>6</sup> In The Hague, and thus at the highest administrative level in Paramaribo, politicians and officials stayed the course. Suriname was framed as a stagnant, even backward, colony. The Dutch interest for the colonies in 'the West' was minimal; the colonial authorities were obsessed with the budget deficits, only very few thought about sustainable solutions. All eyes were focused on agriculture and the authorities were blind to the emergence of, for example, the bauxite industry. Because of this lack of interest, mining concessions were easily obtained by American companies. Planters smugly contended that laborers nor supervisors would be interested in working for Americans.

Probably the first report on the newly established company town of Moengo belies these views. It is by Fred. Oudschans Dentz, a prolific writer on history and contemporary Suriname. He praised Moengo as 'a monument to the willpower and perseverance of the Americans'.<sup>7</sup> This visitor lyrically describes the organization of the production process, modern health care facilities, the sewage system, the electric street lamps, the calculators and typewriters, things Paramaribo could only dream about. As to be expected, such a modern town and industry were very attractive to plantation laborers and their supervisors. To be sure, Moengo and other

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<sup>5</sup> R.A.J. van Lier, *Frontier Society: A Social Analysis of the History of Surinam* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971) p. 295.

<sup>6</sup> Annual Report Evangelische Broedergemeente 1931 cited in *De Banier van Waarheid en Recht*, July 27, 1932.

<sup>7</sup> Fred. Oudschans Dentz, 'De bauxietnijverheid en de stichting van een nieuwe stad in Suriname', *West-Indische Gids* 2 (1921): 481-508.

company towns were embedded in the colonial system. In the words of colleague and anthropologist Anouk de Koning: these were enclaves in the shadow of the plantations.<sup>8</sup>

Not only the bauxite industry brought change. The supposedly stagnant Surinamese society was in some ways rapidly transformed after the abolition of slavery in 1863, while in other areas the rate of change was considerably slower. This abolition was a legal benchmark, but the socioeconomic and political-cultural emancipation of the former enslaved lasted for many decades and perhaps a century.

Economically, the changes were clearly visible: many plantations were discontinued and the remaining companies, especially in the sugar industry, became increasingly larger industrial complexes. Of the 108 sugar plantations in 1830, in 1890 there were 14 left. In 1930 there were only 4 sugar plantations in operation; however, the total area of cultivation had grown during those 40 years. Through an increase in scale and modernization /concentration production could be kept at the pre-abolition level. The laborers on these plantations were mainly migrants from India and Java, who were put to work on temporary contracts. It soon became apparent that the majority of the more than 60,000 immigrants would not return to their homeland. Approximately two-thirds of the British Indians or Hindostanis and three quarters of the Javanese remained in Suriname. The consequences of this inflow were clearly visible in the census of 1921: almost half of the population was of Afro-Surinamese origin, 27% Hindostani and 17% Javanese.

Socioculturally, the growth of the middle class catches the eye. Part of that rise can be explained by the gradual 'Surinamization' of the civil service - there was room for light-colored, Christian, Dutch-speaking, urbanized Afro-Surinamese, but the highest positions remained firmly in Dutch hands.

Changes are also visible in other professional groups. A few examples to illustrate this development. In 1912 Johannes Hendrik Nelson Polanen became the first black head teacher, a

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<sup>8</sup> Anouk de Koning, 'Shadows of the Plantation? A Social History of Suriname's Bauxite Town Moengo', *New West Indian Guide* 85 (2011); see also Rosemarijn Hoefte, *Suriname in the Long Twentieth Century: Domination, Contestation, Globalization* (New York : Palgrave, 2014), chapter 5 with Anouk de Koning, 'Bauxite Mining in Moengo: Remnants of the Past and Signs of Modernity', pp. 113-132.

grade that only a handful of teachers had achieved.<sup>9</sup> The medical school in Paramaribo trained doctors; the famous Sophie Redmond became the first ‘doktores’ in the colony in 1935, while in 1912 two female pharmacists were mentioned in an official report.<sup>10</sup> Grace Schneiders-Howard was chief sanitary inspector in the 1920s, making her the highest female civil servant in the colony.<sup>11</sup> Salikin Hardjo was an official at the Ministry of Public Health, and later a politician, but also a journalist who wrote about the life of Javanese plantation workers under the pseudonym Bok Sark.<sup>12</sup> The *Surinaamse Almanak* mentioned the company Ramyad for years, as ‘dealer in opium, ganja, Br. Ind. articles, provisions and drinks’. This suggests that this company earned its money with homesickness for India, but that turns out to be different.<sup>13</sup> In her dissertation research on Construction of Hindostani identities in Suriname in the era of indenture, Margriet Fokken found this ad, putting this company firmly in the 20th century. The advertisement testifies to faith in the ongoing modernization: the car is ‘unsurpassed so far’. In many cases education was the motor of social mobility.

This mixed middle class also suffered from the economic recession, but a number of private individuals took initiatives to alleviate the poverty of workers and the unemployed, because the colonial state did next to nothing. This is apparent, for example, from research by Hennah Draaibaar and Rosa de Jong, MA Research student at the UvA, into the life of Alexandrina Paulina Bruyning, a gold digger who made the discovery of her life. From the sale of the gold she gave the poor people cash. When the authorities forbade her to do so, she started issuing coupons that could be redeemed at the corner shop and at a clothing store. Gowtu Missie, as her

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<sup>9</sup> J.V.D. Polanen, *Herinneringen aan mijn vader: Johannes Hendrik Nelson Polanen, de eerste neger-hoofdonderwijzer in Suriname (1882-1939)* (Paramaribo: n.p., 1982), p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia M. Kortram, ‘Meer dan arts alleen: De maatschappelijke betekenis van huisarts Sophie Redmond in laat-koloniaal Suriname’, PhD Dissertation Erasmus Universiteit, 2014 [[hdl.handle.net/1765/50372](http://hdl.handle.net/1765/50372)]; Surinaamsche Sub-Committee, ‘De Vrouw 1813-1913’ in *De vrouw in Suriname*. (Amsterdam: author, 1912).

<sup>11</sup> Rosemarijn Hoeft, ‘The Difficulty of Unhooking the Hookworm: The Rockefeller Foundation, Grace Schneiders-Howard, and Public Health Care in Suriname in the Early Twentieth Century’ in: Juanita De Barros, Steven Palmer, and David Wright (eds), *Health and Medicine in the Circum-Caribbean, 1800-1968* (New York: Routledge, 2009) pp. 211-226.

<sup>12</sup> Klaas Breunissen, *Ik heb Suriname altijd liefgehad: Het leven van de Javaan Salikin Hardjo* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Surinaamse almanak 1920: [http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_sur001192001\\_01/\\_sur001192001\\_01\\_0101.php](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_sur001192001_01/_sur001192001_01_0101.php)

nickname was, also paid hospital costs for people who could not afford it themselves.<sup>14</sup> The aforementioned Sophie Redmond treated poor patients for free; she did this in collaboration with her friend Esseline Polanen (the daughter of the first black head teacher, who had graduated as the first black pharmacist in 1935) who provided free medication.<sup>15</sup> Her mother, Albertine Johanna Chan A Hung, better known as Moesje Polanen, paid rent and doctor's bills, food and so forth for the sick and the poor.<sup>16</sup>

Also at the house of the aforementioned Grace Schneiders-Howard, according to journalist Johan van de Walle, 'poor people rarely knocked in vain at the door'. Van de Walle also described Freule Van Lynden, who was active in the Moravian Church: 'She was small, shriveled, shabby, dehydrated by the sun, suffering from the dreaded folk disease, the filaria, and pulled her through that disease swollen leg laboriously. Yet she was on the road day and night [...] Freule Van Lynden did not only spiritual but mainly social work. People like her and Mrs Grace Schneiders-Howard were social workers *avant la lettre*.'<sup>17</sup>

Even though such personal, often quiet, actions helped individual families, they were drops on a glowing plate in a colony where poverty prevailed and the resistance grew.

After the public, large-scale protests in 1931, The Hague turned to the question of guilt, not to what motivated the demonstrators. After February 7, 1933 it was no different: the political consensus was that governor Rutgers had been too weak and he was recalled. In response, the new governor Kielstra introduced a repressive policy on the anticommunist and antinationalist laws in the Netherlands East Indies.

Kielstra also got other ideas from the East Indies. His great experiment was the attempt to 'indianize' (*verindischen*) Suriname via a two-stage strategy: by appointing officials who had been trained for the colonial service in the Dutch East Indies (and thus reclaiming Surinamization) and by introducing Javanese for the benefit of small-scale agriculture. In Kielstra's policy the agricultural sector remained the mainstay of the Surinamese economy.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://resources.huylgens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon/lemmata/data/Bruyning>.

<sup>15</sup> Kortram; Polanen p. 82.

<sup>16</sup> Polanen, 76.

<sup>17</sup> Johan van de Walle *Een oog boven Paramaribo: Herinneringen* (Amsterdam: Querido 1975), p. 48.

Already years earlier, in 1925, Kielstra had visited Suriname at the request of the then governor to investigate the economic possibilities there. He concluded that drastic measures were needed to save the 'Dutch problem child'. He was very pessimistic about the future of the colony. In order to increase competitiveness, wages should be drastically reduced and Kielstra saw migration as the means to do so. His racial prejudice, ethnic stereotyping, and paternalistic perspective speak for themselves: he saw the British Indians as the population group with the best economic insight, but for that reason they would be more attracted by trade. He saw the Afro-Surinamese as a lost group for agriculture. In 1925 Kielstra doubted whether Javanese were suitable to become independent small farmers, but once in Suriname he expected that with 'social education' they could become valuable inhabitants of the colony.<sup>18</sup> Where on the British Caribbean islands a social policy was introduced, Kielstra opted for a radically different route for Suriname: the prevailing unemployment and low wages did not lead to an adjustment of his migration plans.

Experiences in and studies on the Netherlands East Indies must have been a rich source of inspiration for Kielstra, even though he himself was not explicit about it. Earlier I did research on the influence of the authoritative Indian official De Kat Angelino on Kielstra.<sup>19</sup> In a number of voluminous publications De Kat Angelino emphasized the importance of the Dutch leadership for the further development of the Netherlands East Indies. For the local population there was little room in this policy, except for cultural-religious matters. The aim should not be the construction of an Indonesian state, but the formation of an organic empire. In such an organic relationship, optimal cooperation between 'white and brown' would be guaranteed.

Kielstra translated these ideas into the Surinamese situation: his policy was based on ethnic 'pillarization' (*verzuiling*), so every group, Afro-Surinamese, Hindostani, Javanese and so on would be able to maintain its own religion, culture, and traditions. According to Kielstra, it was

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<sup>18</sup> J.C. Kielstra, 'Nieuwe mogelijkheden voor Suriname', *De Economist* 76 (1927): 181-196 and J.C. Kielstra, 'Suriname's economische vooruitzichten', *De Economist* 78 (1929): 335-348.

<sup>19</sup> Rosemarijn Hoeft, 'Learning, Loving and Living in Early Twentieth-Century Suriname: The Movement of People and Ideas from East to West', *Journal of Caribbean History* 45 (2) 2011: 190-211. Historian Elsbeth Locher-Scholten alerted me to the possible influence of De Kat Angelino on Kielstra.

the moral obligation of the Dutch colonizer to take care of public order and stability, if necessary with a firm hand.

In the project 'Departing from Java' about the Javanese diaspora that I set up together with colleague Peter Meel of Leiden University, I was made to think about a possible other but related influence from the Netherlands East Indies: transmigration. In the early years of the 20th century, the Netherlands East Indies colonial government set up a colonization program. The goal was to induce Javanese to move from their overpopulated island to the 'outer islands' (*buitengewesten*), such as Lampung in South Sumatra. The idea was to create small Java's. The transmigrants were to produce cheap food for landless colonial plantation laborers. Equally important, as the British anthropologist Rebecca Elmhirst has shown, those resettled appear to have retained a sense of 'Java' as a symbolic 'home': a source of norms and values. Obvious vestiges of Javanese culture, such as *gamelan* orchestras and *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets) performances, but also administrative and religious traditions remained strong in transmigrant communities, as De Kat Angelino had prescribed.<sup>20</sup>

Kielstra had great plans regarding Javanese migration (or transmigration?) to Suriname. According to the Welter (that was the new Dutch Minister of Colonies)-Kielstra plan in a 10-year period 100,000 so-called free Javanese would be shipped to Suriname (consider that Suriname in 1935 had less than 150,000 inhabitants). They were therefore not contract workers, such as the more than 30,000 Javanese who had previously been brought in; the new migrants would cultivate rice for domestic consumption and export in Javanese *desa*'s, complete with their own administrative and religious leadership. Their own traditions and customs would be maintained as much as possible. In 1939 the first ship with about 1,000 Javanese migrants arrived in Suriname, but it did stop there and then. The outbreak of World War II meant the end of the Javanese migration to Suriname.

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<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Elmhirst 'Departing from Java to Lampung: Locating Javanese Diasporic Practices in Indonesia's Transmigration Resettlement Programme' in Rosemarijn Hoefte and Peter Meel (eds), *Departing from Java: Javanese Labour, Migration and Diaspora* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018).

The Welter-Kielstra plan linked ethnicity, economics, and conservatism. It is a textbook example of social engineering ... and somewhat other-worldly in a situation of economic depression and unemployment.

Kielstra enjoyed some popularity when taking office, especially in comparison with his politically and socially awkward predecessor. The support for him, however, crumbled but resistance was mainly hidden. Muzzling laws prevented openly criticizing the governor. The censorship of press and correspondence was further increased after the outbreak of World War II. Yet it continued to be brewing in Paramaribo.

It is certain that there was conspiracy in both military and political circles. The politicians denounced Kielstra's authoritarian attitude. In 1943, the teacher and politician Wim Bos Verschuur even dared to petition Queen Wilhelmina for the resignation of the governor.<sup>21</sup> Kielstra had him locked up immediately. Public protest therefore certainly involved risks. The military criticized Kielstra's lack of decisiveness. Because of its large bauxite industry, the Dutch colony was of primary importance for the manufacture of allied aircraft. Kielstra was certainly not blind to the military and economic dangers that Suriname could face, but his demand for expansion of Dutch troops was rejected by the Dutch government with the argument that Suriname really was not of importance to the belligerent powers.<sup>22</sup> Eventually the bauxite mines and transports were protected by American troops. Kielstra, however, was not in favor of this American presence, because according to him it undermined the prestige of Dutch authority. This view was of course known in the diplomatic and military circuit. Some American officers were most likely involved in at least one serious coup attempt, because the commander of the US troops was unexpectedly recalled to the United States after the attempt to replace Kielstra.

Public archives do not generally bulge with reports about secret actions and it did not surprise me that I could find little or nothing about this episode. Given the United States' very likely involvement in the coup, my last move was to look for records of Suriname in World War II in the archives of the US State Department. As far as I know, those archives had not yet been

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<sup>21</sup> See Hans Breeveld, *Baas in eigen huis: Wim Bos Verschuur, heraut van Surinames onafhankelijkheid 1904-1985* (Paramaribo: Djinipi, 2004) and Ramsoedh, *Suriname 1933-1944*, pp. 147-200.

<sup>22</sup> Ramsoedh, *Suriname 1933-1944*, p. 167.

consulted. I hoped that the American representatives would give a different perspective on Suriname and of course also that I would find the smoking gun about infiltration and coup attempts.

Let me immediately take away the potential suspense: I did not find that smoking gun, but that was perhaps too much to ask. To speak with the Rolling Stones 'you can't always get what you want'. I eventually found interesting peripheral information, with that different perspective. For example, the American consul in Suriname Winfield Scott writes to the US Secretary of State Hull in 1942 that: 'no real, energetic, continuing, progressive and collaborative all out war effort, may be anticipated under the administration of Governor Kielstra, a bureaucratic, uncompromising, procrastinating, weak, arrogant and pompous official, possessing little force, war-mindedness as well as the administrative and collaborative qualifications so necessary'.

A year later it did not get any better, according to the consul, who reports that Kielstra is not decisive, is pompous, and not interested in reality or daily life. And he rarely leaves his palace.<sup>23</sup>

That casts a different look at the, in his own opinion, so decisive governor. Kielstra's career ended in a minor. Colonial Minister Van Mook 'promoted' him to Mexico, because according to Van Mook, Kielstra undermined the war effort and, ironically, he caused social unrest in Paramaribo.

Wim Bos Verschuur, the man of the petition, was released in 1944, a few months after the departure of Kielstra, because the Colonial Administration did not want him to become a martyr for the rights of the people. With the departure of Kielstra, but actually with the outbreak of World War II, the colonial experiment of *verindisching* ended.

The war and its aftermath stimulated the autonomy movement, especially among middle-class Afro-Surinamese. In 1948 universal suffrage was introduced and 6 years later the colonial period was officially concluded with the signing of the Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands. On paper, the Netherlands, Suriname (and the Netherlands Antilles) were now equal partners.

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<sup>23</sup> National Archives, College Park MD, RG 59 General Records Dept of State File 1940-44 Box no 5306 Folder 5.

Kielstra's policy of Kielstra and his plan for the *verindisching* of Suriname were a final colonial convulsion. The governor, in consultation with the Dutch government, parachuted his plans in the colony, without much feeling or interest in what the residents of Suriname moved or considered important.

Perhaps surprisingly, in late colonial Suriname the state became even more dominant and authoritarian, and ethnic stereotyping was perhaps even more pronounced than before.<sup>24</sup> Governor Kielstra was blind to changes in colonial societies in general and in Suriname in particular. He did not leave his palace and thus did not see that a homegrown Surinamese society was dawning, personified by some well-known and lesser-known people who were passed in review this afternoon. There was no eye for the growing self-consciousness in Suriname. It was the last time that a Dutch governor tried to put his stamp on Surinamese society.

My assignment is the history of Suriname after 1873 in comparative perspective. A comparative but also a connecting perspective can help us to interpret developments, as hopefully I have just shown with the modest trips to Indonesia and the British Caribbean. This also applies to the comparison between the perspective of the outsider Kielstra and that of Surinamese such as De Kom, Schneiders-Howard, the Polanens, Redmond, the widow Ramyad, Hardjo or Bos Verschuur. Let's look across colonial, regional, and political, but also perspectival and disciplinary boundaries. Certainly in the Caribbean, the borders of former colonial empires have an impact on legal, sociocultural, and political-economic developments, while connecting elements and contacts may be lost too easily.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot is an example of a researcher who looked beyond the boundaries of his profession. This Haitian intellectual published in 1995 the book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.<sup>25</sup> It is one of the most important publications in recent Caribbean historiography and written by an anthropologist. His nuanced argument, which of course I advise you to read, is about the production of and silences in history. History is not only the recording

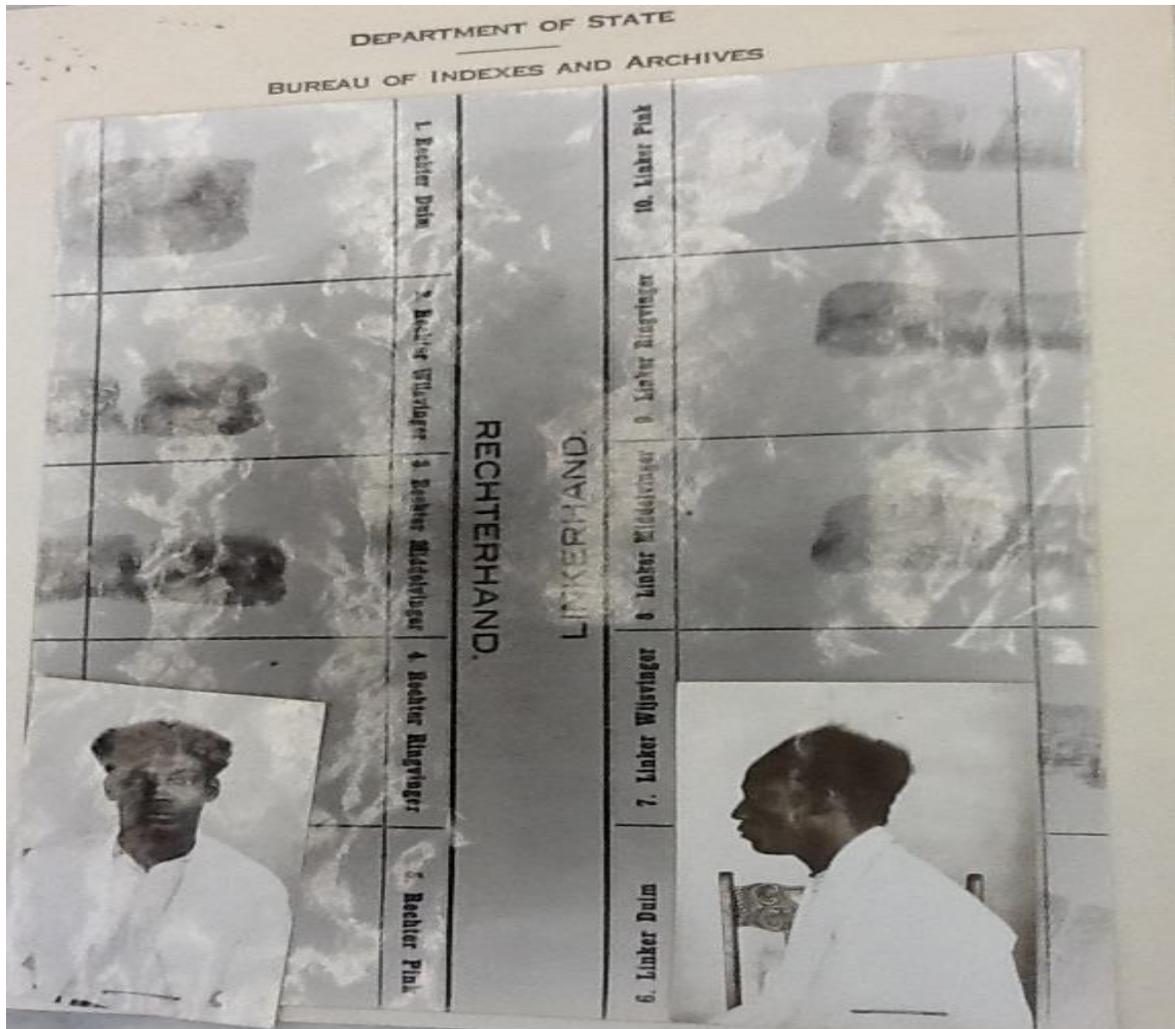
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<sup>24</sup> See Hoefte, *Suriname in the Long Twentieth Century*.

<sup>25</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

of facts and events, but above all a process of active concealment: sometimes unconsciously, often also on purpose.

I want to take you back once more to my archival research in the American National Archives to illustrate this point. On a rainy Friday afternoon in that old-fashioned and unpleasant archive in College Park, Maryland, I decided to also request the files for the 1930s. It turned out to be a very thin dossier, almost all related to the protests for the release of Anton de Kom in 1933. Without much enthusiasm I read the boring reports that were largely copied and did not contain any new or different perspectives. A waste of time. Until I came to the last message from the American consulate in Trinidad to Washington. It was reported with some astonishment that De Kom and his family were put on the boat by the authorities in Suriname. It was explicitly stated that De Kom was not allowed to disembark in the ports that were visited along the way. Until then, all the attachments had been removed from the dozens of files that I had seen, so I was surprised that there was an attachment to this rather short message. But my shock was even greater when I removed the paper clip and the letter that covered the addendum. At the very last moment of a rather depressing week, I had what you call an historical sensation.



As far as I know, these images by Anton de Kom are not available in Dutch or Surinamese archives. This created historical silence, to speak with Trouillot, of these mug shots and fingerprints of Anton de Kom has now made way for a very prominent public presence in postcolonial Suriname and the diaspora.

De Kom's second life started in the early 1970s, when a group of Surinamese students found the book *Wij slaven van Suriname* (*We slaves of Suriname*), which was still illegal at the time in Suriname, in the Leiden University Library, and multiplied it massively (and illegally). It was the time of social criticism against the exploitation of the Third World and political activism against dictatorships in South America, and Surinamese students were active as well. But it was also the time of Suriname's independence in 1975; De Kom was seen by many as an anticolonial hero

who placed social justice and solidarity high on the agenda. And he also set the tone in the development of the Surinamese decolonization debate, a debate that started very cautiously in the 1930s and that has not yet been fully completed.

My research agenda will focus, among other things, on the long decolonization process and nation building, coupled with the study of nation branding in Suriname and other postcolonial states. In the historiography of postcolonial states, nation branding is a subject that has received little attention, also because it is a fairly recent phenomenon.

Of course, nations have long branded themselves through symbols such as flags or anthems, but new is the use of commercial branding techniques. The state uses nation branding to introduce itself or enhance its positioning within the global economy by creating a recognizable image.

The goal is to (re)shape the image of the country and to (re)charge the economy by attracting foreign visitors and investors, promoting trade, and enhancing the country's profile in international organizations. But no less important, it also addresses the own population: it is a tool to mobilize pride in the nation and its accomplishments.

My focus is on how nation branding, at the intersection of the economy, culture and politics, serves as a means to (re)define the nation and national consciousness in postcolonial societies in the 21st century. I see nation branding as a historically logical extension of the ways in which national identity is constructed and communicated.<sup>26</sup> Suriname is an example of this process and I hope that a comparison with other postcolonial states will put this topic more prominently on the research agenda.

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<sup>26</sup> See Melissa Aronczyk, 'New and Improved Nations: Branding National Identity' in Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett (eds), *Practicing Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 105-128.

I have the pleasure to say a word of thanks.

First of all, I would like to thank the Executive Board of the University of Amsterdam, the dean of the Faculty of Humanities and the board of Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences for the trust placed in me.

My special gratitude goes to my employer KITLV-KNAW who enables me to fulfill this professorship. My thanks also to my colleagues at KITLV; the combination of humanities and social sciences and the resulting interdisciplinarity makes the institute a wonderful place to do research. Jeanette Poestkoke, Yayah Siegers and Ellen Sitinjak: you are the beating heart of the KITLV. I want to thank my fellow MT members Gert Oostindie and Henk Schulte Nordholt for their support and friendship.

Mieke Aerts, Liz Buettner, Paul Knevel, and Wyger Velema welcomed me at the UvA. Minou van Beurden, Wendie Pezarro, and Bart-Jan Roffel are constantly doing their best to guide me through the bureaucratic maze. I look forward to working with colleagues in the colonial and postcolonial field: Remco Raben, Peter Romijn, Charles Jeurgens, Geertje Mak, Vincent Kuitenbrouwer, and Klaas Stutje. I hope to further strengthen the ties with Michiel Baud and Cedla. Of course, I also want to keep looking beyond disciplinary boundaries and am looking forward to further collaboration with Michiel van Kempen, Rivke Jaffe and other colleagues in the humanities and social sciences.

Dear students, I have hopefully shown today that digging through archives can lead to unexpected discoveries. I hope that your research in Suriname, Cuba or anywhere else will surprise and inspire you.

Obviously, I will also keep looking beyond Amsterdam's borders. Alex van Stipriaan was the first researcher I met during my Surinamese explorations. Many thanks for all those years of sparring and friendship. The same applies to Peter Meel: I look forward to another joint project.

In Suriname I thank Maurits Hassankhan, Rita Tjien Foooh, Hilde Neus, and Jerome Egger for their help and hospitality.

My interest in the Caribbean was born in Florida. Jane Landers and Steve Noll were a big support in a new life. Despite the fact that an ocean separates us, our contact is still very intense. They show that a combination of scholarship and social engagement is very well possible.

My warm thanks go to my extended family: Beverly, Steve, Jody, Amanda, Joke, and Eduard.

Finally, I am very happy that my mother is present today, thanks to the resolve of Michelle and Paul's assistance. My father, who died 10 years ago, has sparked my love for history. He would, I think, be proud.

I have spoken.