

The future of the colonial past

Valedictory lecture by Prof. Gert J. Oostindie
Director of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV-KNAW)
Professor of Colonial and Postcolonial History at Leiden University
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Ladies and gentlemen,

“Centuries ago, the African student Jacobus Elisa Joannes Capitein defended his *dissertatio*, a learned treatise, in this Great Auditorium in Leiden’s Academy Building. He had been brought to the Netherlands when he was a small boy, from what is now Ghana. As a slave. Capitein was freed and he converted to Christianity. He was smart, worked hard, became assimilated, had powerful patrons, attended the Latin School in The Hague and studied theology at Leiden. He became a widely admired, exotic phenomenon.

Heathens should be converted, he argued in his master’s thesis at the Latin School. Later, in 1742, he presented his *dissertatio* in Leiden. In Latin, although there was nothing unusual about that at the time. However, the question he addressed *was* unusual: ‘Is slavery compatible with the Christian faith?’ His answer, on the other hand, was in keeping with his times. What matters in life is not freedom of the body but freedom of the spirit, and only Christianity can give that freedom. Christians can certainly keep slaves, but they must convert their heathen slaves to Christianity. The slaves can remain in captivity after their conversion as what matters is their *spiritual* freedom.”

Ladies and gentlemen, some of you were also present all those years ago when I gave my inaugural lecture in Leiden. * If so, perhaps you recognized the text I just read out. I have shamelessly committed plagiarism — or self-plagiarism, which is of course permitted under certain conditions. Then too, I started with Jacobus Capitein, using these exact words. Even today, I would not have expressed myself significantly differently, although I may have pondered whether to use ‘enslaved person’ instead of ‘slave’.

I have mentioned Jacobus Capitein again partly because I like the idea of picking up the thread but also because today again, I want to say something about the Dutch history of colonialism and slavery, and the way that past resonates in the present. In that context, the case of Capitein is both appealing and tragic. As I said at the time, he constituted a good investment in ideological terms, as an African who had been enslaved and then freed and who completed his education by arguing that there was no problem with the combination of Christianity and slavery. That was convenient in a period when the Republic of the United Netherlands was investing heavily in slavery and the slave trade. And if Capitein eventually failed as a preacher in the West African town of Elmina, his place of birth, well, that too could be explained. It was simply further proof that the true religion was too sophisticated for the likes of Africans — ‘as pearls before swine’, they would have smugly concluded.

We could paint Jacobus Capitein as a victim and tool of Dutch colonialism and end our account there. Which he was, of course. But if that is the only story we tell, we would fail to do him justice or acknowledge how he seized the opportunities that came his way. We would be denying his willpower, drive and intelligence, and we would be making his story too one-dimensional. That is not how we should recount history. We should be searching for the nuances, the differences in perspective and the voices that contradict one another. But we must do so from a proper understanding of the historical context, for not every version or interpretation of the past is equally plausible.

I would like to tell you another story with a Leiden connection. In 1658, an unhappy indentured labourer called Johannis Catheau wrote to his parents in Leiden from the Caribbean island of Barbados that he had been sold “as a slave” and was now being horrendously exploited. “I was sold here for 1200 pounds of sugar and I am with a bad master and his bad wife and I am sure that between the two of them I will be beaten to death before my time has come.” Some people will

now say that this shows slavery wasn't just about Europeans enslaving Africans. Of course that is true; I mentioned that in my inaugural lecture too. Slavery has been a constant phenomenon in world history, seen in all eras and cultures, only widely renounced in the course of the past two centuries and still not eradicated everywhere. That account 'is correct' and it is a plausible version.

But let us put it into perspective. The tragic tale of Johannis Catheau really did happen. But the more relevant story is that Europeans soon restricted slavery in the Caribbean, and elsewhere in the world, to people who were *not* white. There is a word for this, and that word is 'racism'. This racism was an essential element in centuries of European colonialism, especially in the slave trade and slavery, in the Americas, Africa and Asia. Johannis Catheau is barely a footnote in that long history — in which millions of victims have gone nameless to their graves.

I struggled with this at the time of my inaugural lecture in Leiden, *Slavernij, canon en trauma* ('Slavery, Canon and Trauma'). I wanted to share what was known about the history of slavery while also reflecting on the lasting consequences, on the political legacy, on recognition and reconciliation, and on the emotions that were still aroused by this history. Those emotions have not abated since then — quite the contrary. I offered a few tentative answers but also left many questions unanswered. It is now fifteen years later and I have learned a great deal since then, including about the Netherlands' colonial past in a broader sense. I have spoken and written a great deal on the subject. But I am still searching for answers, and indeed for answers about what my task actually is (or was) as a historian.

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In this valedictory lecture, I would like to look back — after all, I am a historian. I will touch on my first steps in this field, more than forty years ago in Cuba. From there I ended up in Indonesia via Suriname and the Caribbean territories of the Kingdom, but also back in the Netherlands. As well as reflecting on the past, I would also like to look ahead, not because I have any particular competence in this regard but because I have never been able to stop myself in this, just as I have never been able to stop myself from becoming involved in the public debate about the colonial past. I have adopted positions in these debates that some have found too adamant and others too flexible. It is a constant dilemma, and I have also changed my opinion regarding some aspects. The dividing line between consistent and intransigent can be wafer-thin. However, I have invariably concluded that talking about our colonial history *can* serve an important purpose in society at large. In my view, that purpose is 'social cohesion' (sorry for the *jeukwoord*, i.e. irritating term). But social cohesion is not always easy, and this history inevitably prompts an emotional response.

Public debate revolves around the Netherlands' colonial past as never before and the tone is often critical. This has been called a 'rediscovery'. That is the wrong metaphor, or at any rate it gives a very one-sided picture. To be sure, colonial history is being 'discovered' by white Dutch people but the people in the former colonies never forgot it, nor did the postcolonial migrant communities in the Netherlands, the people who drove this 'rediscovery'. *They* were the ones who said, "We're here because you were there!" and who demanded recognition. But the stories these groups tell, and that they want acknowledged by society at large, are far from homogeneous beyond the common factor that the Netherlands bears responsibility for a colonial past steeped in racism and violence. Their stories differ from one another and are only becoming more multifaceted over time with more multiple viewpoints as each generation is replaced by the next. Equally, the extent to which these

Dutch people identify with the colonial history and their 'country of origin' is becoming increasingly diffuse.

I see that as only to be expected. Why shouldn't people's sense of identity evolve? But not everyone was pleased with this analysis when I formulated it over a decade ago in my book *Postkoloniaal Nederland* ('Postcolonial Netherlands'). I have thought about this a great deal. Was it the message itself that people found irritating, or a suspicion that I was indirectly playing down the legacy of this colonial past? Was it because I did not pay sufficient attention to a broader issue, that of racism in Dutch society? I am still not sure. But it has taught me once again how important it is to be respectful in tone.

Let us return to the public debate. What does Dutch society as a whole think of the colonial past and what differences do we see between groups? I was recently involved in a survey on the topic by the current affairs programme *EenVandaag*. Some of the findings were surprising. As regards the Netherlands' history of slavery, about two thirds of Dutch people would be in favour of a national museum of slavery and feel more attention should be paid to this topic in education, continuing a trend that has been evident for several decades. This indicates that there is widespread willingness to bring a history out into the open that had previously been shrouded in silence. On the other hand, while support for national excuses is growing, it is still limited and there is even less backing for reparations. There is much more support for official excuses among Dutch people of Caribbean heritage, but their opinions are sharply divided on reparations.

We also asked people about the colonial past in a broader sense. Of the total panel of around 30,000 Dutch people, one third said they were proud of this history, 45 per cent said they were not and a fifth were not able or willing to answer this question. That is a far less chauvinistic result than the British survey quoted by David van Reybrouck in his book *Revolusi* and referred to repeatedly, which apparently showed the Dutch to be exceptionally proud of their colonial past. That might not be the case.

Over half the respondents with an *Indisch* (mixed Indonesian-European) or Moluccan background had a relatively negative stance towards the colonial past, reporting that they were not proud. That proportion is even larger among the respondents with Caribbean roots: the vast majority said they were not proud. We also asked people whether they were ashamed of that past. Most Dutch people said they felt no shame. The *Indisch* and Caribbean groups were very divided: over one third felt shame, but more than half said emphatically not. In other words, the postcolonial migrant communities are more critical in their views of the colonial past but that does not translate into shame. The obvious explanation is that they see themselves as the victims of this past rather than the perpetrators.

But how about the nostalgia that the *Indisch* Dutch are often assumed to feel, as to some extent are the Moluccan Dutch? They had overwhelmingly negative views of the colonial past of modern-day Indonesia and were much more critical than the panel as a whole. Young people who said they had *Indisch* or Moluccan roots were particularly trenchant. A possible explanation is the broader critical reevaluation of the past few decades. This started with the history of slavery in the Caribbean, but attention then turned to the violent nature of colonialism under the Dutch East India Company and in the Dutch East Indies, the bloody war of independence in which the Netherlands 'stood on the wrong side of history' and last but not least, the chilly reception in the Netherlands. This is the dominant impression for many young people in this community, not *tempo dulu* — the good old days.

In short, there are differing opinions, but the general picture is clear: more interest, more openness and more acknowledgement. That has resulted in political action such as *Het Gebaar* ('The Gesture') — state compensation for members of the *Indisch* and Moluccan communities — and the National Slavery Monument. A similar evolution is taking place in the big cities, in the art world, in museums and the heritage sector, in churches and — albeit hesitantly — in the corporate world. Self-examination and acknowledgement are being used to arrive at a broader and more inclusive national narrative, as in the recent apologies by the mayors of Amsterdam and Rotterdam for their city's involvement in slavery, or in this week's coalition agreement of Rutte-4 linking more attention to 'our shared past' in one breath to a 'dialogue about the slavery past and contemporary racism'.

Of course this has provoked a backlash, which is indeed a cause for concern. But I am also concerned by the fact that expectations are often so high, as if acknowledgement of past wrongs can be an immediate solution for the conflicts and racism in our society today. Unfortunately, that is an illusion.

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Given this context, there is an increasing demand for academic research on colonial history. I am proud that KITLV has been intensely involved in this development, for example conducting studies of the colonial past and connections with slavery of Rotterdam and The Hague, performing studies of extreme violence on the part of the Dutch in the Indonesian war of independence, and with an involvement in other projects due to start soon. This puts pressure on both the individual researchers and institutes such as KITLV. Everyone is watching and they all have very different expectations. People are quick to accuse established institutions and historians of unnecessarily airing dirty laundry or conversely of whitewashing. No, social cohesion is not always possible. What course *should* you take then? That of sharing your knowledge as a historian, without exercising self-censorship, even if that knowledge does not immediately bring groups closer together. Half-truths and *de rigueur* reproaches and excuses don't get us anywhere. At the same time, the tone of the debate is all important: everyone who feels involved must be treated with respect, or else the dialogue will grind to a halt before it has even got going. Unfortunately, I see this happen too often.

The recent rise in studies of cities' involvement in colonialism and slavery is interesting but also has its risks. For decades, there has been a trend towards 'provincializing Europe' in research on world history, whereby Europe is no longer seen as the sole centre of relevant historical dynamics. In fact, that was already the essence of the Master's curriculum in non-Western history I completed at the VU University Amsterdam. While no one would choose that unintentionally Eurocentric course title now, the main message was clear — and correct. That trend of provincializing Europe can be at odds with research into the colonial and slavery connections of specific cities, but it does not have to be, as work in the field of 'New Imperial History' shows. This school of historiography stresses the multifaceted networks and connections within colonial empires. Such an approach also has room for tracking down the stories of the enslaved of Amsterdam, the production process that linked a Middelburg chainmaker with a plantation in Suriname, the role played by trade with the Dutch East Indies in the growth of Rotterdam's port, and nationalism among Indonesian students in Leiden. All these stories demonstrate that colonial history was not just something that took place in lands far away but is also part of the past here in the Netherlands. It is important to tell that story, certainly from an educational perspective.

Yet I also see risks. One risk is that we go too far and end up mainly talking about what happened *here*, in the Netherlands. Another is that the traces we find in the Netherlands are amplified and too much significance is attached to them, for example regarding the early presence in the Netherlands of people of colour from the colonies. Such approaches attempt to introduce a human dimension in history but, as historians, we must not duck questions about how representative these people were or what the wider implications were for the history of the city.

Not that long ago, I raised questions in my book *Postkoloniale beeldenstormen* ('Postcolonial iconoclasm') regarding the stories we want to pass on about our colonial past. What do we actually gain from recognition of this colonial past, with its shameful motives, racist assumptions and violent practices? It is an important and overdue step forward, I said. The celebratory account of colonial history that used to be given literally belongs to a different phase in the formation of the Netherlands as a nation. But if this is the *only* story we are able to tell about Dutch history, it can never serve to connect people and bring about social cohesion. Since writing that book, I have thought and talked a great deal about this, but my conclusion remains largely the same. On the one hand, I am only too aware of how problematic it is to speak of a national 'we', a concept that fits better with the top-down style of nation formation in earlier centuries than with the highly diverse society of the modern-day Netherlands. On the other hand, I still believe that an endeavour to tell a broad, inclusive story 'about all of us' is crucial for our society.

Of course the colonial past is part of this story. So of course there is a future for this colonial past. As things stand, the group of Dutch people who feel some kind of involvement with this past seems to be growing rather than shrinking. Moreover, it is important that 'we' as a nation today keep in mind this colonial past as a mirror in which we see 'ourselves' and as a correction to the overly positive self-image of the Netherlands as a tolerant, humane and altruistic nation. We also need to talk about this history if we are to examine its legacy today and make that something we can discuss openly.

In *Postkoloniaal Nederland*, I wrote, "The rediscovery of the (post)colonial past is not a new beginning, but the closure of a long history." And also, "The postcolonial move to catch up on the debate about our national identity is almost completed." I would not use those words now, but was I totally on the wrong track? To a certain extent, it was because I did not expect public interest to increase to such an extent, nor that it would lead to so much more research. Which just shows that predicting the future is not historians' forte. If I were to write such a book today, I would also focus more on the effect of racism today on the constant 'rediscovery' of colonial history – just take the impact of Black Lives Matter, including here in the Netherlands.

Even so, my line of reasoning also touched on the new generations in postcolonial communities, the increasing diversity of Dutch society and the impact of the eastwards expansion of the European Union on the room for the colonial past in accounts of European history. It was partly an argument against identity politics and against pointless memory wars. I still believe that plea for intellectual freedom is relevant and compatible with engagement.

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It often helps to look at the experiences of other countries in order to put things into perspective. I started my career as a researcher in Cuba, forty years ago. What a colonial history Cuba has! Columbus, the decimation of the indigenous population, the slavery of Africans, bloody wars of independence from Spain, the humiliating occupation by the Americans — followed by the

Revolution. I learned a great deal there, including about the power of culture and nationalist citizenship. But I also discovered how stifling a state-imposed viewpoint is, and how mechanical the obligatory rejection of the nation's history. The overwhelmingly white communist elite took the easy way out when it came to colonial history, slavery and racism. No one accepted responsibility for what had happened in the past, which was blamed entirely on Spain, the United States or capitalism in general. All the problems of the past had been brought to an end by the Revolution. That included racism, on paper at any rate.

That is not how we should approach the colonial past and its legacy here in the Netherlands. So what *should* we do? I have had the opportunity to study at length how other former colonial states deal with this question. There are many parallels: the same struggle everywhere wrestling with questions that concern the very essence of what the nation was — and what it wants to be today. But there are also big differences. In countries with large postcolonial migrant communities, such as Britain, France and the Netherlands, those communities have been able to make their story heard as part of the national narrative. In countries where this is not the case — examples being Spain and Portugal — colonial memories are more likely to remain stuck in triumphant metaphors and monuments. One thing is clear: what the state does matters. We only have to compare the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or 'coming to terms with the past', of West Germany with the East German regime's practice of blaming everything on capitalism, just as the Cuban state did.

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The debate about the Netherlands' colonial past resonates to varying degrees in the various former colonies. This history weighs heavily in the Caribbean, but I was surprised to find how different that is in Indonesia. There is a tendency in that country to see the colonial past as a disruptive intermezzo rather than a period that still has a deep impact today. And I have not even started on the resonance in other parts of the world that were once part of the Dutch empire. Incidentally, what a privilege it has been for me to be able to consider these questions and discuss them with fellow historians in all these countries! There is much to be said on the topic of that resonance, but for lack of time I will restrict myself to a couple of remarks.

There is every reason to acknowledge that colonialism was fundamentally wrong, did not have any inherent justification and was seeped in racism and violence. Saying this out loud *can* be a worthwhile gesture, just as offering excuses can be. I believe it is important to have a debate on this in the Netherlands. But I get a strong impression that we are failing to consider what ideas and possible expectations there are on this subject in the very heterogeneous group of countries that — like it or not — share a colonial history with the Netherlands. This really ought to be part of the discussion as well, if the Netherlands is to achieve more than self-congratulatory exhibitions of public humility.

Furthermore, we should not just consider whether the Netherlands still has a responsibility but also whether it is even possible to make amends, and if so how. As regards that responsibility, I note a big contrast between Indonesia and the former Caribbean colonies. Indonesia sees the Netherlands as it really is, an affluent but minor player in global affairs, and in view of their shared history certainly not a partner that should or could take responsibility in any way in the further development of Indonesia. It therefore befits the Netherlands to be humble in its dealings with Indonesia.

The situation is different in Suriname. The republic only really distanced itself from the Netherlands during the long, arduous years under Desi Bouterse. However, the recent not-quite-state visit by President Santokhi made it very clear that Suriname is keen to renew links with the Netherlands and needs support in many areas. I think many lessons can be learned from the failure of the development relationship after Suriname became independent in 1975, and that approach should definitely not be repeated. But Suriname has more to gain from meaningful engagement, geared to the future, on the part of the former colonial power than from non-committal excuses for the past.

Finally, the six Dutch Caribbean islands are part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. That implies mutual obligations, but the task of providing support inevitably falls to the Netherlands. There can be no doubt that the history of the transatlantic relations within the Kingdom is one of colonialism and slavery, and it is important to be explicit about this. But does that insight offer logical pointers on how to treat one another? In one respect it does: acknowledge the pain on one side and shame on the other, recognize the cultural differences, show respect and do not take the attitude of 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'. But more constructive relations between the Kingdom's countries can only be achieved if there is realism about the challenges faced today. There is nothing 'colonial' about pointing to the problems inevitably associated with the small scale of the islands: the limited economic, ecological and geopolitical viability, issues with integrity in politics and government, and obstacles to implementing a more acceptable standard of public services such as health and education.

When the Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands was introduced in 1954, a hybrid, semi-federal structure was chosen that had originally been conceived with the aim of keeping Indonesia as part of the Kingdom — a very colonial if also futile endeavour. It was not supposed to be 'a permanent edict' but it did become that, not because it is such a logical or well-designed 'constitution' but because the Statute guarantees the partners stagnation if that is what they want. Over the past decades, I have written a great deal on the subject, expressing my surprise and indeed irritation about this state of affairs. Countries have evoked their autonomy in order to shift responsibility onto the other party, all at the expense of the island populations. The abolition of the Dutch Antilles on 10/10/10 did not become the successful relaunch that people had been hoping for. That was no surprise. No one can make progress when the bar is set so high and distrust reigns supreme. And that is most definitely not purely a question of insufficient funds. Take the large amounts of money that are sent to the three Caribbean municipalities: it seems as if resistance to 'recolonization' grows with every euro invested. Money does not solve everything by a long way.

What certainly does not help is the short institutional memory of parties involved in Kingdom relations, especially in the Netherlands. There is a never-ending stream of new politicians, civil servants and other professionals who are constantly reinventing the wheel, albeit with the best intentions (in my experience). Almost no investment is made in transferring knowledge. We will never make progress like this; we can and must do better.

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There I was again, crossing the thin dividing line between analysis and advice... Over the past quarter of a century, I have reflected and written at length about the significance today of the colonial past. However, certainly before I moved to Leiden, I also sought to explore other modern-day issues — not

so much in the Netherlands, let alone Indonesia, but in the Caribbean. That fitted well with the mission of KITLV to be an interdisciplinary institute for area studies.

As the director I have inevitably thought a great deal about KITLV's position as an institute that was founded in 1851 as a centre for colonial expertise. The role of academic scholarship in supporting colonialism is increasingly being subjected to scrutiny, and rightly so. It is also understandable that some people may view an institute such as KITLV with suspicion, as too white, too much part of the establishment, and not sufficiently 'decolonial'. But the modern-day institute is far from being a colonial relic. To those of you on the outside, I would say: do not underestimate the intensity and integrity with which we have discussed these dilemmas within the institute over the past few decades. To my colleagues at the institute, I would say: don't forget that previous generations at and around KITLV also thought they were doing the right thing, that they also attached a high priority to integrity — and that they too had widely differing views. Do not underestimate the importance of that diversity in ideas — that too has value. Do not lose sight of that value; we already have more than enough echo chambers.

Anyway, there has always been plenty of room for multiple perspectives and interdisciplinary research at KITLV. That allowed me to chart my own path. And so when I gave my inaugural lecture at the department of Anthropology in Utrecht in 1994, my starting point was the distant past and I reflected on the deep, indelible impact of colonialism and slavery on the region, but I then turned my attention to what I saw as the key modern-day challenges for the Caribbean. That brought me onto the subject of ethnicity, small scale, geopolitics, independence and non-sovereignty, and the difficult process of nation formation.

One prediction, which made the headlines at the time, did at least come true. The then Dutch Antilles would remain part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, just as other non-independent countries and islands would not choose to cut their ties with the colonial power. The costs of such a rupture would be too great, whether in terms of the legal and territorial protection, economic support, or the passport that gave citizens the right of migration. I argued that these benefits would outweigh the satisfaction of severing links with the colonizing power. And indeed, nowhere in the world has a former colony opted for independence in the past thirty years. The struggle has shifted for the non-sovereign islands, wherever they are in the world: it is no longer about sovereignty but about true equality and respect for local cultures. The Caribbean parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands are the perfect example.

When I leaf through that first lecture, I find all sorts of things that still seem relevant to me in understanding the Caribbean. But there is nothing on the climate, even though this was an aspect that was deeply embedded in colonial history. Alexander von Humboldt wrote about it back in 1800 when he was in Cuba. He described how the colonization of the Caribbean not only led to the decimation of the indigenous population and the introduction of the slavery of Africans but also environmental devastation. I had read his work when I was a student but I had clearly forgotten that aspect. It seems I also did not yet recognize the urgency of this issue, in itself a consequence of the colonization and subsequent globalization.

Nowadays it is unthinkable that you could talk about the Caribbean without mentioning the existential threat of climate change — or without discussing climate justice, which is such a big issue for the Caribbean and other parts of the Global South. I only have to refer to the speech by the prime minister of Barbados Mia Mottley, as eloquent as it was dramatic, at the recent climate summit in Glasgow. In my work, I have taken other paths that seemed important to me, and I hope I have been able to persuade you of their importance this afternoon. But I did not address climate change, which

is in my opinion the biggest challenge facing the Caribbean, and other parts of the world including Indonesia — and the urgency has only increased. (I hardly dare think about my own carbon footprint after four decades of flying around the world for my work.) However, I am proud that other scholars at KITLV have taken on the topic of climate change governance in recent years. That is yet another reason why I am pleased with my successor as the director of the institute, Diana Suhardiman, who will undoubtedly be able to develop this research further.

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I wanted to share my thoughts this afternoon about the future of how we deal with the colonial past and I did this in part by going back to some of my experiences and public lectures in my own past. If you would like to read the lecture, the text is already available in both Dutch and English. No footnotes though, as I have already created thousands of those. Then there is that pile of books... A much valued younger colleague recently let slip a description of me as “a kind of typewriter”. It was intended as a compliment but it did make me wonder whether I should have spent more time on reflection and less on writing. Perhaps that is a task for me in the years ahead.

I believe that our claim to fame as historians lies primarily in our expertise, in our thorough knowledge and understanding of the past and also in making that knowledge widely available — and not necessarily in our engagement. But of course we unavoidably take a stance through our choice of subject and the way we conduct and present our research. And we make use of our status — such as this professor’s cap — when we do so. Yet we historians should know better than to claim the same pontifical authority that we deny our predecessors because they told different stories about the past. Again, it is a thin dividing line. When I look back, I have to conclude that I gave my opinion rather a lot. I do sometimes think that could have been less.

And I could perhaps have given more space to other dimensions — emotions and the imagination. Those are dimensions that historians do not always feel comfortable with. That is why I wanted to liven up my farewell moment with a symposium in which I asked my colleagues to say something precisely on that aspect: which image, or perhaps sound or smell, do you associate with colonial or postcolonial history, why, and what effect does it have? I had hoped that this improvised sculpture garden would give a glimpse not just of this history but also of my fellow historians’ souls. A glimpse of the emotions that most scholars in my discipline do not really know what to do with, the creative tension between a warm heart and a cool head, shall we say. Unfortunately, COVID-19 threw a spanner in the works here too. Who knows, maybe there will be another possibility next year.

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All that remains now is for me to express a few words of thanks. First, the four employers I have had over the past four decades, consecutively and also to some extent simultaneously: the KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, Utrecht University, the KNAW/Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Leiden University. I would like to thank the many wonderful colleagues I had for their collegiality, for sharing their expertise and in many cases for their friendship. I thank these four institutions for giving me the freedom to chart my own course, in terms of discipline, topic and region, provided I remained productive, initially as a researcher and later in other roles. I am all too aware that the younger generation working as researchers at

universities and institutes are finding it much more of a rat race and more difficult than I ever did. This needs to change if the Netherlands wishes to remain an acclaimed centre for scholarship.

I enjoyed the freedom I was given and did my best to make good use of it. Throughout my career, I have nearly always done my job with great pleasure. The exception was those couple of years about a decade ago now when the KNAW, in a rather lengthy fit of administrative madness, decided that KITLV could be sacrificed on the altar of the digital humanities and the demands of a larger institutional scale. As if the colonial past was not important, as if Southeast Asia and the Caribbean did not matter. I hasten to add that since then, in a new configuration, KITLV is blossoming precisely thanks to the enthusiastic support of both the Academy and Leiden University.

When I think of all the fellow scholars in the Netherlands and abroad with whom I have had the privilege of working, the PhD candidates and students I have had the privilege of teaching, the people I have had discussions with here and in far-off countries — when I think of them, I see in my mind's eye a long procession of faces who have enriched my life. I can't name them all here, but I am grateful to them all. The same goes for my colleagues at KITLV. I would like to mention the names of the management team with whom I shared the task of getting the institute going again after 2014. They are Vanessa Hage, Rosemarijn Hoefte and David Kloos, and prior to him Henk Schulte Nordholt. The same applied to this team as to all my previous management teams: I never had to face things alone. They embodied collegiality in capital letters. I offer them my deepest thanks.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues Michiel Baud and Alex van Stipriaan for forty years of friendship and discussions about history and engagement. This is not the first time I have expressed my thanks to them in public but it may be the last. It certainly will not be the last time I thank my wife Ingrid Koulen for her loving support in everything and for holding up a mirror to me for so long and confronting me with my blind spots, including my scholarly ones. I think I may have become a tiny bit wiser as a result, although a glance in the mirror these days mainly shows that I have become quite a bit older. Thanks as well to our children Felix and Julia for everything they have meant to me, both in my work and, above all, in other areas of my life, insofar as the two could be separated. I suspect that dividing line will become less blurred in the years ahead.

Ik heb gezegd. (I have spoken.)

* Gert Oostindie, *Slavernij, canon en trauma* (inaugural lecture, Leiden University, 2007). I have opted not to include extensive notes for this valedictory lecture. I draw on two previous endeavours to reflect on the significance of our colonial past, namely *Postkoloniaal Nederland. Vijfenzestig jaar vergeten, herdenken, verdringen* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2010), translated as *Postcolonial Netherlands. Sixty-five years of forgetting, commemorating, silencing* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; quotes on pp. 241 and 242), and the Daendels Lecture *Postkoloniale beeldenstormen* ('Postcolonial iconoclasm', Amsterdam: Vantilt, 2018), and on my first inaugural lecture *Caraïbische dilemma's in een 'stagnerend' dekolonisatieproces* ('Caribbean dilemmas in a "stagnating" decolonization process'. Utrecht University, 1994).

Catheau's letter can be found in Erfgoed Leiden en omstreken (i.e. the Leiden archive), Weeskamer Leiden Archive, inv. no. 11245, letter of Johannes Cottijow [Catheau], 19 May 1658.

For the opinion poll, see Petra Klapwijk/1V Opiniepnl Rapport, *Onderzoek koloniale geschiedenis: slavernijverleden*, 4 September 2021; and *Onderzoek koloniale geschiedenis: Nederlands-Indië*, 5 October 2021. In *Revolusi. Indonesië en het ontstaan van de moderne wereld* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2020, 19), David van Reybrouck cites a survey by YouGov (December 2019) in which 50 per cent of Dutch people said that they were proud of 'the former empire', significantly more than in Belgium, Britain and France (with percentages of 23, 32 and 26 per cent respectively). YouGov did not reply to questions about the methodology used for this survey.

Prime Minister Mia Mottley gave her speech at the COP26 World Leaders Summit, Glasgow, 1 November 2021.