

NiNsee

**Breaks the silence**

## Foreword

*Glenn Willemsen*

### *Context*

Between the 15th and 19th centuries, the great powers of Europe shipped men, women and children from Africa to the New World to work as slaves on plantations. The Netherlands was a major player in this slave trade for a long time. It is estimated that it transported hundreds of thousands of Africans into slavery. Slaves were forced to work on plantations throughout the Caribbean in abominable conditions and under the threat of gruesome physical punishment. They were also psychologically and culturally dislocated from themselves by the ethos of the slave traders – divide and rule.

The Landelijk Platform Slavernijverleden (LPS) (National Platform for the History of Slavery) was founded in 1999 in order to break the silence surrounding this shared history and to work on dealing with this unfinished chapter.

This organisation subsequently became the government's interlocutor in this process.

The result was that the board of the National Institute for the Study and Legacy of Dutch Slave Trade and Slavery was officially installed on 24 June 2002 and the Nationaal Monument Slavernijverleden (National Slavery Monument) was unveiled in Amsterdam on 1 July 2002.

### **The static monument**

The monument is the impressive sculpture by the Surinamese sculptor Erwin de Vries. The unveiling took place in the Oosterpark in the presence of Her Majesty Queen Beatrix. In the Netherlands, 1 July is now the National Commemoration date of the abolition of slavery.

### **The dynamic monument (NiNsee)**

The NiNsee is a knowledge and expertise centre in the field of the history and heritage of the Dutch slave trade and slavery. It is distinguished by its unique interpretation of the shared heritage of Dutch slave trading and slavery and is intended to be the most complete and accessible point of contact for all Dutch people on the subject of slavery.

### International

Attention to the history of slavery now has a broad base of support. Various institutes throughout the world, such as the Schomburg Institute in New York and the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery in Liverpool, are devoted to this subject. The NiNsee will also present itself on the international stage and work closely with these and other institutes.

### Four domains

The NiNsee conducts activities in four domains:  
Research, education, documentation and presentation.

### *Research*

Until now, research into the history of the Dutch slave trade and slavery has been conducted primarily from a Eurocentric perspective. The NiNsee wishes to investigate the history of slavery from the perspective of those transformed into slaves and their descendants. Points of attention include gender, children in slavery or the personal lives of slaves. The research also focuses on the modern heritage of the colonial history through 'oral history'. Orally

transmitted stories are an invaluable source of knowledge. A great many stories are circulating in Suriname, the Antilles and also in the Netherlands that must still be documented.

#### *Education*

The Dutch Education system still devotes very little attention to the role played by the Netherlands in the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. This means that the average Dutch citizen has a limited knowledge of this history. In collaboration with relevant governmental organisations, the NiNsee will develop educational programmes intended for the normal education system.

#### *Documentation*

Hundreds of metres of documentation on the history of the Dutch slave trade and slavery have been stored in various libraries and archives in the Netherlands for centuries. However, there are also a number of depositories containing relevant items from the Dutch slave trade in Suriname and the Antilles. The NiNsee will draw these collections to the attention of interested parties on-line through its web site [www.ninsee.nl](http://www.ninsee.nl). To achieve this, the NiNsee will work closely with libraries, archives and other relevant documentation centres. This will make information on the history of the Dutch slave trade and slavery accessible to researchers, students and interested parties anywhere in the world.

#### *Presentation*

The history of slavery is a charged subject. This charge is expressed in two ways: trauma and taboo. A consequence of this ambivalence is that there is ambiguity in the slavery debate on issues such as the scope of the slave trade, the seriousness of the system of oppression or the nature of the contemporary inheritance. The presentation domain will accept any debate. It intends to stimulate and confront, without being self-satisfied. This domain is also the place where this ambivalence and ambiguity can be expressed, allowing everyone to see a reflection of their own unique vision. Simultaneously, the presentation domain is where the heritage of the Dutch slave trade and slavery is kept alive with semi-permanent and varying exhibitions and virtual presentations.

## Exhibition opening

*Speech by the State Secretary for Culture and Media Miss. M. C. van der Laan during the opening of the 'Break the Silence' exhibition on Wednesday 17 December 2003 in the NiNsee in Amsterdam.*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

History can be related in many ways. And this is certainly true of our part in the history of slavery. There are all kinds of stories on this subject, which are told to different population groups in different ways. Verbal, passed down through the generations, through archives, from history books and in novels. We sometimes see the pain of the past in sculptures, photos and paintings. And we hear about it too.

These sounds pass almost casually on a summer's day here in the Vondel Park in Amsterdam. You can hear a low, penetrating buzz, as if a tightened elastic band has been plucked. It leads you to a group of black and white people who make music, sing and perform acrobatic dancing. Spontaneous performances, halfway between dance and martial arts, known as *Capoeira*.

*Capoeira* – Now a trendy way to develop self-defence skills. In the seventeenth century it was a dance that African slaves took with them to plantations in Brazil. This dance allowed them to communicate secretly and gave them the strength to withstand the horrors of a life in captivity. That story is embedded in the sound that is associated with *Capoeira*.

Music and dance from different cultures, passed down through the generations. This is what we call intangible heritage. This type of heritage cannot be touched, but it can be communicated.

It is important that we treat this with respect. Just as with tangible heritage such as paintings, monuments and manuscripts, it bears the traces of our past. It is important to chart these traces and to get to know them. Even if the result of this research is painful.

An increasing level of activity has occurred in the field of 'the history of slavery' during the last few years. This is because our part in transatlantic slavery has been veiled for too long. In the late nineteen nineties, exasperation about this silence, the unspeakable and our ignorance prompted a number of Surinamese, Antillean and African organisations to initiate the creation of a slavery monument. This resulted in the foundation of a monument with two dimensions. A static dimension – the monument in the Oosterpark, and a dynamic dimension – the NiNsee slavery institute, a stone's throw from the park.

The memorial means – considering what has happened. This is important. It gives Surinamese, Antilleans and Africans in the Netherlands the opportunity to commemorate the fate of their ancestors. And it gives other Dutch people an opportunity to use the knowledge that they have today to think about what happened in the past.

The dynamic NiNsee institute means – using the past as a point of departure for the future.

This can be achieved by communicating as much as possible about the history of slavery in presentations and by studying it, conducting debates on the subject and including it in education. By linking it to current events. It can be done by involving other, existing, cultural organisations in breaking the silence.

The greatest challenge for NiNsee lies in this type of collaboration.

This is because traditional organisations still possess a great deal of heritage that we do not know enough about. A good example of this is the collection of special shells that has been owned by the Zeeuws museum for many years. The old story about that collection was that we, the Dutch, had brought it back from the East. The new story is that our East India Company traders acquired the shells on the Molluccan islands in order to use them as money to buy slaves in Africa. This is how visitors can be shown the same heritage in a *very* different light.

Discovering the other story and ensuring that the organisations tell it coherently – *this* is where NiNsee can be a motivating force.

There is also material that speaks for itself, but with which more can be done. For example, our archives contain folders full of slave lists. Inventories of plantations in which details of slaves came after descriptions of the fields, buildings and livestock. Men, women, boys and girls. With names, jobs, conditions and their financial value. An average of 300 to 400 Guilders. Working on the plantation until they were written off with revealing comments such as *'old and decrepit', 'rotten' and 'broken'*.

This heritage can be used for broader discussions on our slave trading history and education in this area. I understand that the NiNsee is collaborating with Stichting Leerplan Ontwikkeling on giving the history of slavery a more prominent place in our history books.

It is also important to show children and young people at schools the darker side of our illustrious history. To learn from it and to apply this knowledge to current events.

It is important that we constantly emphasise the link between the past and the present, for all Dutch citizens. Slavery is part of our shared history. And whoever accepts the task of making it a subject of discussion does this not only for himself. The NiNsee has the tools to tell *everyone* in the Netherlands these stories. Naturally, it is extremely important for second, third and subsequent generations of Surinamese, Antilleans and Africans in the Netherlands to know where they originally came from. However, I believe that all *other* Dutch citizens must hear these stories. This is because it leads to more understanding of each other's background. And this leads to respect for each other's culture, even if we do not always agree.

As Paul Scheffer says:

*'We must transmit the cultural capital of previous generations, and that means constantly expressing what binds us and what divides us'.*

The NiNsee is the ideal organisation to contribute to the discussion that must be conducted in a multicultural society. This can be done by adding a great number of stories to our heritage and demanding that attention be paid to them, thereby breathing new life into our discussion with the ancestors.

There is an increasing amount of noise surrounding the subject of the history of slavery. Not only casual sounds in the Vondel Park, but also in discussions and debates. Exhibitions, such as that held recently in the Rotterdam World Museum, stimulate people to talk about the subject. And 25,000 people have already visited the various slavery files in the web site databases of the National Archive this year. Interest has never been so great.

The interest is there, but we have to respond to it. The silence is now being broken. The debate must and shall be conducted. On then, on now and on the future. This is why I believe

that this exhibition in the NiNsee is so relevant. It responds to the hunger for knowledge from those who were directly involved. It serves as a supplement, intensification and link between what the education system and existing organisations already offer. And it also feeds the debate that we are having with each other. About what divides us, but especially what links us.

I wish NiNsee every success with its multifaceted, fascinating and important task.  
And I wish everyone a fascinating exhibition.

## **Break the silence**

*Eddy Campbell*

*'If you know where you come from, and how far you still have to go, the road to the future becomes clear and hopeful'*

*'Ignorance is bad, its roots are bitter.'*

This is a freely translated patois proverb from the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe. This proverb would be an excellent motto for the opening of the exhibition that you have all come to see this afternoon. Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, many millions of Africans were transported to the New World in order to work as slaves on plantations. In America and the plantations in the Caribbean, the living conditions were harsh and punishments were brutal. Consequence: psychological and cultural dislocation.

The consequences of slavery can be seen today in different forms of ethnic prejudice and social discrimination. This past is the history of all Dutch citizens. The National Institute for the Study and Legacy of Dutch Slave Trade and Slavery has the following mission: promoting awareness, recognition, commemoration and acceptance of the shared Dutch history of slavery.

The NiNsee is unique as a centre of expertise on the history of Dutch slave trade and slavery. We are the dynamic complement of the static slavery monument and are a visible national symbol of this history.

The issue is no less than increasing awareness of the consequences of slavery, the mobilisation of the national and international community of citizens to promote peace and prevent new forms of slavery by 'healing' the consequences of this tragedy. The history of slavery must be acknowledged.

A new historical consciousness must be developed and the solidarity between the descendants of slaves and slave-owners must be reinforced in order to collectively accept and go beyond this history. We can do this by means of scientific research. Naturally, a great deal of historical scientific research has been and is being conducted. Nevertheless, little or no research has been done from the perspective of the descendants themselves. In other words, research from the 'black perspective', implies an ideological choice and also has a therapeutic value.

NiNsee inventories the tangible heritage in the form of 'monuments' to the slave trade and slavery. It will do the same for intangible heritage with the aid of the oral history projects that are currently under development. Important tools for stimulating awareness of the collective history of slavery are dialogue and the (national) debate.

In addition to conferences and congresses, NiNsee also organises presentations in museums intended to confront every citizen of the Netherlands, but also the entire population of the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, Suriname and Ghana with the, until now, concealed history of slavery. Slavery was cruel. Slavery was inhuman. However, slavery could not (or at least not completely) eliminate the culture of those who had been enslaved.

Our ambition is to cut straight through the historical layer of history and to rediscover the unique cultural wealth of the enslaved. We intend to dig it out and present it to society. A lack of a cultural identity in which you take pride obstructs integration into the new environment. It should be the most normal thing in the world for a black person to state that he or she is Dutch with a sense of pride.

They will be able to point to a common history, its acceptance in and by the collective efforts of all who live in this country.

The history of slavery is an essential part of Dutch history. It is the dark side of a golden century, and a reflection of the Netherlands as a global colonial power.

'Break the silence' is the motto under which – initiated by UNESCO – the worldwide silence regarding slavery will be ended. Our exhibition will form the Dutch contribution to the unveiling of the, until now, hidden facts on the Dutch part in slavery and its consequences. The exhibition can simultaneously be seen as the start of UNESCO's 2004 commemoration of two hundred years of liberation from slavery, marked by the independence of the Republic of Haiti in 1804.

Creating museum exhibitions costs money. A great deal of money. I would like to thank the Mondriaan Foundation, the Prince Bernard Fund, KF Hein Foods, the 1818 Fund and the Bank Nederlandse Gemeenten for their financial contribution.

Achieving the aims set by NiNsee requires guarantees of continuity. In other words, the financing of the housing, the activities and research conducted by the NiNsee may not constitute a problem.

The NiNsee works from the past to the future of the descendants of the enslaved and towards the future of our society as a whole. An encouraging motto could be the proverb that originated in the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe:

*'If you know where you come from, and how far you still have to go, the road to the future becomes clear and hopeful.'*

## Board

Director: Mr. G. Willemsen  
Chairman: Mr. E. Campbell  
Secretary: Mr. D. Winter  
Treasurer: Mr. E. Marshall  
Members: Mr. E. Marshall  
Mr. R. Uda  
Mr. R. Koops  
Mrs. F. Ravestein  
Mr. S. Kotey  
Mr. A. Wallé  
Mrs. B. Meyer-Kratz

The National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slave Trade, Slavery and its Legacy will focus primarily and structurally on the history and legacy of Dutch slavery. It will therefore be the ideal centre of expertise in relation to this theme.

### Mission

NiNsee has the following mission: to develop and position itself as the national symbol of a history divided by slavery and the collective future of all Dutch citizens, by highlighting, both structurally and from various angles, the history of the Dutch slave trade and slavery and its consequences for Dutch society, at the national and international level.

### Aim

The Institute aims to create a subtle and realistic picture of Dutch slavery and its legacy from various angles, in order to confront that history and heritage, and to commemorate and accept it for the sake of future generations.

### NiNsee

Nationaal instituut Nederlands slavernijverleden en erfenis

Linneausstraat 35 F

1093 EE Amsterdam

Tel: +31 – (0)20 – 568 8 568

Fax: +31 – (0)20 – 568 8 567

E-mail: [info@ninsee.nl](mailto:info@ninsee.nl)

[www.ninsee.nl](http://www.ninsee.nl)