

*Kwakoe, Baba & Mai:
Revisiting Dutch Colo-
nialism in Suriname*

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The former Dutch colony of Suriname is, interestingly, geographically located in what is called “Latin America,” yet is culturally and politically more entangled with the Caribbean region. Historically, these links have their roots in a colonial history and contemporaneity that aligns European powers such as Britain and the Netherlands. The historical fact that the English colony of Suriname was exchanged with New Amsterdam (which later became New York) in 1667, is indicative for the way large swathes of land that were inhabited by non-white indigenous and enslaved peoples became subject

of colonial trade-offs. For Suriname, three hundred and twenty years of European colonialism have resulted in the presence of large African and South Asian communities in the Caribbean country. Having gained formal independence relatively recently (in 1975), British and Dutch colonial politics have shaped many aspects of socio-political and cultural life. This paper investigates the ways in which African and South Asian communities have become part of a racialized schema imposed by a system of white supremacy under colonialism.

To make my argument, I perform a case study through which I analyze two statues in the capital city of Paramaribo. Firstly, I will problematize Kwakoe, a statue in the heart of the centre of the city, representing the abolition of slavery, which de facto occurred in 1873. Secondly, I come to terms with a statue named Baba and Mai, which represents the arrival of South Asian contracted labourers after 1873. Both statues, as I will argue, importantly omit white Dutch colonial responsibility for the enslavement of African people (in the case of Kwakoe) and the ongoing oppressive conditions that were operative on the plantations (in the case of Baba and Mai).

I argue that a wilful obfuscation of Dutch wrongdoing stems from a sustained dynamic of perpetuating an seemingly innocent white Dutch self which is intricately linked to a Dutch systemic politics that sidelines

Surinamese collective memories so as to not stir up a constructed notion of “the good Dutch” at the expense of both African and South Asian peoples in the Surinamese context. These groups, then, are left with both an embodied sense of inferiority, as well as with an inculcated perception of the other group as inferior, which I believe stems from a racializing Dutch politics of divide-and-conquer. These discourses developed after slavery was abolished, when the formerly enslaved African people left these sites of colonial terror. The Dutch felt obliged to ensure new labour forces, which resulted in recruitment practices in the former Dutch colony of the East Indies, and in the former colony of British India.

A main reason why a revision of Dutch colonial history is important because it opens up often negated issues of racialization in received Dutch historiography and contemporary society. In fact, the category of race, and, subsequently, the process of racialization are largely and passionately denounced both in the Netherlands (Wekker 2016; Nimako and Willemsen 2011) and, through its colonial domination, remains under-theorized in Suriname. Therefore, this paper aims to recenter race as a fundamental social marker (Yancy 2008, 2018; Mills 1998; Crenshaw 2016; Essed and Goldberg 2002; DiAngelo 2018) that unfortunately continues to shape hierarchical race relations.

Historical framework

In this section I briefly sketch the period of arrival of African captives and South Asian contacted labourers in Suriname. As noted above, Suriname became a Dutch colony in 1667, but in previous decades the Surinamese coast was already visited by Spanish, Portuguese, English, and Scottish colonial conquerors.

In their account of the Atlantic slave trade, Nimako and Willemsen detail the considerable efforts that the relatively small country of the Netherlands has made in mass abductions of African captives who were taken to the Americas. They note that: “between 1600 and 1650 the Netherlands replaced Britain as the second major transatlantic transporter; the figure for this period are as follows: Portugal (439,500), Netherlands (39,900) and Britain (23,000)” (Nimako and Willemsen 2011, 19). In the next period they mention, the numbers are as follows: for 1651-75 were Britain 115,200; France 5,900; Netherlands 59,500; Denmark 200; Portugal 53,700 (19). Postma writes:

The spread of cultivation in the 1600s stimulated the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade dramatically. After sugar production became successful in Brazil, the Dutch sought to dominate the industry by capturing northern Brazil in 1630, which got them started in the traffic. Although the Portuguese re-

gained all of Brazil a few decades later, the Dutch remained active in the slave trade. Some of the planters who had cooperated with the Dutch fled Brazil and settled in the Caribbean, where they helped to establish sugarcane cultivation. (2003, 12)

Scholars critical of dominant, and sometimes apologetic nationalist historiographies about the slave trade are summarized by Nimako and Willemsen, a summary which frames the analysis that will follow in this paper:

Europe was the location of ideas, design, planning and innovations in slavery and the slave trade; Africa was the source of banditry, abduction and the captivity of vulnerable peoples (Rodney 1974); the Caribbean and the Americas were the sites of production by enslaved labour (James 1980); and Europe again was the destination of the consumption of the goods produced by the enslaved (Williams 1994). All elements of this network of nations and international relationships were irrepressibly racialized (Banton 1977; Miles 1982). (2011, 3)

In total, it is estimated that the Dutch captured 501,400 enslaved Africans in the period between 1519 and 1867 (Nimako and Willemsen 2011, 28). Many of these enslaved people were taken to the plantations in Suriname, the number of which grew to 564 in 1827, of which most produced sugar, coffee, and cotton (Nimako and Willemsen 2011, 69).

Importantly, I would like to stress that as in many other parts of the colonized world, rebellions against the terror on colonial plantations were widespread in Suriname. Many enslaved people were able to flee the plantations and reach the interior Dutch colony, where Marron villages were founded, which functioned as continuing sites of resistance. In one of the few accounts by an Afro-Surinamese anti-colonial activist, Anton de Kom narrates elaborately about the atrocities perpetrated by the Dutch, and subsequent acts of resistance that were ongoing. His text *Wij Slaven van Suriname* (We Slaves of Suriname), will be published in English in 2019.

To exemplify the atrocities that were perpetrated by the white Dutch colonial authorities, the following narrative by de Kom is indicative:

Only against the death penalty the Dutch seemed to have reservations. Or rather, the colonial government began to buy those who were sentenced to death from their masters. The death sentence was then overturned to lifelong forced labour in the public works. Mindful of the saying: “my hand is cruel, but my heart is gentle,” they first cut off the tongue of those punished, after which they castrated them, and branded the Dutch coat of arms on their cheeks. In this condition they were then forced to work in chains for the rest of their lives. (1934, 58-59) (My translation)

This example shows that the punitive practices of the Dutch authorities did not deviate much from those employed by the plantation owners. Again, it was as a result of a rigid calculation of keeping profits as high as possible, that enslaved people were to be kept alive and put to work, than to receive a death penalty – hence the conviction to forced labour. The branding of the coat of arms served the purpose of, on the one hand, having a sign of recognition in case enslaved people fled the plantations of forced labour camps to join the Maroon groups who were living in the interior. On the other hand, the branding arguably was intended to serve as a permanent reminder of possession, or subjugation as an item of property— the fundament of the slave system. The memories of the days of slavery were transmitted intergenerationally, and in the school system that de Kom was part of, only a certain version of Dutch and Surinamese history was to be remembered. Yet, the stories of escaped Afro-Surinamese continued to be a vivid reminder of colonial conditions, juxtaposing the official narratives.

As with slavery, the Dutch organizers and operators of plantations did not have to invent a new system themselves to be able to proceed with profiteering in their colonies. For centuries, black bodies had been imported from Africa, but after the abolition of slavery, they could follow the example of their British counterparts to lure and import brown bodies to work the plantations. Brit-

ish contractors had been successful in the process of “recruiting” South Asian labourers, and send them onto ships to many British colonies. And so, British and Dutch colonial authorities made an agreement to ensure the steady import of humans to the colony of Suriname. On 5 June 1873 the first ship carrying South Asians arrived in Suriname, marking the period of arrival of in total 34,304 people (Choenni 2016, 47). The system of indentured labour with regard to the colony of Suriname lasted from 1873 until 1916, until pressure from Indian nationalists banned the recruitment of labourers altogether. Strident criticism of Indian labour conditions in Southern Africa— expressed by Indian lawyer and future independence advocate Mohandas K. Gandhi—led to the realization among many observers that the system was degrading and shameful. One of India’s most prominent scholars at the time, G.K. Gokhale stated that: “the system is monstrous, inherently unjust, based on deceit and upheld by violence....a stain for every country, which tries to condone it” (Qtd in De Klerk 1953, 19).

Historians have devoted much attention to the working conditions of indentured labourers on the plantations, putting less emphasis on the actual recruitment process in British India. The widely-held belief that North-Indian labourers were contracted voluntarily and possessed comprehensive knowledge about conditions and consequences, does not, however, correlate with many experiences by contract labourers, as Tinker (1974, 165),

Emmer (1986, 187-207) Choenni,(2003, 20-53; 2009, 108-123), and Bhagwanbali (2010, 61) argue.

Having arrived in Suriname, it should be stressed that the same slave-owning planters were now leading the plantation on which Asian indentured labourers were serving their contract. Crucially, they were subjected to a series of new measures that would ensure their obedience and that they would stay put. One could not choose to leave the plantation without a written permission. As regards these so-called punitive sanctions, Hoefte (qtd. in Choenni 2016, 450) argues:

The punitive sanction referred to a criminal system which was designed to have control over the contracted labourers. Those who refused work were handed several kinds of punishment, and often their wages were withheld. Also, the contracted labourers were not allowed to leave the plantations without permission during working days; for this they needed a leave-pass issued by the employer. Not only were harsh punishments applicable to offences and crimes, but this also applied to “laziness,” and refusal to work, demolishing machines, tools, or other objects on the plantation, and stealing. It was also punishable to use vulgar or insulting language uttered towards seniors. (Hoefte 1987: 62; Hoefte 1998: 203-204)”

The punitive sanction was only abolished after the Second World War, as stated by Choenni: “The punitive

sanction remained in place in Suriname until the 8 September 1947 ordinance, and was abolished on 8 September 1947 (Gouvernementsblad nr. 140)" (2016, 450).

Choenni does acknowledge that after the abolition of slavery, a particular colonial mentality persisted. In this regard, he is agreeing with de Kom, who writes in *We Slaves from Suriname*: "After the abolition of slavery owners of the plantations and their manjhas (representatives) remained in place. They seldom developed new ideas concerning labour relations, and the legal position of the workers. This is why the old notions about slavery continued to exist even after its abolition" (Qtd. In Choenni 2016, 452).

Despite the continued subjugating methods that affected all racial groups who were subordinated under the white Dutch rulers, a separate historical development of cultural groups seems to surface, exemplified by commemorative practices, to which I turn now.

Critical notes on statues addressing colonial history

In this section, I will analyze and bring into conversation the two statues mentioned in the introduction. I touched upon Anton de Kom's text *We Slaves of Suriname*, and laid bare some elements that have forged Afro-Surinamese, and Hindustani colonialism. It became obvious, that

the year 1873 was a watershed moment in Surinamese history, a moment which ended the system of slavery on the one hand, and which marked the beginning of Hindustani migration to Suriname. The remainder of this paper seeks to clarify how two prominent statues that mark the abolition of slavery and the arrival of Hindustani, represent a larger mnemonic dynamic of ongoing affective dissonance between Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani. Central will be the question that arises from the alleged tension between the two works of art, by engaging in an analysis of the statues themselves, and a critical discourse analysis narratives that emerged after the two statues were erected.

On 1 July 2013, Antillean, Surinamese, and Dutch commemorations were organized to mark the abolition of slavery on 1 July 1863. One hundred and fifty years after the official abolition of slavery and forty years after gaining its formal independence, the former Dutch colony of Suriname, in its official narratives, display a multitude of cultures, ethnicities and languages, proudly stating the uniqueness of its diversity. Underlying the vast array of racial diversity, however, contrasting and conflicting narratives emerge in Surinamese public life and versions of its history. The nation-state, which in its official historiography underlines a history of a three hundred and twenty years of colonial exploitation, is—from the perspective of unravelling national identity formation and colonial entanglements—an entity laden

with many layers of cultural histories, intertwined with its respective racial groups . A prime object that is purportedly symbolizing Suriname's national history is a statue that was erected in a central location of its capital city Paramaribo. The bronze image of Kwakoe (Fig.1) is one of few objects in Suriname that has been actively elevated to a national symbol, being depicted on official documents and websites, appropriated to attempt to visualize a national identity.

In Surinamese society, however, the statue of Kwakoe is perceived very differentially, because diverse cultural perceptions by the two largest racial groups in Suriname, Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani, complicate the very construction of a unified national identity. Although the perceived national symbol of Suriname is a vivid depiction of a former slave expressing the moment of liberation, the image evokes different emotions and connotations, most often depending on the ethnic background of the viewer. As the legacy of slavery is perceived so differently by Suriname's ethnic groups, the question, then, arises whether Kwakoe can at all function as a national symbol of unity, as a collective expression of the production of Surinamese culture. Can the symbol of the abolition of slavery be appropriated as an overarching icon of 'national identity'?



Figure 1. Kwakoe Statue in Paramaribo, Suriname. (source: Wikipedia Creative Commons)

In Figure 1 the statue of Kwakoe is displayed. I first want to highlight one aspect of the visual image, namely the facial expression of Kwakoe. What is striking, is the way the statue is made to look towards a point above him, which is odd, to say the least. To portray the

liberation of an enslaved person, representing the end of formal slavery that lasted more than two hundred, years in Suriname, in this particular way, points to a wilful act to deflect attention from the social conditions that were part of the system of slavery. A vague perception towards a point in the sky, I contend, evokes a connotation of transcendence, of a spiritual salvation, rather than a political foregrounding of ending the material conditions of owning black bodies, let alone the fact that colonialism continued to be sustained for another hundred years after the abolition of slavery.

From its central location in the capital city, the image of Kwakoe, since its erection on 1 July 1963, began to exert its influence and representational force upon all of Suriname. The construction of this national symbol, however, never ceased to stir up controversy, unease and outright opposition. The history and powerful legacy of slavery produce ambivalent cultural connotations: from sentiments ventilating freedom to the commencement of the period of *indentured labour*, which perpetuated the colonial plantation economy, whilst dividing the nation culturally.

Depictions of the statue are – apart from the national flag of Suriname- among the most widely reproduced symbols of Surinamese national identity formation, state-run, rather than collectively perceived. Contrastively, the following critical perspective on the matter

should shed more light on its interpretations and cultural connotations among members of the Hindustani community in Suriname.

Over the years, the Indian-Surinamese or *Hindustani* population would surpass the Afro-Surinamese in numbers, adding to the cultural conflict that was carefully monitored and, according to many contemporary Surinamese analysts, even promoted by the Dutch authorities in line with the political strategy of divide-and-conquer. Moreover, in contrast to their African counterparts, Asian immigrants were not given Dutch citizenship until 1927 (Hoeft 1998, 21). As a result, Hindu and Muslim marriages were not recognised by the Dutch, creating an even greater rift between the two largest ethnic groups, the Afro-Surinamese and the Indian-Surinamese.

From the perspective of Asian immigrants – lured to work the plantations after the abolition of slavery – the emancipatory image of the liberated enslaved person contrast with a bitter illusion. Although the system of buying, trading, and keeping enslaved people had been abandoned in 1863, Asian migrants were forced upon arrival to submit to a plantation economy and regime, only differing from the slavery era regarding factual ownership of bodies. As mentioned, plantation owners made extensive use of the so-called *poenale sanctie* (punitive sanction), enabling the Dutch to punish those

who were “insubordinate” or otherwise “unwilling to work” according to the designated standards (Hoefte 1998, 21). Many were imprisoned or received physical punishment. Liberation, for Hindustani and Javanese, resulted in a reality of repression and submission, not congruent with the image of breaking of chains that was supposedly meant to uphold salvation and freedom. As a result, the symbol of an emancipated enslaved person capturing the moment of emancipation, conflicts with plantation realities from the perception of Hindustanis and Javanese. Moreover, the associated liberation, deriving from a *constructed* national symbol, did not materialize: Asian workers complained of being treated as second-class citizens and failed to truly connect to the political heart of Surinamese society – to the only large city of Paramaribo – until the 1950s and 1960s. The statue of Kwakoe is therefore usually interpreted as symbolizing the ‘emancipation’ of Afro-Surinamese, marking a bitter threshold of the beginning of their own exploitation and misery. Because the history of Hindustani and Javanese Surinamese only starts in 1873, the point of reference that Kwakoe embodies, does not represent a perceived belonging or a cultural bond allegedly forging – considering official Surinamese historiography - a unified Surinamese identity.

Furthermore, the statue of Kwakoe emanates a specific gesture of liberation: holding up broken chains does address the evils of slavery, but by no means does it

fundamentally criticize *colonialism* as such. The bronze artefact was – as stated earlier – erected in 1963, a year in which many British and French former colonies had already finished their road towards formal independence. The role of the Dutch as colonial power is not questioned by the narrative Kwakoe radiates: it was decided that ownership of human beings was to be illegal, but the Dutch ownership of the land, of possessing the colony itself, was not addressed. In this regard, the political effort to highlight and commemorate Suriname’s history of slavery does not reflect wider anti-colonial sentiments. Partha Chatterjee observes that “the point is that the practices that activate the forms and methods of mobilization and participation in political society are not always consistent with the principles of association in civil society” (1993, 64). Political structures in Paramaribo had been organized for a white Dutch elite primarily, and slowly – partially due to global anti-colonial endeavours – a small Creole segment was given ‘a seat on the table.’ It could well be argued that a civil society was not present, as political and social organizations were hardly present in a society which was largely geared towards longstanding colonial economic goals. These economic goals centered on the plantations were to be kept outside of the frame of a more fundamental liberation from economic enslavement. And so, I suggest that the statue of Kwakoe represents a moment in time, a temporal statement through which an undesirable past could be

displayed without essentially confronting Dutch colonial ownership and domination of Suriname itself. By participating in the event of commemorating 100 years of abolition of slavery, the Dutch authorities could be said to have attempted to morally cleanse their conscience by embedding crimes against humanity— i.e. the practice of slavery— into a distant past.

The Dutch colonial tactic is reminiscent of the analysis performed by Clare Anderson, stipulating that “the ‘warp’ of this thinking was a totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state’s real or contemplated control: peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth” (2007, 254). Under Dutch control, slavery was pushed out of the grid, and its image became a symbol for a society in a prolonged identity crisis, reiterating the question whether there can be a Surinamese national identity based on the significantly divergent perceptions of the history of slavery.

Surely, the statue of Kwakoe speaks to and continues to address the descendants of formerly enslaved Surinamese as a symbol that that informs an identity that was so brutally constructed by Dutch slavery. The nation-state of Suriname came into existence because human bondage and exploitation. Such histories painfully form the bedrock of a nation that develops culturally and multiculturally in many directions. Interestingly, Benedict

Anderson elucidates: “My point of departure is that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in the view of that word’s multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind” (2006, 4). Moreover, he contends that “cultural artefacts have aroused such deep attachments,” (2006, 4) indicating the immense power these symbols could carry. This, again, problematizes the prominence of the statue given Suriname’s history.

An additional problematic representation of Kwakoe as symbol for national identity refers to its reflection of agency, or rather, the *lack* of agency it embodies. The figure of Kwakoe is a snapshot of the moment directly after his chains were broken. The specific act of breaking the chains – possibly and potentially symbolizing *active resistance* against slavery – is not signified by the statue. The stance could well be interpreted as a passive consequence of an invisible, almost agency-free process of liberation. The unanswered question remains: did Kwakoe liberate himself or was he liberated? Analyzed even broader: the role of the Dutch as slave-owners, as agents of repression, is not depicted by the statue. The image is but a representation of a singular African-Surinamese slave – isolated from his own racial community and indeed any collective agency. Although standing fierce and inhibiting a representational force, his solitude suggests a total lack of collectiveness. Since the statue was erected in 1963, at a time

when leading Dutch politicians were not even contemplating a roadmap towards independence, the reasoning becomes clear: a fundamental critique would have been too politically sensitive. A liberating statement that counters the Dutch crime of enslaving Africans was politically correct, but a remembrance of the victims of the system of Dutch colonialism is not addressed by the statue.

A noteworthy remark on Kwakoe's problematic representation is the name itself. In line with the tradition to name slaves after the day on which they were born, the slave was named Kwakoe, meaning Wednesday. Reminiscent of the derogatory naming of Robinson Crusoe's image of a savage (Friday), the name Kwakoe has been derived from impersonally singular moment in time, rather than from the perspective of the individual himself, or from the perspective of his community.

The history of Suriname is of such a nature that any description of an event showing a representative of one ethnic group simultaneously seems to divide the nation, its myriad of peoples, by elevating one moment in time to a supposedly pivotal and formative representation of Surinamese national identity. A highly critical moment in the history of Suriname, the First of July 1863 marked a watershed instant in time, creating cultural dialectics that are tangible even today. The crucial point and major conclusion after having scrutinized

the impact of Kwakoe, is that although a Surinamese awareness about the central role of slavery is continually being produced by the statue, the perception and importance is markedly diverse among the ethnic groups that constitute its population. With regard to collective elements within the formation of national identity, conceptual frameworks addressing cultural trauma shed more light on the discrepancies with regard to different levels of identification, more specifically the notion of a separate cultural identification by Creole Afro-Surinamese. The cardinal importance of collective identity is underlined by an observation by Ron Eyerman that:

...collective memory unifies the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it, and which, because it can be represented as narrative and as text, attains mobility. The narrative can travel, and it can be embodied, written down, painted, represented, communicated and received in distant places by isolated individuals who can then, through them, be remembered and reunited with the collective. (2004, 159-169)

The diverse memories, linked to separate historical developments, are arguably a divisive factor, rather than a unifying one. Because the larger framework of a collective history of colonialism is not directly touched upon by Kwakoe, the identity formation that resonates from

the statue, is deviating from a national sense of unity.

The physical and central positioning of Kwakoe in itself reminisces of the *performative* character of objects of cultural significance, as Judith Butler argues:

The effects of performatives, understood as discursive productions, do not conclude at the terminus of a give statement or utterance, the passing of legislation, the announcement of a birth. The reach of their signifiability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by the one who utter them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors (1993, 241).

As ethnic groups in Suriname continue to live predominantly next to one another, the realization that an overarching Surinamese national identity is not signified by the statue of Kwakoe is all but outspoken. The bitterness of past events – especially the continuation of the plantation economy by using Asian labour after the abolition of slavery – still feeds into the rift between Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani-Surinamese communities. A truly intercultural marker of national identity should *hypothetically* address all racial groups in an evenly manner. Essential for a young nation-state such as the Republic of Suriname would be to effectively incorporate all cultures into an inclusive framework. However, the question remains whether such a perspective is at all possible in a state built on slavery, the system which

has produced a society of peoples with such divergent historical backgrounds. But, as Homi Bhabha points out, it can be possible to formulate “the complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ and make them the immanent subjects of a range of social and literary narratives” (1994, 201). The notion of identification is absolutely fundamental: groups as diverse as Muslim Javanese, Protestant Marrons and indigenous peoples have become effectively become historically intertwined. They have been made citizens of a nation-state and are by law given rights that should in name promote equality and respectful co-existence. However, serious doubts can be expressed as to how the Surinamese nation-state practically attaches an equal value to the more than fifteen different racial groups. A figure represented by the statue of Kwakoe – racially and temporally specific – can therefore hardly be a unifying element in such complex and diverse a society. In this regard, the observation by Pierre Bourdieu that “the field of cultural production is the site of struggles...” (1993, 42), appropriately typifies Suriname, still coping with the legacy of more than three hundred years of colonial exploitation and racial divisions.

The deep attachment in the case of Kwakoe continues to be felt by those who have ties with their ancestors who worked as enslaved people. A strong underlying sentiment, visible in both Suriname and in the Nether-

lands - again becomes tangible. Indicative for the division is the recent erection of a statue commemorating the immigration of Hindustani in Suriname. The statue evokes the precise time period after abolition of slavery, as is stressed by the *arrival-mode* typical of immigrants (Fig. 2), which leads me to the next section in which I discuss the statue of Baba and Mai.



Figure 2: Baba and Mai Statue in Paramaribo, Suriname.
(Source: Wikipedia Creative Commons)

In Figure 2, the statue of Baba and Mai is shown. Here, I analyze how the statue conveys and produces narratives, and how it functions in a dialogue with the statue of Kwakoe. What I firstly stress here is, the way that a received Western cultural tradition of memorializing people in bronze, fixes a narrative in a specific spatio-temporal framework. In contrast to a common circular vision on time itself –stemming from Hinduism - the fixing of temporality in the form of a statue which commemorates a moment of arrival, forecloses, I believe, a critical and ever-changing perception of a particular event. Generations of Hindustani may view, and a contemporary decolonizing turn among some does indicate, that versions of history change and that an event like the arrival period of Hindustani in Suriname, should not be cemented in a single, static structure with very specific cultural and political messages.

What is key, is that a profound cultural split –statue-wise— has effectively been created, enhancing the divergent cultural signification processes of the Kwakoe-statue. The Hindustani statue in this sense conflicts with, and simultaneously sidelines Kwakoe's national identitarian symbolism. Baba and Mai, as they are represented, are in a similar fashion as Kwakoe, separated from the colonial plantation context. The moment it is supposed to depict, concentrates the isolated duo into a world that is—like Kwakoe—not contextualized at all, other than by the text underneath the statue,

which, translated, says— ‘5 June 1873 – 5 June 1993 Monument of the Hindustani immigration. Inaugurated on Saturday 4 June 1994 by the foundation Hindustani immigration. “where I am well, that is where my fatherland is”’. There is no connection whatsoever with colonialism, and one could, viewed as an outsider, even assume that the two people were random travellers who sought a new “fatherland” and may have found that in Suriname. The elision of working conditions, of structural subjugation, of being kept in isolation to be a mere workforce to produce goods for the European market, the statue can said to be as potent as a contemporary and common Dutch politics of colonial amnesia. Also, it seems as if the two persons who arrived from one of the poorest regions of the colony of British India, representing the Hindustani labourers, were rather well-fed and looked seemingly satisfied, given the facial expressions that were sculpted. The statue, I argue, is an indication of a Hindustani attempt not to tread on eggshells, not to stir any trouble, not to rock the boat of a perceived status quo. The question arises what status quo is being adhered to: I believe no critical element was added, so as not to provoke Afro-Surinamese sentiments as Hindustani were among those who replaced the formerly enslaved Afro-Surinamese people, who for more than two hundred years had toiled on the hated plantations. Yet what is not represented often emerges precisely because of its elision. And the rise of recent decolonial awareness, which can be seen both in Suriname and the Nether-

lands, powerfully disrupts the image of the “satisfied” de-contextualized workers that Baba and Mai seem to represent. Yet what is important is to note that in a discursive context in which state-sanctioned iconic statues can prevail and arguably dominate—at least visually and consequently narratively—public life, the two figures represented as Baba and Mai, instil in those arriving in Suriname in the post-slavery era (Hindustani, Javanese, Chinese, and other indentured labourers) a false historical framework. Analysis conducted on stories about the ways labourers were lured to leave South Asia, tell a very different story. In a recent book that highlight voices of Hindustani and those left behind paint a picture that starkly contrasts with the image radiated by Baba and Mai. The following examples are excerpts from Bidesia folk songs composed in South Asia and Suriname, respectively (Majumdar 2010, 22).

The first text is a poem that was obtained by folklorist Ramnesh Tripathi, who, according to the research done by the Bidesia team that wrote the collection, had witnessed the departure of a train from Jaunpur to Prayag (Allahabad). He witnessed “three or four women who were also going to Calcutta. As soon as the train started moving they started singing and crying. I recorded the song being sung by them. It went like this” :

Puruba se aai reliya pachhun se jahajiya
Piya ke ladi lei gai ho.
Reliya hoi gar moi sabatiya piya ke ladi leigai ho
Deswa deswa bharmaiwai uhai paiswai bairi ho

Bhukhiya na laagai piyasiya na laagai humke mohiya
lagai ho
Tohri dekhiye suratiya humke mohiya laagai ho
Ser bhar gohuwa baris din khaibai piya ke jaibe na
debe ho
Rakhbe ankhia hajurwan piya ke jai na debai ho.

(The train came from the east and the ship came
from the west
And took my husband away
Railway has become my co-wife who has taken my
husband away
Rail is not my enemy, ship is not my enemy, money
is not my enemy
Which makes my husband go from country to
country
I have no hunger, I have no thirst, I feel very loving
towards him
When I see his face I feel very affectionate
I will make one seer of wheat last one year but I
won't let my husband go away
I will keep him in front of my eyes and not let him
go away)" (Majumdar 2010, 22)

The following poem is I believe indicative for powerful narratives that have lingered for generations among Hindustani in Suriname. Again, I wish to outline that hunger and poverty was a prime reason to leave the Ganges-delta, evoking imagery that fundamentally deviates from the well-fed migrants that Baba and Mai are supposed to represent:

Chhor aili hindustanwa babuwa, petwa ke liye
Padli bharam mein, chhotal patna ke saharwa
Chhut gaily ganga maiya ke ancharwa
Na hi manli ekobaba bhaiya ke kahanwa
Babua petwak e liye

(We left Hindustan to satisfy our stomach
We were convinced by the sweet words of the dalal
(arkatiya),
And in the process were separated from Patna and
the Ganga river.
We did not listen to our elders,
But came here because of our stomach) (Kahe
Gaile Bides 2010, 158)

These poems that have luckily survived despite a strong cultural tendency among Hindustani not to “rock the boat,” alongside a sustained colonial politics geared towards subordination, emerge as more genuine narratives about the conditions of indentured labour and the demeaning conditions of working on colonial plantations. Moreover, one would envision the statue next to Kwakoe, a painful realization becomes visible: why did the Hindustani arrive in the first place? Is Kwakoe not radiating freedom, emancipation? What happened to the enslaved people who liberated themselves from the chains? And is this not a historical travesty? The power to abolish slavery was completely in the hands of the Dutch, the power to lure labourers to work on the same

plantations (again, where the punitive sanctions were applied until 1947). Yet neither of the statues alludes to those who kept Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani in subjugation. Instead, the dynamic of avoiding tension seems to do just that, as in public memory, nothing is forgotten.



Figure 3: Baba and Mai text (source: Wikipedia Creative Commons).

In Figure 3, we can see the inscription underneath the statue of Baba and Mai. A critical remark about the specific form of the alleged quote should be made here. By carving a text in italics, one is tempted to assume that the message, in English translation “where I am well, that is where my fatherland is,” is a fictive spoken or written quote by one of the two persons who are depicted. However, the words are Mohandas K. Gandhi’s, and have been added to the text underneath the statue without any reference. It is particularly controversial, because Mahatma Gandhi became increasingly critical towards migration from the colony of British India, which resulted in a halt in recruitment practices by *arkatiyas*. Although Mahatma Gandhi was in contact with some Hindustani leaders in Suriname, the broader political goal ending the decades-long emigration disrupts the attempt to forge a positive migration narrative aimed at Hindustani in Suriname.

Finally, a critical decolonial intervention urges me to juxtapose the positive image of Baba and Mai with findings by Hira and Bhagwanbali, summarized by Choenni, who affirms that Bhagwanbali has described forty rebellions that occurred during the so-called contract era:

Collective resistance. Apart from these individual acts of resistance, a remarkable number of collective acts of resistance have been carried out during the era of contract era. Considering the collective

acts of resistance, it shows that one should not only consider the Koloniale Verslagen (colonial reports). This is proved by Bhagwanbali's valuable 2011 study. He has described forty rebellions, while in the Koloniale Verslagen; only a few uprisings are reported as being collective acts of resistance. (...) (Bhagwanbali 2011: 23; Hira 1983: 196-215). (2016, 588)

Importantly, the first of such rebellions occurred only weeks after the first ship carrying Hindustani, the *Lalla Rookh*, arrived in Suriname: "The first uprising already occurred on 22 July 1873 on the plantation Goudmijn" (Choenni 2016, 589). The notorious killings at the Mariënborg plantation, quelling a strike and subsequent uprising in 1902 resulted in: "...24 deaths. In total 117 shots were fired at the workers¹. (Bhagwanbali 2011: 100-125; Choenni 2016, 604).

These deaths, a result of structural colonial oppression on the Dutch plantations, are a continuous pattern that binds the underlying discourses of often hidden atrocities that should be taken into account when critical analyses are made of both the statues of Kwakoe and Baba & Mai.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have laid bare some of the problematic issues that arise from the 'national statue' Kwakoe, as

well as problematized some issues that arise from the statue Baba and Mai. The statues are important symbols for Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani, respectively, and produce questions on how the ‘colonial past’ is being memorialized. It is obvious that elision and avoidance of colonial contexts as well as contemporary embodiments of the collective traumatic past are issues that emerge and those issues are to be theorized in a very specific way, as the complex history of Suriname urges us to rethink received theories on memory, and colonialism. I hope I have given the impetus to do so, so that we can continue to critique and transform our contemporary colonized world into a globality of bold voices daring to speak truth to power.

Notes:

1. The events of the Mariënborg uprising are depicted in a 2013 film titled *Het Geheim van Mariënborg – Cry of a Cursed Plantation*, for a trailer see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4Jc0nhye30

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