

## Summary Inventory of sources relating to the history of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean islands

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### Background

Metamorfoze is a funding programme for the preservation and sustainable access to paper heritage. The programme is carried out by the National Library of the Netherlands (KB) in The Hague. The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has allocated additional funding to Metamorfoze for the digitisation of heritage relating to the Dutch history of slavery. In that context, dr. Coen van Galen, dr. Margo Groenewoud and dr. Thunnis van Oort, affiliates of the [Historical Database of Suriname & the Caribbean \(HDSC\)](#), have been assigned via the Radboud University to perform an exploratory and advisory survey of material on this theme for purposes of digitisation.

The focus of the survey is on archives and collections in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom. In addition, a global report has been created on the available archives related to Caribbean slavery and its repercussions in the Netherlands. The HDSC was approached because of the expertise and partnerships that have been built up in this project in the area of archive collections relating to slavery and contract labour in the former Dutch Antilles and Suriname.

### Approach

Online consultations were held at the start of the survey with organisations and stakeholders in order to activate the existing network and to identify the needs on the islands themselves. This was followed by an inventory of archival collections on the Windward Islands of St. Martin, St. Eustatius and Saba carried out by Coen van Galen in cooperation with Johan van Langen, programme leader with the International Heritage Cooperation of the National Archives. Margo Groenewoud has done the same, first at the Heritage Centre of Dutch Monastic Life, then on the Leeward Islands of Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire.

The researchers conducted their investigation in consultation with the archive and heritage institutions that contributed to this inventory. This dialogue had a different character in the Windward Islands than in the Leeward Islands and in the Netherlands. On St. Martin, St. Eustatius and Saba, the interaction was largely determined by the observation that much archival material has suffered from sub-optimal climatic and organisational conditions, with organisational levels regarding archiving still developing. In Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, there are fewer challenges related to physical storage than in St. Martin, St. Eustatius and Saba, but many organisational concerns mainly related to backlogs in the organisation and availability of materials. In the Netherlands, the level of organisation is optimal, but contextual knowledge is often absent.

### Main observations

#### Small scale and climate aspect

Smallness of scale makes the digitising of collections concerning the history of slavery difficult in two ways. In the Netherlands, the fragmentary nature of the material on slavery (usually embedded in bigger collections) makes it difficult to retrieve and interpret. On the

islands, it is mainly the small scale of the communities and structural undercapacity that makes it difficult to select, prioritise and access archival materials from a content-expertise perspective. Without such a structure and with severe backlogs in the unlocking and preserving of archives, it is difficult for the smaller institutions to submit requests to Metamorfoze.

On top of that, those archivists who are the least equipped are the ones who have the greatest need of this support. This is especially true for the Windward Islands, where archives have some catching up to do in terms of organisation and conservation. On these islands, archives are also most at risk from external factors, in particular the humid tropical climate and the likelihood of devastating hurricanes that are increasingly frequent due to global warming. Saba and St. Eustatius are also dormant volcanoes that are subject to seismic activity and coastal erosion.

### Capacity and organisation

In the Netherlands, material relating to historical slavery in the Caribbean often forms part of much larger collections of an entirely different historical context. It requires knowledge to label, retrieve, and offer these parts for specialised research.

On the islands, preserved material is not always well organised, although very carefully retained. In fact, all the collections on the islands deal with the theme of slavery and its ramifications. That certainly applies to the collections relating to the 19th century, but also to many collections from the 20th century, particularly the oral history collections.

The problem on the islands is therefore not that the collections would be unsuitable for Metamorfoze, but rather a problem of internal capacity, priorities and expertise. The step towards complete organisation of archives and a contextualised inventory of archival collections, allowing connection to (aggregated) search engines, is a very big one that requires a lot of knowledge and capacity - more than is present or can be freed up. For many collections, this is also still a step too far because the preliminary steps are yet to be taken. Firstly, the inventoring and storing of precious historical material in a secure archival environment. Then the actual conservation and digitisation of the materials.

Other situations include well-preserved and even digitised small private collections, put on a Google Drive somewhere, for example. These lack the infrastructure, knowledge and capacity to unlock materials in an appropriate environment. The digitisation is often done by a trainee or volunteer; the material is lovingly preserved, but the knowledge is lacking that is required to take the appropriate next steps, locally, regionally or in a Kingdom-wide context.

New grant opportunities that can address precisely this capacity issue would make a big difference here, provided they fit into the local context. Also, having money available does not necessarily mean that the right expertise can also be made available - this is scarce. That applies to the Netherlands, but much more so to the islands, where the relatively small size of the communities makes it more difficult to develop and retain expertise.

### Sources out of sight

Only in Aruba and Curaçao is there a formal archive organisation. Related to this is the fact that, particularly on St. Martin, St. Eustatius and Saba, it has been noted that important historical sources seem to have remained relatively 'out of sight'. This applies both to the public (including on the islands themselves) and to scientific researchers and the heritage

sector in a wider Kingdom-wide context. These are predominantly family-related sources, such as baptismal records and transport deeds, but also notarial deeds, vendu books and court records.

These materials are in use within the communities themselves. That creates problems with storage, controlled inspection and wear, above and beyond the already existing issues of climatic risks. There is a great willingness to improve on this, as long as solutions are sought together with the residents of the islands, and the expertise is (literally) flown in.

## Recommendations regarding approach

The perspective from the Netherlands on the Caribbean often leads to observations that refer to underdevelopment: 'there is insufficient expertise', or: 'they're too far behind'. It makes more sense to see the situation as substantially different and incomparable due to scale, different kinds of challenges, and a different political-administrative reality. In the heritage sector on all the islands there are people present with contextual knowledge, love of heritage and the will to work on it. The question is: how do you organise those forces? In the inventory and consultation a few suggestions and best practices were raised that can contribute to better use of the possibilities that Metamorfoze offers:

- flexibility in the nature of applications, for example in thematic clusters by multiple organisations jointly - such forms will provide perspective.
- establish a (temporary) local (commercial) scanning facility.
- maintain structural contact with new platforms and cross-institute working and organisational forms on the islands, such as Frente Kultural in Bonaire, Coleccion Aruba, the group of Antillean heritage specialists active in the Colonial Collections Consortium, the consultation platform in Curaçao that was formed as part of this inventory and the similar consultation group that has emerged on St. Martin concerning the archival issue.
- consideration could be given to engaging some kind of scout who would actively carry out further investigation on site in consultation with the institutions. With their substantive expertise, this individual could also contribute to the process of unlocking the collections.
- for a more structural solution, the special municipalities of Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius and the country of St. Martin will eventually need archive facilities. However, these archives will not have all the expertise in-house. To really catch up, longer-term support (e.g. 10 years) will be required through a work group from the KB, NA or other archival institutions with specialists in the area of inventory, restoration and digitisation of archives.