

Report

Being a slave: Indian Ocean slavery in local context

International workshop held on 29-30 May 2017, Leiden University

Over the last decades, historians have mined French, British, Portuguese and Dutch records for quantitative data on the European slave trade in the Indian Ocean. The information that is often missing, is the qualitative data on the experience of being a slave. The international workshop 'Being a slave: Indian Ocean slavery in local context' held at Leiden University on 29 and 30 May 2017 aimed to study the origin and afterlife of enslavement as well as the imaginaries and representations of slaves rather than the trade in the enslaved.

Doreen van den Boogaart & Harkirat Singh

THE WORKSHOP was organised by Nira Wickramasinghe, Professor of Modern South Asian Studies (Leiden University Institute for Area Studies) and Alicia Schrikker, Lecturer in Colonial and Global History (Leiden University) as part of their project 'Being a slave: Indian Ocean slavery in local context', and was made possible by a grant received from Leiden Global Interactions (LGI), and organised in cooperation with the International Institute for Social History (IISH). The conveners of the workshop brought together scholars from different disciplines and areas of interest to discuss and present their research on the experiences and the meaning of being enslaved. They reflected on the lived experience of slavery in areas like Indonesia, India, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Réunion and the east coast of Africa. The workshop participants took a variety of sources into account, like court records, petitions and private letters. But also the behaviour of (freed) slaves and the display of objects related to slavery were analysed. Attention was also paid to unexplored primary sources such as oral histories, memories and songs.

"Stories of slave experiences are everywhere, once you look for them". Alicia Schrikker started the workshop by stating that references to the lives and experiences of slaves can be found in the archives and literature, and in a great variety of genres. The question, however, is how one can find them and write about them. Elaborating on this, Schrikker used a recent biography of an eighteenth century Dutch Governor, who was famous for his scientific drawings of flora and fauna in the different places in Asia where he was stationed. The voluminous biography turned out to be full of stories of enslavement and life in slavery. It is, she said, embarrassing to see just how much material there is on slave life hidden in the literature and in the archives once you look for it. It is time now to place these stories of enslavement at the forefront and analyse and problematize them. Nira Wickramasinghe continued by arguing that studies on slavery and slaves that have often emphasized the trade in slaves, need a human dimension. She stressed the importance of writing the issue of slavery into mainstream scholarship and how writing history is a process of 'inventing the archive' as Benjamin Zachariah has suggested. This may be achieved by crossing disciplines and looking at the legacies and afterlives of slavery. Besides that, the frames of analysis need to be questioned. The way language is used and the way we look at the archive, structures the way we see the past. For example, by using the word enslaved, which implies an ongoing process, instead of slave. Wickramasinghe concluded that, as the scholar Ann Stoler argues, we are not studying things, but the making of them.

The workshop was divided into panels with the participants presenting their paper and stressing the importance of researching the experience of being a slave in their area of expertise. On the first day the panels provided a methodological framework on slavery in the Indian Ocean and the different approaches to archival sources. On the second day the focus was on the voice and actions of manumitted and emancipated slaves. The panels travelled from the past to the present and back by focusing on the memories and legacies of slavery in the Indian Ocean.

In the first panel 'Testimonies, Letters, Court cases' Herman Tiekens' translation of the letters sent to Nicolaas Jurgen Ondaatje from Ceylon supports the argument made by Schrikker that references to slaves can be found everywhere if you look for them. The former teacher Ondaatje owned a slave and asked his family in Ceylon to buy and send him Ceylonese slaves. This small-scale slave trade between Ceylon and Cape Town from 1728-1737 shed light on the forced travels slaves made and the question of the place of home. Ulbe Bosma (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) discussed the case of Dandajoe,

who was raided and via enslavement became the free spouse of a man living in Dutch territory. Dandajoe and her husband were interviewed by Dutch officials and Bosma questioned the representativeness of this and other colonial sources. According to him further research on oral history is needed in order to find out the amount of truth in colonial sources.

Paul Bijl (Utrecht University) analysed in the next panel 'Stories and Statistics' the text of Wange van Balie, who wrote down his memories as a slave and eventually ended up in the Netherlands. Bijl argued that this unpublished ego-document was a fundamental act, as Wange presented himself as a human with the same equality as any other human. This may be seen as a protest against slavery and inequality. Matthias van Rossum (IISH) contributed to the panel by presenting statistics of enslavement in eighteenth century Cochin, as part of his project on slavery in South and Southeast Asia from 1600-1800. Together with his student-assistant, Merve Tosun, he discussed some of the voices behind the statistics and stated that slaves of the Dutch East India Company had a voice, but never perceived equality and were seen as products rather than humans. Lodewijk Wagenaar (University of Amsterdam) concluded the panel by presenting his research done on the enslaved woman Boenga van Johor on her forced journey from Batavia to the Cape of Good Hope. Wagenaar reconstructed and rewrote her life on the basis of archival sources. He argued that historians have to bring slaves from darkness to light, since they could not write themselves.

The keynote address of the workshop, 'At Sea in the Archive: Slavery, Indenture, and the Indian Ocean', was provided by Yvette Christiansë, poet, novelist and Professor of English and Africana Studies (Barnard College, New York). She discussed the notion of indenture and freedom. What does freedom mean to the enslaved? How did they experience it? She argued that since the self was enslaved, the experience of freedom was complicated for emancipated slaves and coolies. They were traumatized and stripped of their identity, and these traumatic experiences needed to be read through the lines. She illustrated her points through a critical reading of registers of slavery and indenture as physical objects, rather than merely as bureaucratic tools. At the end Christiansë posed the intriguing questions: "Why do I hunger for experiences and what do I want from the voices? How does one acknowledge the archives?"

The second day of the workshop started with the panel 'Trajectories of Emancipation'. Robert Ross (Leiden University) explored the acts of Cape Town's enslaved and freed population concerning their accommodation before and after emancipation. There are hardly any comments of (ex)slaves on their enslavement, however, moving out their former masters' houses and starting to live in crowded accommodation as far as possible from their former accommodation shows that enslaved people made considerable sacrifices for their freedom. Travelling back to eighteenth century Sri Lanka, Kate Ekama (Leiden University) talked about manumission, debt and re-enslavement in Colombo. By using archival sources, she demonstrated different reasons for manumission, the usage of the court by (manumitted) slaves, and the possibility of re-enslavement. She explained that life after slavery was not so different from the experience of being a slave because re-enslavement or having to stay at the former master's house was common.

The following panel was chaired by Guno Jones (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and focused on 'History and Questions of Identity'. He started by stating that studies on transatlantic slavery are dominant, and it is important to break through the silence around East Indian slavery. Françoise Vergès (Fondation Maison

Right: 'Mestice woman going to church in state'. Hand-coloured engraving from Haafner, J. 1808. *Reize in eenen palanquin; of lotgevallen en merkwaardige aanteekeningen op een reize langs de kusten Orixá en Choramandel*, 2 dln, Amsterdam.



des sciences de l'homme) argued that slavery remains silenced and contested in France, one of the few states that still has territories that belong to the colonial empire. There is still no official narrative on slavery in France and abolition did not mean freedom for ex-slaves in French colonial territories. In turn, Anne Marieke van der Wal (Leiden University) discussed Malay slave songs in Colonial Cape Town. Many enslaved and freed people worked as fishermen, and they sang about the sea as a site of memory. The songs functioned as barrier and reminded them of their separation from home, and they still have a prominent place among the Cape Town Malay community.

In the final panel 'Materialities, Memories', Wim Manuhutu (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) talked about traces of slavery in Maluku and the representation of slavery on the Banda Islands. Until recently, the representation had been done by Europeans. Manuhutu argued that people in the Moluccas have discovered heritage as a way of stimulating tourism and therefore developed their own plans and activities in order to construct memory, which includes a new interest in the slave heritage on Banda. The European representation of slavery is also present in museums. Sarah Longair (University of Lincoln) discussed the many issues with recovering the materiality of slavery. She noted how objects carry emotions and show agency of the enslaved people. Also, objects from the museums can be used to fill in the gap in the experiences of the slaves. Wayne Modest (Research Center for Material Culture) elaborated on the issue of collecting and representing the afterlife of slavery. He was able to provide insight into the narratives in the museums with reference to slavery and argued that the museum structures a narrative it wants to tell the public, a narrative that is often political. Modest asked himself and the other participants the question how a political narrative and representation takes form in the museum setting.

During the closing discussion, the workshop participants discussed the possibility of collecting a number of papers and publishing them in a volume co-edited by the organizers of the workshop. While discussing this, keynote speaker Christiansë suggested that the title of the volume could be 'Seeing a slave', as this would capture the achievement of the workshop that was to make invisible actors and voices from the literature and archives present in the mainstream narrative.

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