

Resisting Enslavement: A Global Historical Approach to Slavery in the Dutch Atlantic and Asian Empire (1620-1815)

NWO Vidi

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Short project description – 2023-05-03

Introduction

This project questions how slave resistance impacted slavery and modes of enslavement in societies connected to the Dutch colonial empire in the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and Indonesian Archipelago worlds. By studying slave resistance from a global micro-historical perspective, *Resisting Enslavement* questions how different modes of enslavement impacted i) patterns of slave trade, ii) the labelling and treatment of enslaved, iii) and the social and resistance strategies of enslaved in the early modern Dutch Atlantic, Indian Ocean and Indonesian archipelago worlds.

Approach: method and sources

Resisting Enslavement uses the rich source material preserved in the (indexed) Dutch colonial courts of law to explore slave resistances and the impact of enslavement. These records contain detailed information on (previously often ignored) processes and actors of colonial, local and domestic authority and resistance throughout and beyond boundaries of the Dutch colonial empire (Van Rossum et al 2020). The project will employ an inductive (in-depth, source-based) global (micro)historical approach that analyzes resistance and slavery through colonial court records from the Atlantic and Asian sides of the Dutch empire in one single comparative framework.

The courts records include the *rarely studied voices* of those involved in slave resistance, as well as practices of enslavement, slave trade and other aspects of colonial and slavery regimes. Although court records are often fragmentary, and transmission of specific historical information can be distorted through legal procedures and translation, these challenges will be offset by contextualizing methods of close reading and comparative analysis (Stoler 2009; Anderson 2012; Van Rossum 2014; Van Rossum et al 2020). This is facilitated by the indexation of (criminal) files for colonial courts of Batavia, Colombo, Cochin, Elmina, Willemstad and (partial) Paramaribo (*Resilient Diversity*, 2017-2021). The court records also include traces of the responses by authorities (labelling, regulation); other contextual information is widely available in the vast Dutch Asian and Atlantic colonial archives.

Moments of resistance are crucial because these provide a lens on practices and strategies of enslavement, slavery and resistance that surface both 'transgressions' and the considered 'normal'. More than other case types, these provide a multiplicity of views on the actors 'backgrounds' and the event 'circumstances'. This allows to explore resistance as well as its relation to modes of enslavement, (colonial) slavery regimes and differentiation processes (labelling, racialization).

Project setup – short version

The project is organized in subprojects that study connected cases and complement each other:

PhD Project 1: Differentiating Enslavements in the Dutch Global Empire

This subproject questions how modes of enslavement and (export) slave trade shaped resistance and group formation by enslaved. It compares enslavement regions of the Dutch empire that represent different slavery and enslavement regimes. These can vary from local bondage regimes (e.g. Malabar

coast and Gold Coast), raiding and war regimes (e.g. Sulawesi and Bight of Benin) to slave-export regimes (e.g. Buton and Bight of Biafra). The subproject focuses especially on cases of resistance against (export) slave trade and enslavement that lay bare enslavement practices and their impact. Availability and searchability of source material allows for this high number of cases. Sources are available in (indexed) court records. Slave trade reports and journals are available in digitized archives of the WIC, MCC and VOC.

PhD Project 2: Enslaving Differentiations in the Colonies of the Dutch Global Empire

This subproject questions how (shared) experiences and modes of enslavement and displacement shaped strategies and group formations under slavery. It compares colonial slavery societies in different parts of the Dutch East and West Indies. These could be e.g. Batavia and the *ommelanden* on Java; the Moluccas; the Cape colony in South Africa; Paramaribo and wider plantation society of Surinam; Curacao; New Netherlands. The subproject focuses especially on cases of resistance and revolt by enslaved in colonial contexts that lay bare everyday practices and social formations that allow to trace the impact of the backgrounds of the enslaved and modes of enslavement. Source material is abundant in court records for these and other Dutch colonial cities. Additional material is available in regulations, placards and reports on trade, manumission, adoption and other aspects of slavery regimes.

Connections and Comparisons

This subproject analyses connections and comparisons. It surveys literature to analyze patterns of enslavement and slave revolts in the wider European colonial context, aiming to connect the historiographies of the Indian Ocean and Indonesian archipelago with the well advanced research on the Atlantic world. The project team will furthermore collaborate to identify and connect the same groups of enslaved (e.g. Buginese, Pulaya, Nias people, Coromantee, Calbari, Ibo) that are studied in the different contexts of their own respective regions and cases. This allows to connect and share insights on these enslaved groups, categorizations, colonial policies, patterns of slave trade, and especially moments and patterns of resistance. The project members will contribute to collective datasets (slave trade, enslavement, resistance) and to developing a shared analytical grid.

Outreach

The project team collectively will develop a dissemination strategy that aims to make visible, explain and openly discuss the foundations and implications of historical knowledge, the scientific process, and historical sources for the history of slavery – especially by foregrounding through the ‘voices’ and multiperspectivity of court record narratives. An interactive and ‘reciprocal’ approach aims to enrich historical practice, advance interpretations of sources, and at the same time increase trust in academic procedures. The project team will work with a dialogue group of interested individuals on the sensitive histories dealt with in this research (histories and legacies of slavery, enslavement, and racism) to reflect on and discuss the source material, research questions and process, and the state and implications of historical knowledge. The project team will develop ‘stories’ on striking narratives from court records that contain ‘blogs’ (with contextualization and interpretation for general readership; ‘voice’ of the writer) and (modernized) sources (the ‘voice’ of enslaved individuals). It is the aim that the personal nature and multiperspectivity of these narratives helps to create insight in enslaved experiences within the structural dynamics of slavery. The stories will be made available online and presented in a workshop on ‘voices’ and ‘narratives’ as a source for heritage and educational activities in national context. Finally, the project aims to address the need for ‘applied’ knowledge on the Dutch history of slavery by providing accessible applied knowledge on key societal questions (in open access outreach papers), providing advice and organizing public events.

Network

In this subproject a kick-off advisory workshop and an international conference are organized to present the individual and collective subprojects and results.

Supervision and Synthesis

The PI will work together with the project team to synthesize the results of i) the subprojects, ii) the slave trade, enslavement and resistance datasets, iii) and additional comparative source-based case studies on the circulation of labels and resistance. The PI supervises the researchers.

Relevance: (Global) Slavery Revisited

Recent years witnessed a boom in slavery studies influenced by a *global* turn. This established growing awareness of the urgency to move beyond the study of Atlantic expansions of slave trade and slavery (Lenski and Cameron 2018; Zeuske 2018; Conermann et al. 2019) and develop perspectives accounting for the coexistence, interaction, decline, and emergence of (different) slavery regimes across the globe (see e.g.: Bosma 2019; De Vito et al. 2019; Van Rossum 2020). New waves of slavery studies shifted focus to understanding slavery not only as a formal institution, but through concepts of ‘slaving’ (Miller 2012) and ‘availability’ (Zeuske 2018). This stimulated perspectival shifts from the institutional side of slavery regimes to understanding slavery as historical practice. It inspired research that tries to understand dynamics of slavery within different contexts (Schiel and De Vito 2020) or looks more closely at impact, regulation and contestation of enslavement and enslavability (Van Rossum et al 2020). Especially scholarship on West-Africa called for attention to the impact of slave trade on local slavery regimes, and to ‘trajectories’ of change that slavery underwent under colonial rule and after abolition (Rossi 2009).

These advances stress that we should ask not only *why slavery occurred*, but also *why specific regimes of slavery and labor coercion occurred, how these developed, and how these impacted people*. In recent years, historians started to explore slave trade and slavery regimes in the Mediterranean (Hanss and Schiel 2014), Islamic world (Clarence-Smith 2006), Western Indian Ocean world (Ewald 2000; Machado 2003; Hooper and Eltis 2013; Hopper 2015; Subrahmanyam 2019), South Africa (Shell 1994), South and Southeast Asia (Arassaratnam 1995; Chatterjee and Eaton 2006; Van Rossum 2015; Bosma 2020) and Central Asia (Eden 2018; Whitfield 2018). These studies show widespread presence of slave trade and commercial slavery outside the Atlantic realm, especially in the early modern Indian Ocean and Indonesian Archipelago. They indicate that slavery regimes and differentiations across the globe were shaped by continuous interactions and connections between slavery regimes in different localities forged especially by early modern colonial expansions and slave trade (Miller 2004; Van Rossum 2021a).

Atlantic slavery studies paved the way by challenging earlier notions that New World identities and communities were developed almost anew from ‘very heterogeneous crowds’ (Mintz and Price 1992, 18), but instead resulted from events and experiences on both sides of the Atlantic (Gilroy 1993). This led scholars to reconnect Atlantic regions, exploring how experiences of enslaved were shaped not only by forceful displacement, but also by ‘their own history, culture and identity’ (Falola and Childs 2004, 3). This led to important insights on, for example, Yoruba and Malagasy (slave) diaspora identities, how these came about, the role of slave trade in this, and why identification of specific slave groups was more pronounced (Law 1997; Lovejoy 2005; Larson 2009; Wilson-Fall 2015).

But despite these crucial advances, more global and encompassing approaches remain wanting. Research struggles to systematically (re)connect developments in sending and receiving slavery regimes. This project argues that the ways (experiences of) enslavement impacted both enslaved and slavery regimes is the most overlooked factor in understanding slavery and the positioning of enslaved in European colonial empires. It thus takes up the call of Patterson in his landmark comparison of slavery

regimes in world history (Patterson 1982, 176-178). Until today, this remains to be explored further systematically and a crucial step in re-understanding the history of slavery (Zeuske 2012).

Slavery and Differentiation in the case of the Dutch Empire

This project takes up this challenge through the case of the Dutch global empire. Slave trade to Dutch colonies became significant immediately after the conquests of Jaccatra (1619) and Banda (1621). The VOC initiated largescale slave trade in the Indonesian Archipelago and Indian Ocean. An estimated 27.000 enslaved were transported from the Bay of Bengal to Batavia until the mid-1660s alone (Dijk 2006). With the (temporary) possession of Dutch Brazil and colonial expansion in the Guianas and Caribbean, Dutch Atlantic slave trade expanded. Enslaved were exported from the West Central Africa region (central to Brazilian slave trade, but of continued importance after that), the Bight of Benin, and from 1720s onwards increasingly the Gold Coast and Windward Coast. Throughout maritime Asia, the Dutch East India Company conquered significant territories especially in Taiwan, Java, the Moluccas, South India, Sri Lanka and South-Africa. A multidirectional slave trade drew enslaved from Madagascar, East Africa, Bengal, South India, and diverse parts of the Indonesian Archipelago (e.g. Sulawesi, Nias, Bali, Papua, lesser Sunda Islands). The Dutch were a significant actor in Atlantic slave trade (an estimated 608.000 out of 12.5 million enslaved were shipped from Africa under Dutch flag – Paesie 2010; Van Rossum and Fatah-Black 2012). And in Asia the Dutch were similarly important in fueling colonial slavery: an estimated 660.000-1.135.000 enslaved were transported to VOC colonies (Van Rossum 2015).

Similarities and differences in slavery across the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean and Indonesian Archipelago are not explained by simple regional dichotomies (Worden 1985). Elsewhere I have argued that in order to understand links between ‘the Atlantic and the wider global history of slavery’, we need to reconceptualize slavery and its historical manifestations through an inductive comparative approach aiming to understand slavery regimes through the study of historical everyday realities. For this agenda, we can provisionally distinguish four types of slavery regimes: i) war and raiding enslavement regimes; ii) local bondage regimes; iii) slave-export oriented regimes; iv) slave-import oriented regimes (Van Rossum 2021a). In these slavery regimes, different modes of enslavement dominated – from explicit violence in war and raiding regimes (capture, kidnapping), to implicit violence (child or self-selling, destitution, debt) and punishment (convicted by polities, local rulers or communities) in slave-export regimes, and mostly birth in local bondage and slave-import regimes (slave status, or social status that allows enslavability, e.g. caste) (Patterson 1982; Vink 2002; Van Rossum 2021a). It is expected these different enslavement experiences invoked different responses, but its subsequent impact on strategies, treatment and trade patterns remains a crucial question.

In European colonial empires, authorities and slave owners organized slaveholding and slave trade through divide-and-rule policies and adapted ideas on ‘usability’ of specific groups (increasing labelling and differentiation). Enslaved continuously developed their own strategies, identities and communities – including creolization as ‘the creation and construction of culture out of fragmented, violent and disjunct pasts’ (Mintz 1996, 302). VOC authorities categorized enslaved groups through regional origins and (perceived) ethnic stereotypes. Ward claims that ‘ethnic stereotyping of slaves was generated partly through channels of shared information’ and ‘reinforced by specific local forms of slave resistance’ (Ward 2009, 247). Sens argues slave hierarchies were based on ethnicity in ways ‘similar to the West and in South Africa’ (Sens 2001, 112). Enslaved ‘Macassars’, ‘Buginese’, Balinese and Butonese were perceived as dangerous, while ‘Alfoeren’ from the Moluccas, enslaved Papuans and enslaved born in colonial households (‘huisboorlingen’) were often characterized as ‘docile’ (Sens 2001; Ward 2009). In the Atlantic world, distinctions were made between those transported from Africa (‘coast-’ or salt water slaves’) and later local-born later generations (‘creole slaves’) (Kars 2020). Enslaved Africans themselves employed the concept ‘sippi’ to signify symbolic kinship based on transport. Its meaning later shifted to

plantation origin (Mintz and Price 1976, 22; Van Stipriaan 1993, 384). Enslaved organized through 'nations', which included people from different ethnicities and polities, but denoted 'fluid communities of people who came from the same general geographic area in West Africa' and spoke a shared language (Kars 2016, 47).

Ethnic, racial and strongly gendered categories are thus omnipresent in colonial sources, but are often highly ambiguous. Ethnic categories were based on toponyms, specific stereotypes, fears, or other categories imposed by host societies. Despite its detail and ethnographic value, traditional colonial literature left many categories unchallenged. Later historiographies indicated that (e.g. in VOC societies) social relations were 'more complicated in terms of the correlations among ethnicity, freedom, religion, wealth and gender than the simple categorization of people in the Company records might suggest' (Ward 2009, 243). The 'apparent continuity of an 'ethnic community' could mask fundamental shifts' (Sutherland 2001, 397). We tackled this in our NWO project *Resilient Diversity* by studying how actors defined diversity along multiple axis of differentiation (status, origin, gender, religion). Similarly, labeling of enslaved needs to be unpacked and reassembled. The current project does so by analyzing labels through multiple lenses, comparing and cross-checking references of different actors, especially enslaved. This project takes ethnic, racial and gendered categories as labels of (self)identification shaped by societal dynamics, and in the case of enslaved influenced or even created by processes of enslavement, displacement and resistance (e.g. debates on *ethnogenesis* and slavery – Miller 2004; Northrup 2006; Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra 2011).

By connecting the histories of resistance with those of enslavement and differentiation in a global historical perspective, this project aims to contribute to key debates on the perceived 'unique' natures or (in)comparability of slaveries in the wider Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds, on the transformative impact of slave trade on slavery regimes, and on slavery and racialization. This allows the project to contribute to testing the alleged 'uniqueness' of Atlantic links between slavery and racism, and to unravel how slavery, resistance and racialization developed across the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and Indonesian archipelago.