

The Red Shop and Slavery in Batavia

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Abstract

This study explored Toko Merah (The Red Shop) in Batavia, now Jakarta, as a symbol of colonial power and a witness to slavery during the Dutch East India Company (VOC) era. Built in 1730 by Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff, it later became the residence of Governor-General Reinier de Klerk and his wife, Sophia Francina Westpalm. Using a critical-historical approach through archival research, literatures review, and expert interviews, the study reveals how slavery was deeply embedded in the social and economic life of the colonial elite. The 1786 auction of Sophia's estate, including 192 enslaved individuals, illustrates the commodification of human life and the systemic inequality of 18th-century Batavia. Toko Merah thus stands as both an architectural landmark and a reminder of the moral contradictions of colonial society. Today, as a preserved cultural heritage site, it serves to educate the public about Jakarta's colonial history and the intertwined legacy of wealth, power, and human exploitation.

Keywords: Toko Merah, Slavery, Batavia, Reinier de Klerck

1. Introduction

Toko Merah is one of the oldest buildings in Batavia (Jakarta) and is culturally significant among the city's historical buildings.¹ It represents the layered history of the town in the Dutch colonial era (18th Century).² In 1730, Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff constructed Toko Merah.³ Imhoff was a high-ranking official of the Dutch East India Company and later the Governor-General. It served as Imhoff's luxurious private residence. The building was located on Kali Besar Barat, a trading hub and residential quarter for the European elite. Toko Merah is a remarkable 18th-century Dutch building, featuring red brick walls, large windows, and a double staircase.⁴ More than its architecture, Toko Merah tells a story of Batavia's colonial elite and their enslaved people. It reveals the exploitation and the violence that were a part of the wealth and everyday life of the elite. The building tells the era's social, economic, and cultural exploitation through intertwined power and wealth.

Toko Merah's historic architecture demonstrates the multifaceted evolution of Batavia's geography and socio-economics. Historically, the building served as a residence to some of the higher-ranking VOC officials, a trading office, a military school⁵, and a headquarters for a private enterprise. These sequentially served purposes indicate the building's flexible and responsive nature to Batavia's evolving administrative and socio-economic landscape. However, Toko Merah's architecture reflects the city's history of socio-economic exploitation. Among the most noteworthy socio-economic exploitation events Toko Merah witnessed, the auction of Sophia Francina Westpalm's estate exemplified the atrocity of the colonial slavery

¹ The origin of why the building is colored red can be seen in Benjamin Jos Roo, *Curaçao: Scenes and Behind the Scenes* (Willemstad: Van Dorp-Eddine, 1993), pp. 39.

² Herald Van der Linde, *Jakarta: Biography of a City* (Leicestershire, UK: Monsoon Books Ltd., 2025), p. 30.

³ Coenraad Liebrecht Temminck Groll, et.al., *The Dutch Overseas Architectural Survey : Mutual Heritage of Four Centuries in Three Continents* (Michigan: Waanders, 2002), p. 137.

⁴ Chandrarezky Permatasari, "Aesthetic research of the building heritage Toko Merah Roland Barthes semiotic approach", *International Conference on Design, Engineering and Computer Sciences* (2018), pp. 1-3.

⁵ Thomas B. Ataladjar & Anzis Kleden, *Toko Merah, Saksi Kejayaan Batavia Lama di Tepian Muara Ciliwung: Riwayat dan Kisah Para Penghuninya* (Jakarta: Dinas Kebudayaan dan Permuseuman DKI Jakarta, 2003), p. 1-30.

system. It auctioned off Westpalm's estate, including enslaved members of the household, as estate and disposable private property, devoid of any recognition of their humanity.⁶ Such events illuminate the inequality and the perverse social order of Batavia, as well as the severity of elite human exploitation and wealth concentration that drive the city's socio-economy.

As of today, Toko Merah has been designated a cultural heritage site and serves as a venue for social and cultural activities of an artistic nature.⁷ In addition to serving as a monument to a part of colonial architecture, the site is also a resource for the public to learn about Jakarta's colonial history and the history of slavery in the city. The historic site also provides a more nuanced picture of 18th-century Batavia by telling the stories of the colonial elite and the enslaved people who lived and worked in Toko Merah. The preservation of Toko Merah prompts the study of multiple historical variables in a narrative that marries the achievements of architecture with the social inequities and lived human realities of the time, underscoring the need to document the glory and inequity of colonial Batavia.

2. Research Questions

Research questions help narrow the scope of the study so that it doesn't become too broad and remains relevant to the main topic.⁸ Furthermore, these questions serve as a basis for collecting, analysing, and interpreting sources so that the research results accurately describe the phenomenon being studied. The research questions related to this article include:

1. How did the practice of slavery around Toko Merah, Batavia, during the VOC era reflect the colonial social structure?
2. How is the relationship between power, social status, and wealth reflected in the lives and practices of slave ownership by Reinier de Klerk and Sophia Francina Westpalm, one of the largest slave owners?
3. What happened to the enslaved people previously owned by Reinier de Klerk and Sophia Francina's family after their deaths, and how does the auctioning process for the inheritance reflect the socioeconomic situation of enslaved people during the colonial period?
4. How did the function of Toko Merah change after the deaths of Reinier and Sophia (19th-20th centuries) reflect the development of colonial life in Batavia before Indonesian independence?

3. Research Method

The research method used in this article is a critical-historical method with an archival approach, literature review, observation, and interviews.⁹ The research focused on tracing the history of Toko Merah in Batavia and the story of slavery that occurred nearby during the colonial period. Primary sources were obtained from colonial archives (National Archief), pictorial evidence, and observations at museums across the Netherlands (Wereldmuseum,

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁷ The Red Shop house became a protected building and Indonesian national heritage through *Article 4 of Indonesian Law Number 11 of 2010*.

⁸ Patrick White, *Developing Research Questions* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publisher, 2017), p. 2002.

⁹ Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1985), p. 35

Rijksmuseum, and Bronbeek Museum). Interviews were conducted with history experts and museum management staff to enrich the contextual data. Secondary sources included books and scholarly articles on Toko Merah, Batavia, and slavery in the 18th century. All data was then verified externally and internally to assess the authenticity and credibility of the sources. The final stage was writing a draft based on the data interpretation to produce a comprehensive, scientific narrative that shows how Toko Merah is not only a symbol of the splendour of colonial architecture but also a silent witness to a complex social system through the practice of slavery during the VOC era.

4. Discussion

4.1. Slavery Around Red Shop, Batavia

Toko Merah (Red Shop) was built in 1730 by Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff, a high-ranking official of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC).¹⁰ He was later promoted to Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies. Originally constructed as a luxurious private residence in the West Kali Besar area of Batavia, Kali Besar was a center of the slave trade in Batavia.¹¹ Furthermore, this area was also a center of trade and residential areas for the European elite. The building's architecture is in the classic Dutch style, typical of the 18th century, with distinctive red brick walls, large windows, and a double staircase at the front. The natural red color of the bricks gave it the nickname "Toko Merah" (Red Shop)¹².

Over time, the building's ownership changed hands several times, and its function changed.¹³ After van Imhoff returned to the Netherlands, it served as a dormitory for VOC military cadets and a residence for colonial officials.¹⁴ Dating back to the early days of its rule in the Dutch East Indies, the VOC used many slaves to build Batavia, in the 16th century.

Several sources state that slaves at that time were quite numerous to fulfill the labor force in the construction of the Batavia fortress when the Jayakarta fortress was successfully captured by the Dutch under the command of Jan Pieterszoom Coen in 1619.¹⁵ As the Dutch began to gain a stronger grip on the archipelago, the Dutch also strengthened the slavery system where at that time slave ownership was already neatly organized with a very good trading system.¹⁶ As time went by, the number of slaves in Batavia continued to grow. Slaves were one of the

¹⁰ Yaptadian Sari & Ari Widyati Purwantiasning, "Community Perception for the Current Function of Toko Merah in Kota Tua Jakarta", *International Journal of Engineering Research & Technology (IJERT)*, Vol. 7 Issue 9 (2018), pp. 49.

¹¹ Adolf Heuken, *Historical Sites of Jakarta* (Jakarta: Cipta Loka Caraka, 2007), pp. 354.

¹² Edi Dimyati, *Wisata Kota Tua Jakarta* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2010), pp. 53.

¹³ Several owner names of Toko Merah were Willem Baron van Imhoff, Jacob Mossel, Theodore Mossel, Peter Albertus van der Parra, Reinier de Klerk, Nicolas Hartingh, and Baron van Hohendorf. See Yaptadian Sari & Ari Widyati Purwantiasning, *op.cit.*, pp. 50.

¹⁴ H. J. De Graaf, "Gouverneur Generaal van Imhoff's Broeder en de Academie de Marine", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*, Deel 107 (1961), pp. 369-378.

¹⁵ P. A. Leupe, "Jakarta 30 Mei 1619. Batavia 30 Mei 1869", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*, 15de Deel, 3/4de Afl., [3e Volgreeks, 3e Deel] (1868), pp. 535.

¹⁶ Markus Vink, "The World's Oldest Trade": Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Jun, 2003), pp. 131-177.

largest population groups in Batavia between 17th and 18th century. Initially, the slaves were imported from South Asia who were included in the VOC trading network connections.¹⁷

Table 1
Population Composition in Batavia

No	Group	Total
1.	Dutch	2.024
2.	Eurasia	726
3.	Chinese	2.747
4.	Mardijker	5.362
5.	Moor and Javanese	1.339
6.	Malay	611
7.	Balinese	981
8.	Slaves	13.278

Source: Blackburn (2011)

However, as the Dutch trading empire in Batavia declined in the late 18th century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) began importing local slaves from the Indonesian archipelago. Besides increased contact with the Indonesian people, time efficiency and cultural practices prevented waste. This was a key factor in the VOC's exploitation of the local slave trade. At that time, the majority of slaves belonged to Europeans, who used them as a way to display their wealth. On average, the wealthiest people owned a hundred slaves, or even more.¹⁸

Slaves were usually employed to perform domestic work. They were often employed as cooks, lamplighters, tailors, and even housemaids. It was not uncommon for slaves to be hired to style local Javanese hairstyles, such as buns, especially for European ladies. Others served as massage therapists for European masters. Buying and selling slaves and auctions were regular activities for the people of Batavia. There were at least two ways to buy and sell slaves in Batavia, both within the city walls and outside.

"Enslaved people were required to perform numerous tasks. Conditions were quite difficult. Many were chained. They were often subjected to physical labor. A more complete picture can be seen in the sketches by Wouter Schouten from the 17th century."
(Interview with Maria Holtrop, 7 November 2025)

The first method involved selling or buying slaves at slave auctions¹⁹. Auctions were the most common method at that time. Auction houses served as centers for buying and selling activities, where sellers brought their slaves to be offered to prospective buyers. This process typically involved an intermediary or auctioneer, whose job was to display the slaves and announce their prices and conditions to a large audience. The auctions were often attended by many prospective buyers, eager to bid for the best price.

¹⁷ Titas Chakraborty, "Dutch Slavery in South Asia", *Slavery and The Dutch State: Dutch Colonial Slavery and Its Afterlives* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2025), p. 303-313.

¹⁸ Susan Abeysekere, "Slaves in Batavia: Insights from a Slave Register", Anthony Reid (ed.), *Slavery, Bondage, and Dependency in Southeast Asia* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), p. 296.

¹⁹ One of the best illustrations of a slave auction or sale in Batavia, see Matthias van Rossum, "Seeing the Invisible? Slave Trade, Urban Slave Markets, and the Interpretation of a 'New' Painting", Nancy Jouwe et.al. (ed.), *Revisualizing Slavery: Visual Sources on Slavery in the Indonesian Archipelago & Indian Ocean* (Edam: LM Publisher, 2021), p. 36-37.

After an agreement was reached between the seller and buyer at the auction house, the two proceeded to formalize the transaction. They went together to a notary to legally register the transaction. This registration was crucial because it served as legal proof of the newly transferred ownership of the slave. This step provided legal protection for both buyers and sellers, especially in the event of a dispute.²⁰

This official registration was especially important for those who lived far apart and did not know each other. Therefore, the auction house process provided a safe and reliable means of ensuring the authenticity of the transaction. Furthermore, the notary played a crucial role in ensuring that both parties understood the terms of the sale and purchase agreement. This also demonstrates that the practice of buying and selling slaves at that time already had a fairly well-organized administrative system.²¹

The second method involved the relative proximity of the slave seller and buyer, eliminating the need for an auction.²² In this case, they already knew each other and avoided the need to go to a slave market or auction house, as a trusting relationship had already been established. The transaction took place directly at one party's home. Afterward, it was registered with a notary for legal approval. This method was simpler and involved fewer procedures than an auction. This type of buying and selling often occurred between neighbors or people living in close proximity. They already knew each other, so the risk of fraud or misunderstanding was less. The slave transfer process was faster and more efficient, saving the time and expense typically incurred at a slave auction.

Therefore, these two methods indicate differences in the social and economic systems of the time. Analyzing the first method, it appears more formal and open to anyone wishing to transact slaves, while the second method was more private and involved a close personal relationship. Both methods illustrate how the practice of buying and selling slaves was truly organized and tailored to the needs and circumstances of the owners.

The high demand for slaves led to a booming slave trade in Batavia. At the time, slaves were an essential part of society, especially for officials, nobles, and the wealthy, who needed labor to manage their households, plantations, and other economic activities.²³ This situation opened up significant opportunities for traders and middlemen to openly trade slaves, making it a lucrative business sector.

²⁰ Bondan Kanumoyoso, "Orang-orang yang diperjualbelikan: Aspek Sosial-Ekonomi Perdagangan Budak di Daerah sekitar Batavia, 1710–1740", Djoko Marihandono (Ed.), *Titik Balik Historiografi di Indonesia*. (Depok: Wedatama Widya Sastra, 2008), p. 129.

²¹ Maria Holtrop, "Van Bengal: ship to Batavia, Banda, Cape Town, and Dokkum", Evelin Sint Nicolaas, et.al., *Slavery: an Exhibition of Many Voices* (Amsterdam: Rijkmuseum Atlas Contact, 2021), p. 161.

²² The same thing happened with slavery in South Africa, see Robert C. H. Shell, "A Family Matter: The Sale and Transfer of Human Beings at the Cape, 1658 to 1830", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1992), pp. 285-336.

²³ Richard B. Allen, "Satisfying the "Want for Labouring People": European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500-1850", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 54.

The burgeoning slave trade subsequently gave rise to markets, specifically known as slavenquartiers, or slave trading areas.²⁴ These markets became gathering places for sellers, buyers, and intermediaries to negotiate prices and assess the condition of slaves. Transactions were conducted officially at these locations, often involving a notary to record the agreements for legal effect.

"Slaves of that era (17-18th century) were freely traded. Some were humane, some were not. After being traded, they would immediately be placed in their masters' homes to work. Here at the Wereldmuseum, we have an exhibition displaying data on enslaved people (name and place) from several Dutch colonies, including Indonesia."

(Interview with Emilio Kertokarijo, 19 October 2025)

Furthermore, slave markets were often located near *stadhuis* (city center) and other markets, both of which were bustling and strategic trading centers. The slave markets were always bustling with buying and selling activity, particularly among middlemen and wealthy Batavians seeking slaves for household and business needs.²⁵ This demonstrates how deeply embedded the slavery system was in Batavia's social and economic structure in the 17th and 18th centuries.²⁶

The high demand for slaves made them highly sought after, not only in slave markets but also at official auctions. Auctions became an important platform for buyers to obtain slaves at competitive prices and relevant to their needs.²⁷ In practice, slaves auctioned were not always sold for high prices, instead, they were sold voluntarily by their owners, due to changing economic conditions or family decisions. This auction system demonstrates how slaves were treated as valuable and highly marketable goods in Batavian society.

Unfortunately, some slaves were no longer needed. Slaves were often auctioned off as part of a deceased person's inheritance. This tradition reflected the social view of the time, which viewed slaves as part of a family's assets.²⁸ Inherited property, including slaves, would be registered and sold openly to distribute the proceeds to heirs. This was done to ensure fairness and compliance with colonial laws.

²⁴ In Batavia, many slave transactions took place near the homes of their respective masters to facilitate the process and allow for immediate work. Slavery practices were most prevalent in the owners' homes rather than in offices, warehouses, or other places. See Maria Holtrop, *op.cit.*, p. 156.

²⁵ Pim De Zwart & Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Labor, Wages, and Living Standard in Java 1680-1914", *European Review of Economic History*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (August 2015), pp. 215-234.

²⁶ Four main types of slave lived in Batavia were the household slave, the chained slave, the craftsman, and the kuli. See Marsely L. Kehoe, "Dutch Batavia: Exposing the Hierarchy of the Dutch Colonial City", *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, Vol. 7 Issue 1 (2015), pp. 20.

²⁷ Trevor Burnard & Kenneth Morgan, "The Dynamics of the Slave Market and Slave Purchasing Patterns in Jamaica, 1655-1788", *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 1, New Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Jan., 2001), pp. 205-228.

²⁸ Marietta Morrissey, "Women and the Slave Family", *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2021), p. 81-99.

4. 2. Reiner de Klerk & Sophia Francina, One of the Largest Slave Owners in Batavia

One example of a major inheritance auction is the story of Mrs. Sophia Francina Westpalm, widow of VOC Governor-General Reinier de Klerk. Reinier (or Reynier) de Klerk (pronounced de Clercq) was a high-ranking VOC official. Reinier's exact date of birth is 22 November 1710, in Middelburg, Netherlands. He began working as a cadet in 1725 at the Zeeland Chamber of Commerce. The chamber owned warships used to protect the fleet's route back to the Netherlands. In December 1730, he departed for Batavia aboard the ship *Het Vliegend Hert*. He later captained a ship that sailed back and forth between Batavia and Padang between 1735 and 1737. In 1737, he was appointed accountant at the VOC and began his life on land. In 1738, he became a junior trader and briefly settled in Lampung. Shortly thereafter, in 1741, he became the army secretary in Java and moved from city to city, from Surabaya to Semarang. His most frequent positions were as a trader and administrator for the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Reinier achieved a significant career promotion when he was appointed Governor-General of Banda. After several requests, Governor De Klerk was transferred back to Batavia in 1754. His position in Banda was replaced by the Commander of the VOC Malabar Troops, Reynicus Siersma. Reinier's expertise in diplomacy and trade was greatly sought after.²⁹

He was appointed Chairman of the Board of Management of Plantations and Cemeteries for Chinese and Non-Christians in Batavia. He also eventually served as an extraordinary member of the Dutch East Indies Council and was officially appointed a member of the Council of the Indies in 1762. In 1775, he was given new assignments as Acting Director-General and was definitively appointed to that position a year later.

The pinnacle of his career came on 4 October 1777, the day after the death of Governor General Jeremias van Riemsdijk, Reinier was elected by acclamation as Governor General of the VOC³⁰ and inaugurated on 9 October 1778. He officially held the position for several years, albeit a relatively short one. Reinier was a hardworking governor, attentive to detail, and a reformer. He attempted to implement several reformist policies, but unfortunately, he was unable to realize his ideas. He was deeply committed to cultural integration (Dutch, Malay, Javanese, and others) in the Dutch East Indies. For example, he wanted to introduce Dutch into education to shift from the use of Portuguese and Malay. However, his efforts ultimately failed due to the public's reluctance to learn Dutch.

Only a few major events occurred under his reign. The conflict in Celebes ended with the conquest of Gowa³¹, while the Sultan of Banten successfully ceded the Landak and Sukadana regions to the VOC. To maintain the spice monopoly, the Princes of Tidore were dethroned and exiled to Batavia. They were replaced by Maluku nobles loyal to the VOC.

²⁹ The full story can be found in Huyser's oldest biography of Reinier de Klerk. See Ary Huyser, *Het Leven van Reinier de Klerk. Gouverneur Generaal van Nederlands Indie* (Utrecht: Abraham van Paddenburg, 1788), pp. 1-3.

³⁰ Hans Groot, "Het oprichtingsjaar en de eerste twee decennia (1778-1799)", *Van Batavia naar Weltevreden: Het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen*, 1778-1867, pp. 67.

³¹ *The conquest of Makassar by the Dutch (1596-1800)*, downloaded from <https://indonesia-dutchcolonial-heritage.nl/KNIL1/ConquestMakassar.pdf>

Reinier de Klerk's reign was short, as he died on 1 September 1780, in Molenvliet (south of the Stadhuis, Batavia).³² His house was located on the west side of "de Molenvliet," the second largest house after Toko Merah on the West Kali Besar River. Since 2002, the house has been used as the National Archives Museum, currently located at No. 3 Gadjah Mada Street. Reinier was succeeded by Willem Arnold Alting.³³

During his relatively short reign, De Klerk worked to improve the fading economic conditions of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and to regulate trade and finance. He was also known for his lavish lifestyle, as evidenced by his magnificent residence in Batavia (the Red Shop) and his villa in Molevliet (now a museum at the Indonesian National Archives).³⁴

De Klerk left a lasting legacy through the Red Shop, his former residence with his wife, Sophia, and now a significant cultural heritage site in Jakarta. After his death in 1780, his vast wealth, including his collection of goods and slaves, was auctioned off to the public.

Sophia was known to be a wealthy individual who owned numerous treasures and properties in Batavia.³⁵ One of the most famous was the Red Shop on the banks of the Ciliwung River. Sophia's possessions, recorded in the inventory, numbered no fewer than 1,471 items. This included luxury goods, household furnishings, jewelry, and, of course, the slaves, who were part of her personal assets. All of this wealth signifies the level of luxury of the European elite in Batavia and also demonstrates how deeply enmeshed the slavery system was in their social structure. Slaves served not only as labor but also as symbols of social status and prosperity.

In the Reinier household, each slave had a very specific role and task. They served not only as ordinary domestic workers but also possessed specific skills tailored to their masters' needs. Ariantje, Juliana, and Lesarda were responsible for making fine lace, a skill highly valued among European aristocrats at the time. Meanwhile, Kamoeing and Estrea were responsible for daily care of their mistress's hair, including creating the distinctive buns that symbolized the social status of European women in Batavia.³⁶

In addition to them, there were other slaves, such as Flora, who ironed clothes until they were perfectly smooth, and Patjar, known as an expert sock maker. These tasks demonstrate the detailed and structured work system within the households of high-ranking colonial officials. Each task had a dedicated person, and every piece of work was expected to be perfect to maintain the image and honor of the governor-general's family in the eyes of the public.³⁷

³² De Klerk's reign could be described as very short, considering that he was already over 70 years old when he was appointed Governor-General and soon afterward suffered health problems. *Bataviasch Nieuwsblad* 1 April 1916.

³³ L.P. van Putten, *Ambitie en onvermogen: gouverneurs-generaal van Nederlands-Indië 1610-1796*. (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij ILCO-productions, 2002), pp. 192

³⁴ De Klerk also owned some houses and lands in outside city center of Batavia, such as Grogol, Wastoenegara, Waktonagae, Pabaijoran, etc. from 1777 to 1780 according to *VMF Inventaris van de verzameling kaarten en tekeningen afkomstig van J.C.M. Radermacher en buitenformaat stukken behorend tot het archief van de familie Vosmaer, 1689-1916*. Nationaal Archief NL The Hague.

³⁵ Bestuursvergadering: van 16 October 1926, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*, Deel 82 (1926), pp. XXXVI-XXXVIII.

³⁶ Ida Indawati Khouw, "Slave trade, a scar on Batavia's history", *Jakarta Post* 21 January 2001.

³⁷ Ida Indawati Khouw, *ibid*.

Interestingly, the De Klerk family even owned a slave whose sole job was to make chili sauce for their master's family. This illustrates the great attention to detail in the daily lives of Batavia's elite families. Food, clothing, and appearance were crucial aspects of their luxury and sophistication. With numerous slaves skilled in various fields, the De Klerk household functioned like a small, self-contained institution.

Most slaves in Batavia worked within their masters' households. They were essential to the daily life of wealthy families, including Reinier and Sophia. Masters considered having many slaves a sign of prosperity and high social prestige. The number and skills of slaves were often a source of pride and discussion among Batavians.³⁸

In the 18th century, there was a sense of pride among wealthy and official families who were able to meet all household needs without involving outside labor. Everything from the kitchen and garden to personal care was handled by their own slaves. In such households, the division of labor was very clear and orderly, creating an efficient work system while also showing how strong a role slavery played in supporting the luxurious lifestyle of the Batavian elite.

4. 3. The Fate of the Slaves After the Death of Reinier and Sophia

In 1786, Toko Merah witnessed a touching moment. A year earlier, the owner of the twin houses (Toko Merah has a unique architecture, with the north side open to the public and for work purposes, while the south side was for the owner's private use) had died in 1785 inside the house. Her passing left a deep sorrow for the residents, especially the slaves who had long worked there. However, due to the colonial legal and economic system at the time, all her possessions (including human property) had to be auctioned off to distribute the inheritance to the rightful heirs.³⁹

Sophia who was born in Batavia, during the middle of the VOC period, is the daughter of Michiel Westpalm and Geertruyda Margaretha Goossens.⁴⁰ They were a family of considerable social standing within the colonial society. She was christened and baptized on 3 September 1722, in Batavia. Growing up in a well-to-do European family in the tropics, she would have experienced the unique blend of European customs and local influences that characterized life among the colonial elite. Her life was closely connected with the upper circles of Batavia's ruling class⁴¹, and she eventually became known for her wealth and her association with one of the city's grandest residences, later known as the Toko Merah. She lived through a time of both prosperity and decline for the VOC, witnessing the opulence of

³⁸ Pauline Dublin Milone, "Indische Culture, and Its Relationship to Urban Life", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1967), pp.

³⁹ Several of Sophia's wills are recorded and still exist today. Besides being auctioned off, Sophia's assets were generally given to her closest relatives. Some of her wills are found in the Dutch National Archives. See "Inventory 4454", 1.04.02 *Inventaris van het archief van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), 1602-1795 (1811)*.

⁴⁰ *Stamboom De Ridder / Wolterbeek en aanverwante geslachten, Sophia Francina Westpalm (1722-1785)*. Downloaded from <https://www.genealogieonline.nl/stamboom-de-ridder-wolterbeek/I507545.php>.

⁴¹ She was born in Dutch elite class. Michael Westpalm was Director General of VOC, one of the highest position in VOC after Governor General. See V. I. van den Wall, *Oude Hollandsche Buitenplaatsen van Batavia* (Deventer: Uitgeverij W. van Hoeve, 1943), p. 89.

Batavia's golden age and the beginning of its economic and moral decay. She passed away on 31 December 1785, leaving behind a significant legacy of wealth and property, which included several houses and estates that would later become part of the city's historical landmarks.

Sophia's legacy was immense. Besides Toko Merah, she also owned a house in Grogol and a luxury villa in the Molevliet area (now the Indonesian National Archives Museum).⁴² Reinier and Sophia's movable property was listed as 1,471 items in the inventory.⁴³ All of these possessions, including slaves, were put up for public auction in accordance with procedures in Batavia at the time.

"I think Reinier and Sophia's slaves not only worked at the Red Shop House, but also at the large house in Molenvliet. What needs to be explored is how these slaves worked and what their specialties were."

(Interview with Alicia Schriekker, 29 October 2025)

Behind Reinier de Klerk's grand mansions, there were a few humble quarters where over a hundred enslaved men and women lived and worked. These modest dwellings contrast sharply with the grand architecture and opulent interiors of the Toko Merah, highlighting the stark divide between the colonial elite and the slaves who served them. The slaves who lived there performed the essential daily tasks that supported the household of the governor-general and his widow. Sophia still employed them in cooking, cleaning, sewing, tending the garden, and assisting at social gatherings. Their lives were determined by Sophia and her masters, but within this environment they also formed a close-knit community.

As mentioned earlier regarding social gatherings, 16 slaves were trained musicians who formed a private orchestra. They performed for Reinier, Sophia, and their elite guests at exclusive events. This band was renowned for its skill in playing a variety of European and local traditional instruments.⁴⁴ This reflected the unique cultural fusion that characterized life in colonial Batavia. Music, apart from being the main source of entertainment for masters, was also one of the few creative outlets that allowed slaves to express their identity and humanity amidst the oppression caused by slavery.⁴⁵

When Sophia made her will shortly before her death in 1785, she included provisions that marked a rare act of mercy at the time. According to her will, more than 50 slaves would be granted freedom upon her death. Apart from freedom, they will also be given a certain amount of money to start a new life as independent individuals. This testament indicates that at that time there had begun to be a moral awareness that was contrary to the normal norms

⁴² Professor Colenbrander reports on the manuscript, which he has obtained from Mr. V. I. Van de Wall about the estate of a company's Lady Sophia Francina Westpalm, Dowager of Rev. G. Reinierde Klerk (1777-1780), "Bestuursvergadering: van 16 October 1926", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*, Deel 82 (1926), pp. XXXVI-XXXVIII

⁴³ Amanda Rachmadita, *Toko Merah dan Sejarah Kelam Perbudakan di Batavia*. 12 Januari 2023. Downloaded from <https://www.historia.id/article/toko-merah-dan-sejarah-kelam-perbudakan-di-batavia-vqobk>

⁴⁴ Like most slaves in the Southeast Asian colonies (including Batavia), slaves not only did manual labor and household work, but many also had skills as singers, musical instrument players (local and European traditional), and dancers. Lihat Richard B. Allen, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ This has been going on since the 17th century. Many slaves and native people became singers, dancers and performers to entertain Europeans in Batavia, especially at large banquets. See Wouter Schouten & Cornelis de Bruyn, *Balinese Muzikanten en Dansers*, Rijkmuseum. c. 1660.

of colonial society, although it was still limited. However, the act of freeing dozens of slaves did not completely eradicate the injustice experienced by the slaves, because their new freedom came without social protection and economic stability. Many of them face the challenge of surviving in a city where residents of color and mixed races often have difficulty finding secure livelihoods. Nevertheless, Sophia's testament remains a historical moment that reveals the contradictions of her character who enjoyed showing the luxury and moral complexity of slavery among the Batavian colonial elite, where compassion and exploitation of human labor coexisted in one place.⁴⁶

Not all slaves were given freedom. Those who were not in the will or could not afford to buy their freedom were still treated as property and included in the estate auction after their death. On Saturday, 28 January 1786, the grand auction took place in front of the mansion (red shop) on the banks of the river. The atmosphere that day was depressing for anyone who witnessed it. The slaves who had lived and worked in the house stood in a line on the steps, waiting to be called by the auctioneer. They had no idea who would buy them, and no idea where their fate would take them from that day on. A total of 181 slaves were listed on the main inventory list, with 11 others on a supplementary list. The auctioneer read out their names one by one, along with their respective skills and duties. Josephin, a clarinetist, was called first, followed by Ariantje van Batavia, a lacemaker, and her three children. Next came Achiles, a drum maker and flutist. Even a full orchestra of 17 musicians was auctioned off, along with all its instruments.⁴⁷

Such was the fate of slaves at that time. Those who had been an integral part of the household of Reinier de Klerck and his wife Sophia were now forced to leave their place of service to follow their new masters.⁴⁸ There was no choice, no freedom. Everything was determined by whoever was willing to pay the most. The auction at Toko Merah in 1786 became a vivid example of how humans were treated as commodities in the colonial system of 18th-century Batavia.

The auction attracted a large crowd, including businessmen, officials, and wealthy merchants, eager to acquire the valuables left behind by the widow of a high-ranking VOC official. The scene was both tragic and symbolic of the dehumanizing nature of the colonial slavery system. The slaves and their families, who had lived together for years, were finally torn apart, and the individuals who had served loyally in the de Klerk household were scattered throughout Batavia and beyond. Their fates were determined by wealth and fortune. This also signaled the end of a glorious era for the de Klerk plantation. It also revealed the cruel economic reality of the 18th century, where human lives were valued and traded like furniture, jewelry, and property. Today, the memory of this event stands as one of the most epic episodes in Toko Merah's history, a reminder of the human sacrifice behind the splendor of Batavia's colonial heritage.

⁴⁶ Matheos Viktor Messakh, "A home truth about the house of a Dutch governor general", *Jakarta Post*, 15 July 2008.

⁴⁷ Amanda Rachmadita, *loc.cit.*

⁴⁸ After Sophia's death, all slaves were also asked to move immediately from the Red Shop due to a disease problem that led to deaths among the slaves. Therefore, it was proposed that the slaves move to an area farther from the city center and cleaner in the environment. See "Zesde boek: Batavia, zesde deel 1787", 1.04.02 *Inventaris van het archief van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), 1602-1795 (1811)*.

4. 4. The Function of the Red Shop in Later Times

Initially, after the auction of Sophia's inheritance, the Toko Merah building was purchased by several wealthy individuals and high-ranking VOC officials. This was due to its strategic location on the banks of the Kali Besar River, Batavia's central trading area.⁴⁹ This building was also ideal for administrative and business activities. Therefore, the building, which was formerly a residence, was transformed into one of the VOC's trading offices and a meeting place for high-ranking colonial officials.

Then, in subsequent periods, especially after the VOC was dissolved in 1799, the Toko Merah building was taken over directly by the Dutch colonial government. The building was then used as a colonial administrative office, given its strategic location near the Sunda Kelapa harbor, a major hub for international trading ships. During the transition of power from the VOC to the colonial government, the practice of slavery persisted, and much of the work in the offices and households of colonial officials relied on slave labor. Slaves were used to clean rooms, carry documents, prepare banquets for colonial officials, and maintain the building. Thus, Toko Merah not only bears witness to the transition of power but also preserves tangible traces of the role of slaves in sustaining the colonial system in Batavia.

Entering the 19th century, the Kali Besar area increasingly developed into the center of Batavia's economic activity. During this period, Toko Merah was used by various private European trading companies. The building's spacious, sturdy, and classical European architectural style made it an ideal location for offices and warehouses. This commercial function made Toko Merah known as one of the busiest buildings in Batavia's old trading district.⁵⁰

In the mid-19th century, Toko Merah served not only as a trading office but also as an educational institution, specifically the Military Engineering Academy (Militaire Technische School).⁵¹ This school was established by the colonial government to train prospective engineers and technicians for both civilian and military employment. Its role as a school marked the period when Batavia began to transform into a center of education and training in Southeast Asia.

After the military education institution was relocated, Toko Merah returned to its function as a trading company office. Many wealthy Dutch and Chinese merchants used the building as a center of business activity and a venue for important meetings. During this period, remnants of slavery were still felt, although they were diminishing, especially after the announcement

⁴⁹ J. Pijnappel, "Bijvoegsel, Om Te Laten Volgen Achter de Javaansche Schetsen Deel III Van Dit Tijdschrift, Bladz 413", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*, 4de Deel, 1/2de Afl. (1855), pp. 1-12.

⁵⁰In the mid-19th century, Toko Merah (Red Shop) was purchased by a Chinese man named Oey Liauw Kong. He was a captain of the Chinese community in Batavia. Oey continued Toko Merah's function as a trading and warehouse due to its strategic location. See Meliani Budianta (ed.), *Cultural Dynamics in a Globalized World* (London: Routhledge Group, 2018), p. 220.

⁵¹ This can be seen from the photo archives displayed by KITLV in its special collection section. See KITLV, *Trappenhuis in de Toko Merah aan de Kali Besar te Batavia*. Downloaded from <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/view/item/770670>.

of the abolition of slavery in Batavia in 1860.⁵² Slaves (former slaves) became native laborers, often employed as porters, cleaners, and servants in commercial buildings like Toko Merah.⁵³ They worked without proper rights, becoming an invisible part of the colonial trade that revolved in the region.

When Indonesia entered independence, Toko Merah's function changed again. The building was used by various government agencies and private Indonesian companies. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the building served as one of the important trading offices in Jakarta's Old Town area. However, over time and the shift of the economic center to other areas like Thamrin and Sudirman, Toko Merah began to lose its role as a major business center.

Despite its neglect, Toko Merah's historical value and architectural beauty continue to attract historians and cultural heritage enthusiasts. The government subsequently undertook restoration to preserve the building's authentic structure. The red brick walls, marble floors, and detailed windows and large doors were retained to reflect the atmosphere of 18th-century Batavia. This restoration is an important part of efforts to preserve Jakarta's colonial history.⁵⁴

Today, Toko Merah has been designated a cultural heritage building by the Jakarta Provincial Government. The building has been transformed into a center for cultural activities and historical tourism. Numerous events are held there, from art exhibitions and history seminars to cultural activities aimed at introducing Batavia's colonial history to the younger generation. Toko Merah is no longer a symbol of colonial power, but rather a place for learning and remembering the past.

Spanning over two and a half centuries, Toko Merah is one of Jakarta's most recognizable Old Town icons. From the private home of the widow of the Governor-General of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), to a trading office, a technical school, and a cultural center, the building has weathered many eras and changed functions. Toko Merah now stands not only as a colonial architectural relic, but also as a silent witness to the long journey of Batavia's history from the glory days of the VOC to modern Jakarta.

⁵² Ulbe Bosma explained that when the British government returned colonial territories in 1815, the Netherlands committed to prohibiting and eradicating the slave trade in these colonies and territorial waters. This included the Netherlands Antilles, Suriname, the Dutch settlement at Elmina (on the coast of present-day Ghana), and the Indonesian archipelago. This abolition proceeded with little momentum. Human theft and slave trade continued until the mid-19th century. Finally, in 1860, this commitment was realized. See Ulbe Bosma, "Gedwongen verplaatsing en illegale slavenhandel na de afschaffing", Rose Marie Allen, et.al., *Staat & Slavernij: Het Nederlandse Koloniale Slavernij-verleden en Zijn Doorwekkingen* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 2023), p. 145.

⁵³ Andrew Febrian & Hari Iskandar, "Analysis Of The Influence Of The Revitalization Of Toko Merah Kota Tua Jakarta On Tourists' Visiting Preferences", *Management Studies and Entrepreneurship Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (2024), pp. 7575-7584.

⁵⁴ This De Klerk residence and its 18th century architectural style become even more interesting when the interior of the house is the typical combination of European baroque and Chinese South East Asian, like other buildings in Kota Tua (Old City). See Julianti Parani, "Reviewed Work(s): Jakarta/Batavia. Het centrum van het Nederlandse koloniale rijk in Azië en zijn cultuurhistorische nalatenschap by J.R. van Diessen", *Bijdragen to de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*, Deel 148, 1ste Afl. (1992), pp. 181.

5. Conclusion

Toko Merah serves as a reminder of both the complexity of Batavia's colonial history and the intertwining of wealth, status, and slavery during the VOC era. In the case of Toko Merah, the slavery practised around the estate, while providing and fulfilling the functions of labour, also served as a status symbol, as was the case with Reinier de Klerk and Sophia Francina Westpalm. Enslaved people provided a range of services within the household and performed skilled crafts, which demonstrates the extent to which slavery was the 'unseen' pillar of the colonial elite's lifestyle. Sophia's estate, auctioned off in 1786, included 192 enslaved people and 1,400 movable assets, which demonstrates the extent to which human lives, in the case of slavery, were legally and economically integrated into the colonial system.

The fate of the De Klerk and Sophia's enslaved people exemplifies the social and economic structures of Batavia at the time. Enslaved people were treated as property and moved through organised auctions and notarial contracts, indicating how systematic and routine the organisation of the slave trade was. The absence of moral consideration for the human beings involved confirms the injustice of the procedures. The social and economic inequalities within and the organisation of 18th-century Batavian society are illustrated in this case. The status and wealth of the elite were maintained through the work and exploitation of others. The auction at Toko Merah demonstrates the human cost of the colonial power and the social suffering of enslaved people.

The history of Toko Merah is illustrative of Batavia's urban and social historical development. The building has survived economic and political changes in the city, even as slavery declined and was abolished. Toko Merah today is a centre for educating the general public about history, particularly the colonial era and the history of slavery in Batavia. The building's endurance and the function it serves today underscore the need to preserve such sites that tell the story of the interplay of power, wealth, and the exploitation of human beings during the colonial era.

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