

Vrijburgh Conference 2017. The WIC and slavery. An attempt to comprehension.

'Atis Tirma!' gritó el Guancho  
Y al abismo se lancó  
Pués no quisó ser Esclavo  
Y suffrir la humilliación.he

This song from the Canary Islands tells us about the last two warriors of the Guanches, who plunched to their death from the holy rock because they did not want to suffer the humiliation of being sold on the Market of Seville.

It is the year 1496, four years after the discovery of America.

On a number of islands one can find a 'Casa de Colón', or a plaque near the harbour where he passed, Christóbal Colón, Christoffer Columbus, whose fleet had its base on its way to the New World. Starting from the land of the Guanches, the European expansion greatly accelerated.

Pués no quisó ser esclavo, in the Canary nights one hear this song when passing through the streets.

Before continuing I wish you all a cordial welcome to this conference. First of all, the Ambassador of Brazil, Her Excellency Regina Maria Cordeiro Dunlop and her court, as well as His Excellency Cézar de Souza Lima Amaral and a Consulesa Dona Lidia Coelho Amaral. Vossas Excelências, Sejam Bemvindo !

Welcome Ann Backaert who designed the beautiful Programme for Vrijburghconferentie I on Huis Vrijburgh, Casa Friburgo, last year.

A warm welcome, of course, to the bearers of this conference, Professor Henk den Heijer, Professor Michiel van Groesen, Dr. Frank Dragtenstein and Paul Comenencia MA, who is also serving as Day Chairman.

In the year 2002, the Brazilian Deputy Pedro Eugênio de Castro Toledo Cabral asked me in Recife whether we could search the area around '*Cruz do Patrão*', with the echo-instrumentation used in our Fort Orange project.

This 'Cross of the Master' stands at the port of Recife, not far from Fort de Bruin. It is the oldest monument in Recife, mentioned already in 1601 in geographic descriptions. In Portuguese times it served as a beacon between Olinda and Recife for ships mooring on this side of the, at that time, peninsula. These vessels carried the corpses of the slaves that were found, on board of the

big ships coming from Africa, upon arrival in Pernambuco. All corpses considered to be from heathens were buried there, in the draughty ground or simply thrown overboard. The dead that had been baptised were buried in sacred soil.

Thus the macabre background of this monument, twenty feet tall and six feet in diameter.

The area had been so disturbed during the last four centuries that we only found recent shards and candle wax of earthenware and glass candlesticks. These came from the meetings and rituals of Xangó and Consciência Negra groups.

Cruz do Patrão has been moved to a remote location in the port area and is therefore more a symbolic than a historic place. Signed against the evening sky, the huge cross has an evocative effect.

From this moment on, MoWIC considered it a moral duty to study the relation between the WIC and slavery, next to the traditional historic and archaeological subjects studied thus far.

When the UNESCO announced in 2003 the *Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*, it seemed timely to consider the Commemoration of Slavery as Immaterial Heritage of Humanity, also.

In the year 2008, the 'List of the Immaterial Heritage of Humanity', was published. The word 'Immaterial' nowadays, is more commonly used in heritage terminology than 'Intangible'. The list is a multi-coloured collection of cultural expressions from all over the world. They are sub-divided in categories of protection-urgency. The list is yearly updated. In 2016 a textual update of the Convention has been prepared, to contain, among others:

- Belgian beer culture
- The 'Carnaval de Granville' in France
- German Genossenschaft
- The living culture of three writing systems of the Georgian alphabet, still in use

This made me feel comfortable. Not so much the three alphabets, but especially the term 'living'.

A few from the slavery past is listed too, like the 'Tumba Francesa', the 'Capoeira de roda', and since last summer the Valongo Yard in Rio de Janeiro.

It is certainly a privilege to be recognised as 'cultural heritage', but there is also the hidden danger of rigidity. Plum pudding can only be prepared by one recipe. I wonder whether the Commemoration of Slavery fits well with the Belgian beer culture, German Brotherhood, or the French Carnival festivities and therefore whether implementation should be recommended. I have reservations because of the creation of stereotypes.

The sub-title of this conference is: 'An attempt to comprehension' and that is exactly what it is: an attempt. Comprehension in the sense of factual knowledge, that will probably succeed, but comprehension in the sense of 'Verstehen', understanding in the moral sense, that will remain an asymptotic goal. One can analyse the problem as a variable approximation, how human beings were sold and treated as objects, not even as animals, and that remains incomprehensible.

In order to show the relation between as many items as possible in the hermeneutic sense of research, we offer you this afternoon a multiform programme.

The last part concerns the presentation of slave songs from the Zikinzá collection, collected in the last century by two visionary citizens of Curacao.

Slave songs show us the slave's mental toughness. By sublimating their misery in sound and rhythm and sometimes mockery, they were able to persevere and go on and on and on. In this way they left us with a spiritual heritage.

### **Sung Slavery**

On the UNESCO list of Immaterial Cultural Heritage of Humanity, beautiful examples of Music can be found, i.e.:

- Albanese polyphony
- Canto a tenore by the Sardinian shepherds
- Throat singing from Mongolia
- Tango from Argentine and Uruguay and

- The Tumba Francesa from Cuba, mentioned before. This is a mix of music from Dahomey and French ballroom music, imported by slaves from Haiti, having their roots mainly in Dahomey.

In my opinion, the slave songs from Curacao and the Antilles, and those from Suriname, as well as those from wherever in the world, will well figure on this list... providing they should be kept alive for coming generations, taught in schools, presented at festivals. They comprise a cultural document showing how, in the past, singers had the spiritual strength to express themselves in this way. In Fon, the Yoruba language, there is a word for music: *Áfosé*, 'word that works'.

In order to show some of the recent research on slavery in The Netherlands, work is presented of several young authors. To browse and to buy.

- Mr. Dr. Ellen Neslo last year defended her Thesis: 'Een ongekende elite', about children who, born from parents of diverse racial and social background, the patron and the female slave, often received the privileges of their white fathers and thereby entered the ambiguous life of a half-caste with a double's agenda.
- Rowan van der Stelt shows her MA thesis about the knowledge of students about slavery after finishing their university studies.
- From the hand of Drs. Ilse Marreeve there is the richly illustrated book 'Curaçaose Geschiedenissen'. Islanders of various descent and education share their expectations and lives, providing thereby a long-term cultural history of Curacao. The first chapter is about Rosemary Allan.
- The dissertation of Dr. Valika Smeulders: 'Slavernij in perspectief' has been sold out. Her name is connected with the CD box 'Nederland en slavernij' from 2013. Excellent lectures from the KITLV. She organizes city-trips through Den Haag along the places where persons from the Antilles and Surinam had a paper during World War II. Pasado Presente.

**In this conference the accent has been laid on the Trans-Atlantic slavery trade. This concerns the Afro-world. Indian tribes, however suffered a lot in not only the Spanish and Portuguese colonization, but during the WIC period, too. The book, published in 2016 by De Walburg Pers, 'Indiaans Verhaal' by the Indian Caraíbe, Reinier Artist, is on the table, too. Just to**

**give you an insight in the wonderful Indian way of looking at the streams of history they had to go through. In the shadow of two cultures.**

**Spoken history. Spoken family-history. Spoken tribal history. Spoken Slavery.**

I want to express my sincere thanks to all people that have offered their magnificent help during the past months. I will especially mention, *salvis titulis*:

-First of all: Thanks to Dirk Tang for putting us on the right track,

- Thanks to Richenel Andano, Director of the Foundation NAAM of Curacao, for kindly offering us the opportunity to present the Zikinzá collection, and for his sustained support in the analysis of the music recordings.

- Thanks to Michiel van Kempen, Nico Eigenhuis and Paul van Dongen for their useful advice.

- Thanks to Reinier Russell for all his help and for being our generous host.

- Thanks to Paul Comenencia for his willingness to be our Chairman.

- And thanks to my dear spouse Arne van der Gen, for his help in shaving the English text.

November is the 'Mês da Consciência Negra, in Brazil. No better month for this Vrijburgh Conference 2017.

I wish you a pleasant afternoon , in spite of the intrinsic tragedy of the subject.

Because.. nobody wants nor wanted to be a slave.

Pués no quisó ser Esclavo.

Thank you