

A photograph of a woman in profile, wearing a vibrant purple headwrap and a matching textured top. She is looking down at a bouquet of colorful flowers. In the background, a large, rust-colored metal monument stands, featuring four bronze statues of enslaved people in various poses of labor and suffering. The scene is outdoors under a cloudy sky, with other people and buildings visible in the distance.

# Verkenning basis voor naamswijziging in verband met het Nederlands slavernijverleden

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# Summary

## **Exploring the basis for name changes linked to Dutch slavery**

### **Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut**

on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security Research and Documentation Centre  
(Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum -WODC)

## The Research Questions

This exploration attempts to answer the following three research questions:

### **1. Are there any (recognized) records or lists of surnames historically related to Dutch slavery in Surinam, the former Dutch Antilles, and the former Dutch East Indies?**

If so, the following subquestions apply:

- 1a. Which records or lists exist and where are they kept?
- 1b. How complete and historically reliable are they?
- 1c. Which surnames in these records and lists are historically linked to slavery?
- 1d. What, precisely, is the link between these names and slavery?

If there is no (recognized) record or list for a particular geographical or historical context, the second research question applies:

### **2. Is it possible to reconstruct a list of surnames related to Dutch slavery with the help of experts and sources in these geographical/historical contexts?**

Subquestions related to this question are:

- 2a. If so, what would be the best method to produce such a list?
- 2b. What problems would likely be encountered when compiling such a list?
- 2c. Approximately how many surnames are likely to make up the list in a particular context?
- 2d. What, precisely, is the link between these names and slavery?

### **3. How suitable are the available records (for each context and overall) as a basis for name change requests on the grounds of the surnames' link to slavery?**

- 3a. What technical factors do experts see as relevant to the lists and records' suitability?
- 3b. What societal considerations are a factor in the lists and records' suitability, according to experts?

## Methodology

This study was carried out by the Verwey-Jonker Instituut, which has no previous track record of studying surnames and slavery. For this exploration, we have consulted:

- The available literature and the records named in the literature.
- The relevant websites and underlying databases at the National Archives of the Netherlands, Surinam and Curaçao.
- Renowned historians, genealogists, archivists, museum curators, heritage managers and other experts in the history of Dutch slavery.

The experts were approached via email and shared their knowledge in two ways:

- Live (partly online) in expert meetings on the three historical/geographical contexts: Surinam, the (former) Dutch Antilles, and the (former) Dutch East Indies.
- Online, through interviews and correspondence (Appendix 1 details our method of finding and selecting experts).

This exploration contains the input of some 90 specialised experts in total, 40 of whom took part in expert meetings and focus groups. In addition, we discussed our (interim) findings with the supervisory committee on several occasions.

## Answering the Questions

### Answer to Research Question No. 1

This exploration has made clear that there are at least fifteen recognized and historically reliable records and lists in which surnames related to Dutch slavery have been recorded. Some of these are on paper, others have been digitized. These registers cover Surinam (the most completely documented records) and the former Dutch Antilles (about two thirds complete; covering Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao in particular), while there are none for the former Dutch East Indies.

The available registers list individuals. In other words, they do not provide an overview of surnames, but specify individuals and families that were at some point enslaved or freed. What these records have in common is that all of them are based on sources stemming from the colonial era, that is, they are 'slave registers', manumission registers and emancipation registers. The manumission registers contain names of people who were freed before the Dutch abolition in 1863. Every available record is organized according to its

administrative, historical and geographical context (collective districts, island, city, colonial territory, denomination).

The relationship between the surnames that appear in the available records and slavery is consistently the same: surnames were assigned to enslaved people (not chosen by them) when the enslaved were freed—in most cases, at the time of the 1863 emancipation—and the assignment itself bore the hallmarks of the colonial inequality of power. Altogether, the records are estimated to contain the names of 72,000 to 98,000 individuals, but we do not know how many surnames they include. Surinam's emancipation register contains 34,000 individuals and at least 10,000 surnames. The largest collection can be found here: *Suriname en de Nederlandse Antillen: Vrijverklaarde slaafgemaakten (Emancipatie 1863)* <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/suriname-en-de-nederlandse-antillen-vrijverklaarde-slaafgemaakten>

In Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, most surnames assigned upon emancipation were the names of either plantations or Dutch towns and villages without the preposition 'van', inversions of geographical names, names of female ancestors, or odd or demeaning names. Examples include *Weltevreden* (plantation), *Vianen* (place name without 'van'), *Madretsma* and *Neslo* (inversions of Amsterdam and Olsen), *Martina* (female ancestor), *IJzel* and *Chocolaad* (odd or demeaning; these translate as 'Black Ice' and 'Chocolate'). In all cases, the new family names maintained the distinction between formerly enslaved people and other citizens of the kingdom of the Netherlands. At the time of the emancipation, this distinction was visible and recognizable to all involved.

None of the available records are 100% complete, nor can they be completed in the scientific sense of the word. Some people and groups will always remain unrecorded, such as enslaved people who migrated and therefore disappeared from the Dutch colonial records. Particularly in the Antilles, people often moved, or were forced to move, from one location to another in the Caribbean and between the islands and mainland South America. As a result, many ended up in the territory of another colonial power.

## Answer to Research Question No. 2

In order to supplement the emancipation and manumission records pertaining to the Dutch Antillean context, the records of Saba and St. Martin would need to be recovered; the paper records of St. Eustatius and Aruba would need to be digitized; and the surnames of enslaved families would have to be selected from the secondary source (website) concerning Bonaire's families. For Curaçao, the existing records would ideally be supplemented with the island regions that are currently missing because of a fire in the archives.

In the context of Surinam before 1832, the Moravian Church's Registry of Baptisms, Marriages and Deaths (Lamur et al.) might provide some additional names. In the Dutch Antillean context, the same might apply to the records kept by the Catholic and Methodist Churches. The Methodists were influential on St. Martin. These church records can provide information about family relations, which is important in the context of Dutch slavery where especially the paternity of enslaved men was not recognized for a long time. However, it will not be possible to distil a single, supplementary list of surnames from these church records.

It stands to reason that surnames that come to light from these records and supplementary sources from other territories will bear the same type of relationship to slavery as the names already on record. Unlocking additional sources is certain to be a laborious and lengthy process.

In the context of the former Dutch East Indies, we conclude that the church records of the predecessors of the Dutch Protestant Church in that region probably contain too few references to slavery to be of use.

The foreseeable obstacles to generating more complete lists of names are:

- Not all necessary sources have been kept and archived.
- In some contexts, the archives are inaccessible.
- Insufficient insight into corruptions and misspellings made by colonial rulers or enslaved people over the course of time.
- The time-consuming triangulation of various sources (church and government administrative records) needed to create a clear overview.
- The intrinsic incompleteness of all sources: slave registers, manumission registers, emancipation registers and church records are never entirely exhaustive; there are always individuals and groups that are *not* recorded.

## Answer to Research Question No. 3

The records that are available now can be used to determine whether there is a connection between a surname and slavery: all the names in the records named in this report (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) have been assigned to enslaved people. However, the available records cannot be used to exclude certain names from a request for change. The absence of certain names from the records does not prove the lack of a connection to slavery. Names might be absent due to a lack of (accessible) historical sources or to the lack of reference to a particular group of people in the Dutch sources. On scientific grounds, the existing records can serve as a basis to recognize the claims made by descendants of enslaved people who apply for a name change, but cannot be used to dismiss such claims.

**The main technical constraint on the suitability of records** is the fact there is not just one record available, but fifteen of them, based on sources from widely varying contexts. It would be technically complicated and ahistorical to (strive to) consolidate these into one database. In addition, the migration of enslaved people poses a technical problem, as does the presence of other colonial powers in the territories where the Dutch government and Dutch owners operated. Descendants of enslaved people who now live in the Netherlands, Surinam or the Antilles may have received their name from another colonial power (such

as Great Britain or France). The available records pertaining to Dutch slavery do not include the names assigned to enslaved people by other colonial powers.

Moreover, another technical factor in the suitability of the existing records is the misspelling and corruption of names, whether deliberate or inadvertent. Many names have been corrupted over the course of time. It is also unclear how officials in Surinam dealt with the names of forced and voluntary migrant labourers from India and the former Dutch East Indies who were shipped to Surinam after the 1863 abolition of slavery.

**The societal considerations with respect to suitability** are mainly ethical concerns and address the disparity in availability of source material. If the records became the touchstone for determining who would be granted a (free) name change, then anyone with a name not included in these records would stand less chance of having their claim recognized. In practice, this would mean that someone whose ancestors were enslaved in Surinam would be able to prove this much more readily than a descendant of enslaved people from the former Dutch Antilles. This is clearly unfair, given the fact that the latter can have a surname just as loaded and can have an equally valid reason to request a name change. From context to context, there are disparities in the availability of historically reliable proof of the link between surnames and slavery.

The second societal consideration pertains to the wider context of how the Netherlands deals with the history of slavery in general. In the various meetings we organized in connection with this study, participants underscored how important it is to validate all the work that ~~was~~ is being done to make the source material accessible. They argued that this is necessary not only for the purpose of expanding and supplementing existing records, but also to provide the descendants of enslaved people in the Netherlands with better access to their own family history.

The third societal consideration is focused not on the records, but rather on the human dimension and descendants' individual well-being. In the colonial past, enslaved people did not have the freedom to choose their own name. Many experts argue that the Dutch state should now be generous in granting people the opportunity to change their name at no cost. That generosity should not hinge upon colonial sources. Indeed, reusing those sources as a criterion may be considered objectionable. A more acceptable basis for determining the validity of name change requests on the grounds of a name's link to slavery could be the applicant's perceived need for this, combined with proof of an ancestor's domicile in a former Dutch colony. From our contacts with the Surinamese, Antillean, Dutch East Indies and Indonesian communities in the Netherlands, we have learned that the current requirement to provide evidence of psychological distress is experienced as grievous.

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