

Redefining What It Means to Be a Citizen in The Kingdom Through the Lens of Our Slavery Past

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Proclamation (Excerpt)

To the enfranchised population of Curacao and dependencies.

In the month of October of last year has been proclaimed in your Island the law by which it pleased His Majesty, our most gracious King, to decree that on the 1st of July 1863 slavery should be for ever abolished in Curacao and its dependent Islands,

That happy day is now there.

From off this moment, you are free persons and you enter into society as inhabitants of the colony.

*Most heartily do I congratulate you with the blessing bestowed upon you by the paternal care of the King; sincerely you may rejoice in the same, **but you must also make yourself worthy of this benefit...***

*Curacao the 1st of July 1863
Johannes Didericus Crol
Governor*

Introduction

Slavery led to the transformation of the Dutch Kingdom and the establishment of countries of color throughout the Caribbean. On St. Maarten the legacies of slavery can still be seen; its aftermath can still be felt.

Over the last few years, it appears that the Kingdom has been forced to come face to face with its slavery past. It must now create a new path forward. This short paper expresses the opinions of various groups on St. Maarten in the hopes of adding to the current discussion and the design of an approach to hopefully redefining what it means to be a citizen within the Kingdom.

Rediscovering Our History and Heritage

The Arawaks named St. Maarten “Soualiga”, meaning Land of Salt.

When merchants of the Dutch West India Company landed on the island and discovered the Great Salt Pond, they realized that this good would yield substantial profits when traded in America. It is estimated that Dutch ships delivered at least a half a million Africans across their colonies in the Caribbean, over a span of 200 years.

In schools on St. Maarten, students are taught that the island’s first major industry was salt. They learn about the salt pickers who toiled in the sun. They do not learn that the profits of that salt, however, served as an economic driver for another city, like Amsterdam.

Over the last few years in particular, youth and elected officials have called for the immediate development of a comprehensive curriculum on local history and heritage in schools. **This shared history, should be taught throughout schools in the Kingdom.** When we rediscover where we have come from, we can reimagine where we are going.

A citizen within the Kingdom understands Kingdom history; history of Europe and the Caribbean.

Celebrating Emancipation Day

Over the last decade St. Maarten has celebrated Emancipation Day on the 1st of July to commemorate the day when slavery was abolished in the Dutch Caribbean. It is an official, national holiday filled with impactful festivities, music, song and dance.

Unique to St. Maarten is the commemoration of the Diamond 26 Run for Freedom. Slavery was abolished by the French about 15 years before the Dutch emancipated their slaves. The Diamond 26 Run is a reenactment of the escape of slaves from the Dutch side/South to the French side/North to early freedom.

Celebrating Emancipation Day should be a Kingdom affair. Citizens throughout the Kingdom, whether of African or European descent should understand the importance of commemorating the day when humanity prevailed.

Impact of Slavery/Colonialism on Contemporary Kingdom Relations

Slavery aided the Dutch in their bid to colonize the Caribbean and exploit its resources. Colonialism ensured that political control of the islands remained intact for said exploitation.

The Parliament of St. Maarten established a Constitutional Affairs and Decolonization Committee in November 2020; a permanent committee tasked with the research on, discussion of and support of matters of constitutional change, kingdom issues and decolonization. **This committee was established as a direct response to what many believed to be neo-colonialist behaviour** of the Government of the Netherlands as it pertained to the conditions handed down to the islands for liquidity support.

In March 2021 a controversial petition was filed with the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Racism to investigate the Netherlands on accusations of “racial discrimination” and “violations of international rights.”

Since the dismantling of the Netherlands Antilles, the Dispute Regulation ‘Geschillenregeling’, what many believe is the main tool to eliminate one of the greatest democratic deficits within the Kingdom, is yet to be established. If not now, when?

Contemporary kingdom relations continue to be impacted by what can be referred to as an invisible divide; a barrier to better working relationships and understanding. Would acknowledging and commemorating our slavery past be of help in said relations? Perhaps so.

Citizens within the Kingdom, politicians, understand the impact of colonialism on contemporary relations and work towards mutual respect, understanding and improved dialogue.

Conclusion

This roundtable conference, the establishment of the ‘Adviescollege Dialooggroep Slavernijverleden’ and a future pledge by citizens, and politicians more importantly, throughout the Kingdom to redefine what it means to be a citizen by rediscovering, acknowledging, and commemorating our slavery past, may be what this Kingdom needs to be transformed. The research that has been executed, and such discussions as these are the first steps in the right direction.

We are living in historical times, and we should all want to be on the right side of history.

A simple, non-exhaustive plea to the Netherlands

1. Acknowledge and apologize for slavery
2. Make July 1 – Emancipation Day – an official Kingdom holiday
3. Create a Kingdom workgroup to develop curriculum and materials on slavery
4. Consider reparatory justice through the structural financing of projects that tackle poverty and climate change in the Caribbean
5. Improve Kingdom relations through improved dialogue, mediation, and the establishment of a Dispute Regulation