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Speech apologies slavery

On July 1, 2021, mayor Femke Halsema of Amsterdam apologized, on behalf of the city council, for the involvement of former city governments in the worldwide slave trade and slavery. She did so during the annual national commemoration of trans-Atlantic slavery (Keti Koti) at the monument in the Oosterpark.

Our city archives contain notarial deeds of wealthy Amsterdam merchants and government officials from the 18th century. A few years ago, a deed was read to me there relating to a merchant who had died on his way back to the Netherlands from Suriname. This is what he had with him: two silver watches, a tin of chocolate, books, tablecloths, a bed and... a 'black slave boy', with culottes, a scarf and a red cap.[1]

If the crimes are too great, if they are barely comprehensible in their atrocity, a detail mentioned almost in passing, a small fragment, can open the door to our humanity.

A nameless boy with a red cap, without parents or other family, alone and most likely terrified.

At the same time, no fragment or detail can mitigate the crime against humanity that was slavery. Between 1500 and 1880, at least twelve-and-a-half million people fell prey to the transatlantic slave trade. They were dragged from their homes, families were torn apart, their freedom was crushed. People were robbed of their surnames, their history, their identity. They were humiliated, beaten, murdered. We do not know how many enslaved people lost their lives through exhaustion and violence. We do know that about two million people who were embarked in Africa did not survive the journey.

The province of Holland was a major player in the trade in and exploitation of enslaved people. In the 18th century, 40 per cent of the economic growth was based on slavery.

And in Amsterdam almost everyone made money from the colony of Suriname:[2] above all the city government, which was the colony's co-owner and administrator. [3] Moreover, in this economic superpower, members of the city's ruling elite sat on the boards of the West India Company and the Dutch East India Company. Merchants sailed the seas, trading enslaved people as easily as they did spices. The ships in the ports and the warehouses were crammed with goods from afar. Canal houses were richly decorated, depictions of the proud possessions of rulers and merchants set into their facades; power was flaunted in portraits, paintings of civic guards and cityscapes.

This history has left a legacy in our city. It is grandly visible in the historic canal district and our wealth of art. Far less visible - and for a long time ignored - in the exploitation then and the inequality of today.

The city officials and the ruling elite who, in their hunger for profit and power, participated in the trade in enslaved people, in doing so entrenched a system of oppression based on skin colour and race.

The past from which our city still draws its distinctive commercial spirit is therefore indivisible from the persistent racism that still festers.

Gradually, our written history, the view of our heritage, is becoming more complete. We owe this to the many who lived in slavery - and to their children and children's children - who refused merely to be victims. Those who did not allow themselves to be broken, those who resisted. They are the heroes of the past: Baron, Boni, Joli Coeur, Tula. Then and now, people have always resisted - in the West, in the East, and here. With courage and determination, they raised their voices, louder and louder, they were never silenced, until they were actually heard. And among them the many scholars, activists and artists who, in the archives, in museums and in performances, have carried out long overdue repairs to our city's collective memory.

This work is unfinished, but it is now time for the city government to draw conclusions. It is time to engrave the great injustice of colonial slavery into our city's identity. With big-hearted and unconditional recognition. Because we want to be a government for those for whom the past is painful and its legacy a burden. A government for all Amsterdammers.

In 2019, a majority in the Amsterdam city council took the initiative to investigate Amsterdam's involvement in commercial colonial slavery. This research shows that from the end of the 16th century until well into the 19th century, Amsterdam's involvement was direct, worldwide, large-scale, multifaceted and protracted.

Not a single Amsterdammer alive today is to blame for the past.

As a city government, however, we do take responsibility for it. This city government today stands in an unbroken line with its predecessors. Including those rulers and mayors whose actions we despise. We strive for a fair relationship with our history. Reconciliation around a shared past makes room for a shared future.

For the Amsterdam city government's active involvement in the commercial system of colonial slavery and the worldwide trade in enslaved people, on behalf of the College of Mayor and Alderpersons, I apologise.

[1] Ramona Négron, <https://alleamsterdamseakten.nl/artikel/2054/een-swarte-slaaven-jongen-voor-dito-een-rode-muts>

[2] Brandon, Pepijn, and Ulbe Bosma. "The significance of Atlantic slavery for the Dutch economy in the second half of the eighteenth century." *The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 16.2 (2019): 5-. Web.

[3] Fatah-Black, Karwan, Societeit van Suriname (Society of Suriname), Walburg Pers, Zutphen 2019;

Brandon, Pepijn. "Burgemeesters, belangen en staatsmacht." (Mayors, interests and city power) In Brandon, Pepijn et al. *De slavernij in Oost en West: het Amsterdam-onderzoek (Slavery in East and West: the Amsterdam Study)*. Amsterdam: Spectrum, 2020