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## Race in the Netherlands: The Place of the Surinamese in Contemporary Dutch Society

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# Race in the Netherlands: The Place of the Surinamese in Contemporary Dutch Society



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#### FOCUS

**Racism, Colonialism, Policy**

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#### COUNTRY

**The Netherlands**

Sitting in the reception area of Levi's Dreadlock Kliniek on the East Side of Amsterdam, surrounded by pictures of her family and by African and Caribbean flags with reggae music playing in the background, Levi, a middle aged Afro-Surinamese woman, intensely states, "It's only on paper that I'm Dutch. I don't feel Dutch. It's only my passport that's Dutch. That don't make me Dutch!"

Now, fast-forward to the crowded and loud Dapper Markt in which two young Surinamese women, Simona, aged 27, and Michelle, age 24, both born in the Netherlands to Dutch-Surinamese parents, attempt to buy paint. Over the sound of truck horns urging people to pass that ring loudly in the background, the women project their voice to be heard very clearly. When asked, "Are you Dutch?," they reply with, "Yes, I'm Dutch. But the people, who are really from the Netherlands, don't really treat you like a real Dutch person because you have another color skin."

For many inhabitants of the Netherlands, the statements expressed by Levi, Simona, and Michelle are shocking. The Surinamese are considered to be one of the most integrated ethnic minorities in the Netherlands for two reasons:

- 1 They speak Dutch fluently.
- 2 They began migrating to the Netherlands over 50 years ago, and are no longer migrating in large numbers like the Turkish and Moroccan communities.

While the current nationalist discourse in the Netherlands – entangled with xenophobic and islamophobic rhetoric – has specifically targeted the Turkish and Moroccan communities as "ethnic problems", the Surinamese have seemingly become symbols of successful assimilation. In fact, the parliament regards the Surinamese community as such a success that according to Roy Khemradj, the director of Surinaams Inspraak Orgaan (SIO), a new policy has been introduced in which all descendants of second-generation Surinamese immigrants will no longer be registered as minorities.

Given these facts, one may rightfully ask the question, how does this policy change affect the lived experiences of Surinamese people in the Netherlands?

**>> Although many Surinamese people are already Dutch and soon will be legally considered “autochtoon,” there still exists a pervasive insider/outsider dichotomy when it comes to one’s belonging to Dutch society.**

In Roy’s opinion, this will have real consequences, as “any problems the [Surinamese community] face will no longer be taken up as ethnic problems.” Thus, essentially, the Surinamese will transcend race through policy. Roy fears that this post-racial discourse will highlight a discrepancy between what the policy officially states and how the Surinamese community is actually viewed and treated by the greater Dutch population. Although many Surinamese people are already Dutch and soon will be legally considered “autochtoon,” there still exists a pervasive insider/outsider dichotomy when it comes to one’s belonging to Dutch society. Levi and many other Surinamese individuals we interviewed all described being continuously excluded from ‘Dutchness’ and repeatedly seen as “foreigners” due to the color of their skin.

In many ways, this exclusion is facilitated by a staunch rhetoric of equality and tolerance that denies and distances itself from the ways in which historical and contemporary forms of racism and colonialism affect the inclusion of Surinamese people in the Netherlands today. The manifestation of the colonialism, in particular, will be investigated in this report through an investigation of the slave past of the Dutch and the current-day positioning of the Afro/Creole Surinamese.

**>> Regardless of their passport or how well they speak the language, the individuals we interviewed indicated that the color of their skin – in other words, their lack of whiteness – bars them from being accepted as fully Dutch.**

Interviews were conducted in an effort to bring forth the Surinamese experience in Dutch society. We conducted and filmed informal interviews with eight Surinamese individuals, covering a range of ages, occupations, socioeconomic status and viewpoints. Our questions sought to find: (1) how these people view the role played by their heritage in how they are perceived by Dutch society, (2) the nature of slavery’s legacy in the Netherlands, and (3) how they view themselves relative to what is considered “Dutch.” Collecting this information directly from Surinamese individuals enabled us to contrast public ideas about the Surinamese with their actual experience, and determine whether any inconsistencies exist. Indeed, the firsthand accounts we gathered challenged the unverified assumption that the Surinamese people represent an assimilation success story. Regardless of their passport or how well they speak the language, the individuals we interviewed indicated that the color of their skin – in other words, their lack of whiteness – bars them from being accepted as fully Dutch.

Surinamese interviewees were first asked whether or not they were of Dutch citizenship, followed immediately by the question of whether or not they considered themselves “Dutch.” The typical response was that the interviewee, while of Dutch citizenship, felt neither Dutch nor perceived as Dutch. A clear distinction was made, however, between perceptions of that person within the Netherlands and abroad – particularly in Surinam. There, the interviewees stated, they are viewed as Dutch, and therefore treated differently. Most interviewees also conveyed that they hold many characteristics of being Dutch: they speak the language well, have Dutch names, live out their lives in the Netherlands, and hold a sense of belonging to the country and its cities. Such responses seemed to contradict earlier negative responses as to whether or not the interviewee “felt” Dutch. When people were asked to explain why they do not feel Dutch, responses indicated that skin color was the determining factor. Indeed, their apparent insistence that they hold common Dutch characteristics only highlighted the absence of that one component of Dutchness, which is not publicly acknowledged.

**>> The term “allochton,” designating either an immigrant who became Dutch or someone whose parents were born outside the Netherlands, is applied with regard to socioeconomic status, language skills and race.**

While interviewees’ responses were indeed specific to each individual, questions that probed further into what distinguishes the Surinamese experience revealed a shared view of race’s role in shaping day-to-day life. One respondent, Melvin Tjoe-Nij, himself a successful social business entrepreneur, acknowledged that despite the ability of Surinamese and their communities to integrate into and succeed in Dutch society, they are unable to overcome basic perceptions of them based on their skin color. Instead, the term “allochton,” designating either an immigrant who became Dutch or someone whose parents were born outside the Netherlands, is applied with regard to socioeconomic status, language skills and race. “It’s a term for somebody who is multicultural, doesn’t speak good Dutch, and is on the lower side of society,” said Tjoe-Nij. Ultimately, he continued, it’s more about one’s mindset, and this aspect of the Dutch mindset contradicts the notion of a multicultural society.

Our report continues with a short background on the history of the Surinamese in the Netherlands before delving into the forces that have formed and continue to define the Surinamese experience in the Netherlands today. The themes included here were derived directly from our conversations with Surinamese, due to their repeated occurrence. These themes are race, immigration and history. The report ends with our conclusions about race in the Netherlands, based on what we have learned through the experience of a few Surinamese individuals.

The migration of the Surinamese population to the Netherlands began in the 1950s as a result of the new “Charter for the Kingdom of the Netherlands,” drafted into being in 1954 (The Dutch Experience 137). Under the newly instituted charter, the Netherlands granted Dutch citizenship to inhabitants of its colonies in Surinam and the Antilles. With their newly found citizenship, Dutch nationals from Surinam became the largest group from the former Dutch colonies to embark on FOR and take up residency in the Netherlands.

According to political scientists Hans van Amersfoort and Rinnus Pennix, migration from Surinam to the Netherlands increased during the former country’s fight for independence when the “Dutch endeavored to prevent Surinamese citizens from coming to the Netherlands and even deprive all of those already settled in the Netherlands of their Dutch citizenship” (The Dutch Experience 137).

Although the motion failed, the Dutch government decided to allow people to freely migrate from Surinam to the Netherlands until 1980, when they required them to choose citizenship.

**>> These waves of migration are significant in that they were triggered directly by Dutch policy.**

Many people feared “that there would be virtually no further possibility for Surinamese citizens to enter the Netherlands” (The Dutch Experience 137). Thus, there was a mass migration of Surinam nationals during the periods 1974-1975 and 1979 -1980. Scholar Jean Tillie describes the two migration periods as the “immigration wave that took place before [and during] the independence of the former Dutch colony and the second peak after the de-colonization” period. These waves are significant in that they were triggered directly by Dutch policy. So, primarily by its own doing, the Netherlands saw a huge influx of Surinamese people comprising a wide range of age, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. By the 1990s there were over 228,000 Surinamese citizens in the Netherlands, and today there are over 450,000. These immigration policies resulted in the Surinamese population being almost as large in the Netherlands as it is Surinam today.

The position of Surinamese in the Dutch community can be captured in one statement: Surinamese are the best integrated immigrants in the Netherlands. In the following section, we will break down this statement and, based on our findings, analyze the contradictions, problems and true meaning of this phrase.

Worth stating, but rarely acknowledged, is that Suriname is a great example of diversity and multiculturalism. As of 2011, Suriname counts 529,000 inhabitants who can be divided into at least 26 groups. The top five of these groups are Hindi-Surinamese (descendants of Indians who came to work in Suriname as indentured servants after the abolition of slavery in 1863), Creole-Surinamese (descendants of Africans who were brought to Suriname as slaves), Javanese-Surinamese (descendants of Indonesian workers imported by the British to supply the plantations), Afro-Surinamese (descendants of slaves of the British colony Guyana, who latter considered themselves to be in a higher position than the Hindi Surinamese), Aukan-Surinamese and Saramaccan-Surinamese. The latter two are also referred to as descendants of runaway slaves. They settled in the jungles of Suriname, where they could not be easily found, and set up their own societies according to African traditions. In addition to these groups there are others such as Chinese-Surinamese, British-Surinamese, Jew-Dutch Surinamese, etc.. It is said that there are no rivalries between these different groups. However they still refer to one another as Hindi-Surinamese, Chinese-Surinamese, Afro-Surinamese. This is in no way used to demarcate any forms of racial hierarchy between the groups, but rather as a way to talk and laugh together about characteristics of these groups.

### >> **The large influx of colored people into Dutch society was unprecedented.**

Remarkably, they all share one language –namely Dutch. There are different feelings and opinions among the Surinamese community regarding the language. Some, mostly maroons and African Surinamese, perceive this as a loss of identity as they do not speak their native language, but a foreign language that was enforced unto them during colonialism. Others, on the other hand, are of the opinion that even though the adoption of Dutch represented a loss of identity, having a foreign language was and still is the key to the success of Surinamese people.

The large influx of colored people into Dutch society was unprecedented. Despite their Dutch citizenship and language, Surinamese people of color were largely viewed as foreigners, or outsiders. One interviewee, a first-generation Surinamese immigrant, explained how Dutch citizenship alone did not guarantee acceptance of the Surinamese; instead, they progressed through subsequent identities as outsiders, people of “poor countries,” people of developing countries, and finally as allochtoon. This is the case despite the rapid integration of Surinamese into the Netherlands. We now turn to take a closer look at the Surinamese identity within the process of integration.

One remarkable feature in this case is that they are referred to, but also refer to themselves as immigrants and not Dutch people. This is also true in cases where they were Dutch from birth. This is well-articulated by Michelle, to whom we also spoke to at the Dappermarkt: “I am Dutch and when I’m in Suriname I’m treated as Dutch, but I don’t feel Dutch”.

### >> **“My name is Dutch–Van Engel–and I’m black. You are born Dutch but you can’t feel Dutch, because, before they used to cull us outsiders.”**

It is quite understandable why most Surinamese don’t feel Dutch. To begin with, racial issues, as mentioned above, are not to open to discussion. The concept of race seems to be nonexistent in the Netherlands. Rather, words such as immigrants, allochtoon and autochtoon are used to define those others who are not native Dutch. However, we are of the opinion that these other terms are used in the

same manner as racism is used elsewhere: namely, to separate people on the basis of race (creating the categories of 'us' and 'them'). They represent means of circumventing the charge of 'race and racism on grounds of skin color'. A good example of this is the royal family. Nor the queen (Beatrix), nor the king to be (Willem Alexander), nor his children (Amalia, Alexia and Ariane) are 'autochtonen'. This is because their mother is Argentinean, while the future king's father as well as the queen's father were German. However, they are rarely referred to as 'allochtonen,' and in fact when it comes to the royal family, the use of these two terms is avoided. This may be due to the fact that they are heads of state. But unlike the 'official' autochtoon Surinamese, they have white skin color.

"My name is Dutch–Van Engel–and I'm black. You are born Dutch but you can't feel Dutch, because, before they used to cull us outsiders. But they realized they couldn't do that... We will call them people from 'poor countries. Then people from developed countries. Now they call us allochtoon" (Levi).

**>> Perhaps it is this connection of race to an ugly truth of Dutch history, that makes it an issue which tends to go unnoticed or given little attention.**

Most Surinamese take the example of the royal family as proof that no matter how long they stay in the Netherlands, no matter how well integrated they are, they will never belong to Dutch society as Dutch people. Even officially, they are autochthones or not registered as minorities (if the new policies concerning registration of minorities are adopted and put into effect). They are convinced that they will always remain Surinamese, immigrants and allochtoon, and will thus never be treated in the same manner as white Dutch people. Despite every effort at becoming Dutch, they are unable to overcome the truth of their skin color and what that means to Dutch society. As we will see next, this truth is embedded within the history of Dutch colonialism and slavery. Perhaps it is this connection of race to an ugly truth of Dutch history, that makes it an issue which tends to go unnoticed or given little attention.

The integration of Surinamese is directly linked to slavery and colonialism of the 16th and 17th centuries. Dutch norms, values, culture, religion and traditions were passed on by slave masters, schools and employers. This process has been praised as well as criticized. On the one hand, the adoption of Dutch mores by the Surinamese people has afforded them more privileges than other immigrants; "they are treated more favorably" (Eddy Emmanuel). On the other hand, this process is labeled as "forced assimilation rather than integration"; these values and norms were brought upon the Surinamese people under oppressive circumstances.

During our research, we found that all Surinamese people whom we spoke to share particular Dutch norms and values. A clear example is the position over the heated debate on 'mass' immigration in the Netherlands and immigration policies. It is believed that a significant proportion of Surinamese, mainly Hindi, are PVV (a nationalist liberal right-winged party in the Netherlands) voters. This is a noteworthy marker for political views within the Surinamese community. Another indicator of common values is the fact that most of the Surinamese people we spoke to carried the same sentiments towards the Moroccan youth. An Afro-Surinamese man in the Oosterpark stated, "The government is weak. It cannot handle this youth properly and it lets them to continue and disrespect other people. This trouble-making youth do not respect other people." A shared belief has also emerged that Moroccans are well-organized and that they do not allow themselves to be stepped on by anyone. They are more likely to display political will and "fight," and will demand respect if they have to. As Eddy Emmanuel states, "It is a way of living." However, everyone is well aware that these sort of images are created by the media for political purposes, and all heavily oppose the way in which media and politicians portray immigrants– especially Moroccan youth –in order to gain political support. "You have as many Moroccan hooligans as Dutch hooligans" (Eddy Emmanuel).

Another point of view concerning this issue is that to focus only on the Moroccans and other immigrants relegates Surinamese to the shadows (Roy). This minimizes the problems they face, and

impedes further recognition of the Surinamese community.

**>> “While the Turks and Moroccans came later than the Surinamese to the Netherlands they are better represented. This is due to the fact that they are, in general, well-organized”**

When it comes to the impact of immigration policies, opinions are scattered. The youth in particular believe that immigration will have no impact on the Surinamese people. This point of view can be explained by the idea that this is the new generation, who in most cases refer to themselves as Surinamese but also admit that they possess the characteristics of being “very Dutch”. “I love Amsterdam ... I feel very happy here, and I [even] have an Amsterdam accent,” said a young woman we met at the Dappermarkt. However, the older generation is more of the opinion that immigration policies include the Surinamese people, even if they are very well-integrated. “PVV also treats Surinamese also as other immigrants”. One possible impact was clearly laid out by the current director of SIO (Roy). According to him, SIO will shut its doors by 2015. This means that the Suriname community will have no say in policies that could affect them as a minority group. In addition, 3rd and 4th generations will not be considered minorities. Thus, the problems that the Surinamese encounter as a minority group will not be recorded nor recognized as such. This, in his opinion, will place the 5th generation in the same position that the 1st generation was in about 50 years ago. In other words, even if the Surinamese are considered to be Dutch, they will not be treated as such as long as “Dutch people perceive people of color not as part of the society”(Edd Emmanuel). According to this argument, then, it is clear that immigration policies will affect their position in Dutch society.

When examining political representation in the Surinamese community, there is an overall consensus that Surinamese people are poorly represented. “There are two [Surinamese] members in Parliament. In the City Council there are also a small number of Surinamese people in comparison to the Moroccans and Turks” (Roy). “While the Turks and Moroccans came later than the Surinamese to the Netherlands they are better represented. This is due to the fact that they are, in general, well-organized” (Eddy Manuel). “The reason for the poor representation is believed to be the fact that Surinamese youth are not interested in politics” (Roy). “This due to the fact that they do not see a point why they should pursue politics in a “white community...what is in it for them” (Levi). “They rather pursue other occupations which are more beneficial for them”(Roy). Unfortunately, we were not able to examine the extent to which these statements are true. The youth we have spoken to professed to find political representation important, but were not themselves involved in politics.

Does racism go unchallenged in the Netherlands? According to Dienke Hondius, a historian and researcher at the Anne Frank House, “There is no question that most Dutch citizens abhor racism; the problem is that the rejection of racism remains mostly passive” (Black Dutch Voices 26). This can be seen in the way Dutch society, as she puts it, “denies and distances itself from engaging with slavery and racism.” The Dutch, in her opinion, distance themselves from engaging with the ways that the notion of “race” works in societies because this triggers memories of the Holocaust. As she states, “the Germans used race, we don’t.” In Hondius’ opinion, the hesitancy to engage with race allows racism to go mostly unchallenged; thus, there is no recognition of the way that this historical legacy of slavery still impacts and shapes the lives of black people in Holland today.

**>> “There is no question that most Dutch citizens abhor racism; the problem is that the rejection of racism remains mostly passive”**

However, once one actually engages with Surinamese people, such a connection is established instantly. Many people recounted very hurtful experiences of racism in the Netherlands. Simona, a

young Surinamese woman, tells how she was harassed at school when she was younger because of her black skin:

“Whenever the kids would say something about me being different or say you are black. I tried not to let it bother me. Eventually I started saying yes, I’m black but my ancestors helped build this entire country. So don’t say anything to me.”

Other experiences with racism were associated with the Sinterklass tradition. Smiley, a Surinamese woman who works at Levi’s Dreadlock Kliniek, adamantly states, “My son is five. I don’t send him to school on that day.” Levi enters the conversation by stating, “The tradition is wrong,” singing a line of the song, “Sinterklaasje kom maar binnen met je knecht.,” which translates as: “Sinterklass, come in with your servant” – or, in Levi’s opinion – “slave.” Smiley says that she most despises the line, “It doesn’t matter even if you are black like tar, I know your heart is good.” A black man sitting next to Levi laughs, because during a recent Sinterklaas festival a young white girl had pointed at him and exclaimed, “Mom! There is Zwarte Piet.” According to Levi, “The Sinterklass can’t go to Biljmer or he can’t go to the Ouest. The Morrocans will strip him. You stay in the center and go to South where the people like you.”

**>> Remarkably, the history classes [in the Netherlands] tend, in the words of former SIO director Emmanuel, “to diminish and depoliticize slavery and colonialism in Suriname.”**

So, what do people in the Netherlands know about the historical events that took place between the Netherlands and Suriname? In two words: not much. It is only in the last ten years that topics such as slavery and colonialism have been brought into the history curriculums, and even then, the space allotted to it cannot compare to, for example, that given to World War II or other historical events that took place on Dutch soil. Furthermore, the limited attention that is given to slavery and colonialism in history schoolbooks is mainly focused on American slavery. “From the 14 pages about slavery 13 are elaborate about American Slavery and only one mentions something about the Netherlands being involved in slavery (Amy Abdou)”. When asking Surinamese youth about history classes in the Netherlands, it was confirmed that little or no space is given to slavery and colonialism with regards to Suriname. The little that they knew about their own history was the product of their own curiosity, and memories of their parents or other elderly Surinamese people in their environments.

On the other side of the globe, slavery and colonialism in Surinamese history classes are sufficiently addressed and the role of the Netherlands is carefully taken into account. Meanwhile, remarkably, the history classes here tend, in the words of former SIO director Emmanuel, “to diminish and depoliticize slavery and colonialism in Suriname.” The severity and oppression that characterized those times is not adequately addressed. Rather, an image is sustained which makes slavery and colonialism less of a taboo or even slightly acceptable, by stating the advantages that came out of it and downplaying the cruelties that took place.

There are several explanations for this lack of information in Dutch schools concerning the historical relationship between the Netherlands and Suriname.

The first is that this story is not considered to be relevant to Dutch history; accordingly, little attention – in some cases, no attention – is given to an important part of that history. It is believed that the Dutch prefer to be silent about their colonial history either because they are ashamed of it, or simply because they are trying to avoid debates about recognition of and retributions to the Surinamese people (Eddy).

Another explanation is that this is not as well-known a part of history for Dutch people as for the Surinamese themselves. In the words of Dienke, “it takes a person of colour to open the eyes of the others.” It is true that one cannot be expected to teach what one does not know. As to how little is known by Dutch people about the historical events surrounding Surinam, this is doubtful. Taking Amsterdam as an example, there are many places where acts related to slavery and colonialism were

carried out. Suriname was governed, for example, from the City-Hall of Amsterdam. The royal palace was used to organize weekly meetings to discuss about the plantations. The Mayor's house was owned by a former slave master. These are unavoidable monuments; thus it is hard to maintain that so little would be known about the historical events surrounding slavery and colonialism in the Netherlands. According to Amy Abdou, the Dutch people are well aware of slavery and colonialism – it is just that these topics are still not open for discussion. In addition, there is no direct connection made between slavery and colonialism, and their impacts on contemporary society.

Even though the current history classes in the Netherlands come short of addressing slavery and colonialism, one should not underestimate the importance of addressing these topics more broadly. We believe that this would not only give the Surinamese people more information about their roots, but also help to recognize the difficult times they had to and still continue to face, as well as their contributions to the Netherlands. Especially with respect to the latter point, there is frustration within the Surinamese community. A girl by the name of Michel told a story of her mother's experience growing up in Surinam; a story later echoed by an older Surinamese woman we interviewed, who provided a firsthand account of the same experience. Michel explained that when her mother went to school in Surinam as a child, she and her classmates were all obliged to bring five cents to school at the beginning of each week. Failure to bring this tribute would result in punishment. Levi, who herself brought this tax to school as a child, said it was not until years later, when she came to the Netherlands and conducted her own personal investigation, that she learned that the money that had been collected was used to finance a bridge in Zeeland. This part of history is neither mentioned nor publicized in the history of Zeeland, and few people are aware of the story. Such lack of recognition reinforces feelings of frustration and the belief that in Dutch society, events both good or bad that are connected to slavery and colonialism are silenced, especially with regard to Suriname (Levi).

**“The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens,” Alexis de Tocqueville.**

This quote is emblematic of the ways in which discussions on racism, colonialism, and slavery have just now begun to enter the public sphere in the Netherlands. In many ways, our report tried to elucidate the ways in which policies use a post-racial discourse to make the Surinamese “Dutch,” while silencing their lived experiences of racism and exclusion from Dutch Society. Our project seeks to reveal the links between the way that Dutch colonial history is remembered, and how the Surinamese feel represented in society. Thus, our report is grounded in the use of oral histories and film, to allow members in the Surinamese community as well as experts of colonial history to speak against the belief that “race” does not matter in Dutch society. In fact, race does matter – and this only intensified when ignored. We believe that understanding the past allows citizens to engage with both the present and future. By labeling the Surinamese community as the most integrated simply because they speak Dutch, society overlooks many of the struggles this community faces around racism. Our study shows that race is a factor in how people are perceived as “Dutch,” and racism is a factor dictating whose histories are told and validated. By not engaging with these issues, we perpetuate the idea that racism happened centuries ago, and does not exist today.

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### **INTERVIEWS**

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Several other Surinamese residents of the Ninsee Museu and Dappermarkt neighborhoods were also interviewed.

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