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## The enduring legacy of Anton de Kom's anticolonial writings on Dutch empire

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The Surinamese activist and writer Anton de Kom has made a significant contribution to anticolonial thought on the Dutch empire. Silenced by the colonial regime, and with his publications banned in the Netherlands during the Second World War, De Kom's spirit of rebellion remains important for achieving an emancipated world and a prosperous Suriname today.

*This post is a winning entry in the LSE student writing competition **Black Forgotten Heroes**, launched by the **Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa**.*

Paramaribo, Suriname, January 1933.

Despite the early hour (between five and six in the morning), the line of bare-footed labourers under the mango tree grows steadily. Anton de Kom sits behind his desk, listening carefully to their stories, taking notes. I imagine his hand tightly gripping the pencil stub, his middle finger calloused from years of continuous writing, mostly with a pencil, sometimes with a fountain pen.

I write this on the annual celebration of Ketí Koti (Sranantongo for 'the chains are cut') – on 1 July 2021. On that same day in 1863, slavery was officially abolished in the Dutch colonies, though the formerly enslaved were forced to remain on the plantations and work without a salary until 1873 during a period of transition.

What De Kom did not know, sixty years later, is that the book he would write during and after his short-lived and final visit to Suriname, his homeland, would cement his position as the most important anticolonial writer of the Dutch literary tradition. *Wij slaven van Suriname* (We Slaves of Suriname), the first book on Surinamese history written by a Surinamese man, gives a detailed historical account of the horrors of slavery and the transition into 'free' citizenship under Dutch colonial rule – a freedom largely overshadowed by poverty and hunger. De Kom wonders which was the lesser evil: being enslaved, working oneself to death but having enough to eat, or working as a free person for a salary so low one risks dying of hunger.



*The Surinamese writer and resistance fighter Anton de Kom (Suriname 1898 – Germany 1945). Place and date of photo unknown, via Wikimedia Commons.*

The authorities were aware of his influence. In December 1932, De Kom returned to Suriname to visit his mother, who passed away two days after the family's departure from the Netherlands. As he and his family disembarked after the long transatlantic

journey, he noticed armed detectives blended into the large crowd that had gathered on the shores of the Suriname river to catch a glimpse of him.

His public lectures were forbidden by the colonial regime. He thought about his mother, the memory of her kisses and hugs, and how she would listen to his complaints when he was a child. His response to censorship, it dawned on him, would be to establish a consultancy bureau where he could listen to his *pals*, as he called them, the ordinary people of the country. After all, his pain and sorrows had been soothed by his mother's attentive ear, and he could do the same for his compatriots.

And so it happened that he found himself behind a desk in his yard on that early morning in 1933, the labourers under the mango tree becoming more plentiful by the minute. Appreciative of his efforts, the Surinamese people nicknamed him Papa de Kom: the father of Suriname.

His book was written at a unique point in time, when the wound of slavery was still fresh, seventy years after its official abolishment. Few Suriname-born labourers worked on the plantations, many of them growing up with their communities' elders telling stories about the torture their family members there had endured. De Kom consistently refers to the enslaved as *our fathers* and *our mothers*.

*We Slaves of Suriname* features a particularly gruesome account of the torture and murder of an enslaved man named Pierro, on the La Rencontre plantation (not to discourage anyone from picking up De Kom's book, I will spare readers the details of this passage). In the same year De Kom sat at his desk next to the mango tree, my grandfather was born on La Rencontre, the former plantation. A look into recently digitised records shows that this was indeed the plantation where my forefathers lived, worked and died. Does Pierro's blood flow through my veins? I will never know.

Reading *We Slaves of Suriname* in 2021 leaves a sour aftertaste. The last sentences read:

*'Sranang mijn vaderland.*

*Eenmaal hoop ik u weer te zien.*

*Op den dag waarop alle ellende uit u weggewischt zal zijn.'*

*'Sranang my fatherland.*

*I hope to see you again once.*

*On the day when all misery shall be erased from you.'*

He would not see Suriname again. Papa de Kom was banned from Suriname and exiled to the Netherlands, but his spirit of rebellion proved impossible to eradicate. During the Second World War, he wrote on the terrors of fascism, joined the Dutch resistance movement and, on 24 April 1945, days before the Dutch Liberation Day, he died in the Sandborstel concentration camp following his arrest.

Since its independence in 1975, Suriname has lived through civil war, dictatorship and corruption. The country today finds itself in an unprecedented economic crisis, combined with a COVID-19 outbreak that leaves the tiny South American state coloured deeply red on global outbreak maps. The day misery shall be erased from Suriname is yet to come, which I hope to see before my own time is up.

The English translation of *Wij slaven van Suriname* is expected to be published at the beginning of 2022.

### About the author



**Phaedra Haringsma**

Phaedra Haringsma is a writer, photographer and MSc International Relations student from Amsterdam. A previous nominee of the Rijksmuseum Junior Fellowship for her debut documentary on institutional racism, she is interested in gender and postcolonialism. As a trainee at the Netherlands Embassy in Kuwait, she organised an event on women in politics.

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