

**Resource Guide to
Anton de Kom,
We Slaves of Suriname (1934)**



Resource Guide to Anton de Kom, *We Slaves of Suriname*

One Book One Campus Utrecht University, 2024

January 2024

Agnes Andeweg (project leader), Dušan Janković, Marjanne Roodenburg

Contact: onebookonecampus@uu.nl

Website: uu.nl/onebook

Facebook: [onebookonecampus](https://www.facebook.com/onebookonecampus)

Instagram: [@onebook_onecampus](https://www.instagram.com/onebook_onecampus)



[UU Steering committee regarding slavery past and colonialism](#)



Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

Dear reader,

One Book One Campus is a communal reading project that takes place at Utrecht University in the beginning of 2024. One Book One Campus was first introduced in the Netherlands at University College Utrecht in 2017 and has since expanded across the wider community of Utrecht University (UU). One Book One Campus aims to stimulate conversations among staff and students to broaden our understanding of the world, our communities and ourselves through sharing a good book.

This year's edition is a partnership between the UU Steering committee regarding the slavery past and colonialism and the UU Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Programme (EDI). The UU is taking responsibility in creating awareness, stimulating teaching, reflection and research on the Dutch colonial past and the history of slavery, its own involvement, and present-day consequences. The selected book for this year's One Book One Campus provides an excellent starting point for raising more awareness: Anton de Kom's *We Slaves of Suriname* (1934). From January onwards, you can order your discounted copy of the book (€7,50) in [English](#) or [Dutch](#) via uu.nl/onebook and pick it up at one of the designated locations.

We invite you to read *We Slaves of Suriname* in the hope that it will spark conversations and responses all around the university, spontaneously or staged, among students, in class or among colleagues. To support this, from early March we will organize various activities and events (in Dutch and English): meet & reads, a creative contest, a [Cover to Cover](#) event (Studium Generale, 18 Mar), a workshop on decolonial knowledge making for teachers (with [CAT](#) and Anton de Kom University of Suriname, 29 Feb) and an event with the Dutch Poet Laureate Babs Gons and writer Karin Amatmoekrim (27 Mar). Keep an eye out on the [website](#) for updates!

This resource guide offers you an introduction into *We Slaves of Suriname* consisting of some background information about the book and the author, as well as a selection of quotes and discussion questions (loosely) relating to a range of academic disciplines. Thereby we hope to provide you with points of entry into the novel and pointers for stimulating (classroom) conversations. This guide may help you to make connections between the novel and your own field of teaching, but we want to stress that this guide is by no means exhaustive. We are curious to hear about your own reading experiences and welcome your thoughts about One Book One Campus!

Agnes Andeweg (project leader), Dušan Janković, Marjanne Roodenburg

Background Information

For an extended essay in Dutch about De Kom's life and work, see Alice Boots & Rob Woortman, [Voor een Vrij Suriname](#), *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 29 juli 2020

About the Book

We Slaves of Suriname is the first history of Suriname written by a Surinamese author and is a scathing history of three centuries Dutch colonial rule. The book was first published in 1934 in the Netherlands, where Anton de Kom had finished writing it after he was sent into exile by the colonial administration. Meanwhile, the book was not allowed to be published in Suriname.

In the sixties, the Surinamese student Rubia Zschuschen rediscovered De Kom's book in the library of Leiden University. A group of students from the Surinamese Student Union retyped the book and used stenciling to distribute the pirated edition, in the Netherlands and in Suriname. Currently there is an [exhibition](#) until the 7th of July of 2024 about this rediscovery of the book at Museum De Lakenhal in Leiden. Subsequently in 1971, the second edition of the book was finally published. Afterwards, the book was quite regularly republished and different prefaces were added over the years. In 2022, the book got its first edition in English.

About the Author

Anton de Kom (1898-1945) was born in Paramaribo as the eldest son of six children. His father was still born in slavery. Anton attended primary school and afterwards received an "advanced elementary education" and later on obtained a diploma in bookkeeping.

De Kom moved to the Netherlands in 1920, where his political consciousness really started to grow. He got acquainted with people who played important roles in left-wing organizations who wanted to see Indonesia become independent. This inspired De Kom in his anti-colonialism and his socialist activism against the exploitation of Surinamese labourers. He wrote many articles about the need of a joint fight to bring an end to the inequality and injustice people of his home country Suriname had to endure. De Kom also became a public speaker. As such, he gave many lectures against colonialism in which he wanted to educate people about Suriname and in which he spoke about how the people of Suriname had no rights and how they lived in poverty in appalling conditions.

De Kom returned to his home country Suriname in December 1932. Despite his advocacy for better living conditions for the people of Suriname, he saw that nothing had changed. He decided to start a consulting agency from his parents' property in which he listened to and noted the complaints of the Surinamese people. The colonial authorities did not like his activities and eventually arrested him. Under pressure from the people of Suriname, colonial authorities released De Kom after three months of imprisonment and banished him to the Netherlands.

During the Second World War, De Kom played an active role in the resistance against the Nazi's by writing for the underground press for which he got arrested in August 1944. He eventually died in concentration camp Neuengamme in April 1945.

In 2020, De Kom was included into the [Dutch Historical Canon](#) and three years later, Anton de Kom was finally rehabilitated. The Dutch government officially apologized to his heirs.

Documentary

In 2012, film maker Ida Does made a documentary about De Kom in which three of his children, all in their eighties, look back on their youth. The documentary is Dutch spoken, with English subtitles. It is freely available: [Peace, Memories of Anton de Kom](#)

Quotes and Questions – Disciplinary Perspectives

This section of the Resource Guide presents a small selection of quotes from *We Slaves of Suriname* which may be associated – however loosely – to academic fields, as well as questions that highlight potential connections between De Kom’s text and academic disciplines. Of course there are many more questions

Agriculture

“The Negro worker puts on his spurs and climbs a bolletri (balata tree), slashes it open with his owru (machete), and the milk flows. The white color is always the same, but the company will later pay different rates for first, second, and third-rate balata. This work goes on from January to about August. The earnings depend on the amount of balata collected. In the future, this amount will probably decrease over time, owing to a damaging system of overharvesting, which almost seems to have been designed to exhaust this natural source of Surinamese prosperity as quickly as possible.” (166)

Questions:

- How do local or indigenous practices of extracting milk from the balata tree differ from large-scale extractions, be it in method or intended use of the resource?
- In light of sustainability, what are the implications of this ‘damaging system of overharvesting’ of ‘balata milk’ with regard to the production of latex or rubber? What aspect of milk extraction needs to be altered in order for this process to be more sustainable?

Anthropology

“When, in our childhood, my father came home from the gold-digger’s camp, he often brought Ndyuka friends with him, and Ndyukas later stayed at our farm when they visited the city. We children looked up to them with a kind of uneasy curiosity, as if they were wild beasts that might do anything at any moment. When they spoke, we did not understand their language. At school, we told the exciting news that Ndyukas had visited our home and made fun of their stupidity. We felt far superior to the ‘bush Negroes,’ because we had learned the noble art of reading and writing and dressed like Europeans.” (106)

Questions:

- What processes of racialization are at play in the excerpt above? What administrative or educational structures in colonial Suriname established them and for what purpose?
- Can you think of ways in which colorism is similar or different from the discriminatory and/or prejudicial thinking described above by De Kom?

Biology

"[Rich] in immense forests, where the greenheart, the barklaki, the kankantri, and the prized brownheart grow, rich in wide rivers, where the heron, ibis, flamingo, and wiswisi nest, rich in natural treasures [...] poor in humankind, poorer still in human kindness ..." (45)

Questions:

- What are some of the most distinct species of flora and fauna native to Suriname and the Guyanas?
- How does the discipline of biology, if at all, account for local and indigenous names of species it studies? What informs naming and categorization practices of 'newly discovered' species?

Economics

"Three million guilders is the annual contribution of the mother country to Suriname's budget deficit. Three million – that's a lot of money isn't it? It may even be the average income of one of your esteemed Dutch millionaires. Three million is how much is lost on the stock market on a bad day in an economic crisis [...] Yes, what does become of those millions? No, gentlemen, I assure you they do not end up in my mother's pocket; long before the week is out, she is taking a hard look at her last penny. And they're not in the pockets of our hundreds of unemployed workers, as our support committee in Suriname holds to the firm principle that 'financial support to the unemployed inevitably has a demoralizing effect.'" (181-182) (Consider 'The Banana Debacle' and 'The Liquidation', pp 184-193)

Questions:

- How was the economy of Suriname organized? How has the way in which funds were distributed by colonizers disrupted local ecologies and economies?
- How do these satellite entities (mainland, colonies, enclaves) relate to each other economically?

Education

"Senior educational staff members, such as teachers, are generally sent from the Netherlands, and for any type of career advancement, a Surinamese employee must go to the Netherlands to obtain a degree. [...] it is clear that only a few very privileged Surinamese individuals can afford the luxury of this kind of academic education for their children.

Consider the additional disadvantages of inadequate education, generally at denominational schools, of having thought in a foreign language from an early age, and of studying in a foreign climate, far from friends and family, and compare the costs with the usual Surinamese wages, and then tell us what chance a Surinamese person has to provide for himself, even to a modest standard!" (177)

Questions:

- When and how did the Dutch impose Dutch as a language of education and was there any place left for local language education at schools?
- What did the educational program look like in Suriname in the time period De Kom describes? How has it changed since?

Gender Studies

"When the male slaves, our fathers, returned from the fields at sunset after finishing work for the day, they had until the morning to recover from their fatigue [...] But when the last line of women returned home through the fields carrying heavy baskets of cotton on their heads, it often happened that the eye of the master (or in later times the administrator) would fall upon one of the young Negro women, and he would beckon her to put down her basket. That night, she would have a second job: satisfying her master's lascivious lusts. [...]"

As for the children of such liaisons, they were regarded simply as an addition to the human herd, and the lashes of their father's whips, or perhaps their white half-brother's, were meted out with complete impartiality, leaving scars just as deep on their backs as on those of their full-blooded kin." (69-70)

Questions:

- What intersections of race, gender, and/or age do you see in the excerpt above? How do they manifest in the context of labor?
- How could we see the children of the sexual subjugation described above as a byproduct of colonial governance or as a meticulous reproduction of the systems of enslavement?

History

"These workers had the support of Bühler, 'who had had a scientific education but was full of red socialist ideas.' Bühler was summoned by the authorities in Paramaribo and ordered to leave the country, but before he could depart, he died of the yellow fever then rampant in the city. The fear that his ideas had not died with him was undoubtedly one factor behind the drastic liquidation of the whole settlement, which could have had such great significance to the evolution of working conditions in Suriname." (135)

Questions:

- How has Marxism 'traveled' across continents? How does socialism come into play knowing that De Kom for example spoke at socialist meetings?
- How have colonial administrations, Dutch or otherwise, sought to eradicate socialist ideas?

Law

"The Widow Mauricius, a member of Suriname's upper crust, had an old slave woman tied to a tree and beaten to death. By her own declaration, she did so on a whim, because she wanted to see her former nursemaid suffer. Various other slaves of hers had suffered the same fate [...] The widow's slaves then informed the Colonial Court that they would desert the plantation if the governor's widow was not removed as its manager.

The Court did try to persuade her to relinquish control of the plantation to an administrator, 'because it was feared that she might otherwise bring utter ruin to the belongings of her wards.' But Mrs. Mauricius made it known that no one else could better manage her *property* than she herself." (67)

Questions:

- What kind of legal system was in place in Suriname in the period which De Kom describes? What possibilities did enslaved people have to, for example, appeal a ruling? How was that later on in the 1920's-1930's?
- How does the neutrality of law tend to disappear under colonialism so that it governs different people differently?

Linguistics

"We black children in the rearmost desks (the front desks were reserved for the sons and daughters of Europeans) tortured our heads by trying to cram them full of the dates of the noble houses of Holland, Bavaria, and Burgundy. We, who were caned whenever we dared to speak our own 'Surinamese language' within the school walls, were expected to go into raptures about the rebelliousness of Claudius Civilis and the brave Abjuration of the William the Silent" (84)

Questions:

- How has the 'Surinamese language' – also known as 'Sranan Tongo' – come into existence? What languages is it shaped by?
- What were other instances of language-based exclusion in the Dutch colonial context?

Literary Studies

"Only on the thin ribbon along the coast, here and there at the mouths of the big rivers, on the most fertile of the alluvial grounds, does the red, white, and blue of the Dutch tricolor wave.

Red –

'Look, Mother,' the little white boy says in astonishment in Magdeleine Paz's wonderful book *Frère noir* ('Black Brother'), 'you see? The Negroes have red blood too!'

White –

The color of Crommelin's peace treaties.

And blue?

Is it the color of our tropical sky, at which we gaze up through the dark leaves of our trees, to read in the twinkling stars the promise of a new life?" (47-48)

Questions:

- How have western literary representations of enslaved Africans and other indentured groups in the colony evolved since the onset of colonization? What are the implications?
- Consider the form of this passage. What does De Kom see as constituting the Dutch tricolor?

Medical Sciences

"[We] read that under his administration [Baron van Heerdt], in healthy Suriname, severe epidemics of dysentery, whooping cough, and malaria felled the undernourished inhabitants; out of a population of 23,000, more than three hundred died in sixty days, and it was not unusual for more than fifteen people to be buried in a single day." (154)

Questions:

- How was the medical care organized? What do we know of local medicine (practices) and local knowledge about healthcare?
- How did the arrival of the colonizers impact the local population?

Philosophy

"On the colonial chessboard, no move is weaker than the one inspired by ethical principles. Over the long span of the Dutch regime, the white population undoubtedly included good, progressive elements; there were undoubtedly plantation owners who did their duty with loyal honesty, and soldiers whose humble courage was beyond all question. Why have we overlooked them here? Not out of demagoguery, but simply because the act of authorities, and the many atrocities, and the public response, all show us that these better elements did not influence the general mentality [...] Such a [colonial] population will always oppose any truly ethical course of action with all its might." (127-129)

Questions:

- If not the fair treatment of the enslaved, what 'ethics' could be in place in colonial Suriname?
- How has European philosophy (i.e. Enlightenment) developed as a reflection or in response to the colonial enterprise?

Physical Geography

"From 2 to 6 degrees south latitude, from 54 to 58 degrees west longitude, spanning from the blue of the Atlantic to the inaccessible Tumuc-Humac Mountains, which form the watershed with the Amazon Basin, between the broad expanses of Corentyne and Maroni Rivers, which separate us from British and French Guiana [...] Between the coast and the mountains our mother, Sranan, has slumbered for a thousand years and a thousand more. Nothing has changed in the dense forests of her unknown interior." (45)

Questions:

- How has the physical landscape of the Guyanas formed, geologically speaking?
- What are the characteristics of the aforementioned 'dense forests' of Suriname or the Guyanas more broadly?

Political Science

"Yet this entire legislative branch of government is a sham, in that these bodies are denied the most important right: that of budgetary oversight. For it always has been and is still the case that whenever an appropriation is made from the national coffers, the government cannot present the Colonial States with anything more than a "provision budget," on which the Dutch legislature [has] the final say. So in reality, little is left of Suriname's 'autonomy.' The truth is that every piece of legislature must be approved in the Netherlands, and the Netherlands appoints the people who make the real decisions about the colony." (154)

Questions:

- Within the Dutch context, what were the different competencies of mainland and colonial institutions in governing colonies? How did private enterprises figure into this?
- How differently were colonial Suriname and Indonesia governed?

Religious Studies

"Tempted by these rumors [of a golden country], Domingo de Vera undertook a voyage in the Guianas in 1593, claiming the territory for Spain with great ceremony on April 23, 1594 [...] 'In the name of God, I take possession of this country for His Majesty Don Philip, our lawful overlord!'

This is also the earliest example of the misuse of God's name in the colonial tragedy. It was often said later, in Christian books, that the Negro is not human, because humans are made in God's image and, after all, those Bible scholars added, God is not black..." (53)

Questions:

- How has religion been deployed in the governance of west European colonies, and how has this changed over time? Compare the missionary activities in Suriname to those in other colonies or Empires in the early modern period. Consider the impact on native populations.
- How and why has the practice of Christianity been altered by enslaved populations in the Caribbean and the Guyana's?

Sociology

"And the current situation of the Javanese coolies certainly is a miserable one, which forces many of them onto the path of crime. The thefts and robberies that some of them commit are a true plague on the colony, while other who are less bold live on the proceeds of renting the bodies of their wives and daughters [...]

'There are occasional complaints,' *De Banier* wrote on July 7, 1931, 'of inadequate policing in the capital, which has led to a rise in theft and burglary. But villains and burglars can, for the mere cost of keeping them imprisoned, be put to work constructing our roads.' Perhaps they would not have become villains and criminals if, in the days when they were free laborers, they had been put to work on the same roads for a decent pay." (165)

Questions:

- How were unemployment and crime correlated in different Dutch colonies? Could we generalize which groups perpetrated and which groups were the targets of crime?
- How has policing evolved in the colonial context of Suriname, the Guyanas, or the Caribbean? For what purpose was it deployed, and what constituted the failures of its 'inadequacy'?

Urban Geography

"Go for a walk, dear Dutch readers[,] through the streets of Paramaribo, unpaved but broad and planted with tamarind, orange, and palm trees. Admire the stately stone town houses built along the streets by the property owners in various centuries, and then go, if you muster the courage, through the Negro gate onto the grounds. On either side of a muddy path lie the old, neglected, one-room hovels of the former slaves, now home to the free proletariat of Suriname." (148)

Questions:

- Consider the evolution of segregation practices in urban planning, or within urbanization more broadly, with regard to colonial administration. What type of long term-effects (post-emancipation) has this had on the demographics deemed 'racially inferior'?
- How has urban growth under colonial rule impacted the human development of present-day Guyanas?

L  **S**
OFFENSIEF
UTRECHT

