



Rustwijk's appeal for the Celebrations

George Gerardus Theodorus Rustwijk

Een uitnodiging voor een feest

Inleiding door Miguel Heilbron en Mathieu Wijdeven

‘Slavernij werd in 1863 bij wet afgeschaft op al het Nederlands grondgebied, waar Suriname destijds onder viel. In 1912 schreef dichter, publicist en theatermaker George Gerardus Theodorus Rustwijk (1862-1914) te Paramaribo de tekst ‘Een uitnodiging voor een feest’, een oproep om de afschaffing van de slavernij te vieren.

Rustwijk sprak zijn tekst uit op een bijeenkomst van het comité dat in Paramaribo voor viering van de afschaffing van de slavernij pleitte, en hier in 1913 een festival over organiseerde.

Alleen de Engelstalige vertaling is bewaard gebleven. ‘Rustwijk’s appeal for the Celebrations’ werd in 1913 gepubliceerd in het boek *The Emancipation Jubilee*. Dat werd geschreven door E. A. Van Rossum, een Brit met Nederlandse afkomst¹. Het boek documenteert de activiteiten en motivaties het comité. De tekst is onder de nakomelingen van Rustwijk van generatie op generatie doorgegeven. Het boek is te vinden bij sommige verzamelaars en in *The Black Archives* in Amsterdam. Wij hopen dat Rustwijks oproep nu, meer dan honderd jaar later, een nieuwe generatie lezers kan bereiken. We nodigen iedereen uit de tekst van Rustwijk zelf te lezen, er met anderen over te praten en de tekst verder te verspreiden.’

“Liberty Is one of the greatest gifts from God, but it was misused and ill-treated by man. For this reason, it fled for refuge in the forest and planted its seeds therein. As time rolled on, that seed sprang up and grew to be a mighty tree. It had no companions but the beasts and birds; no master to disturb its peace. Birds sang all day their songs of liberty, and ate the fruits with joy and gladness. Suddenly, a stop was put to the songs; the birds took their flight; man appeared on the scene; liberty was in danger, but it had no fear. As man beheld, he saw the branches bent with the heavy weight of fruits; he saw also the difference in the colours of the leaves, from dark green up to sweet light yellow, but it had one form to his amazing eyes. In his analysis he found out that the leaves depended on the tree for life, and unity was among them.

Brothers, the tree to which I referred is a true symbol of liberty and unity. The day is coming! It has on a golden crown and wishes to be welcomed heartily by the crowd that was once a scattered troop – without name and recognition! It is shameful to admit that we are not living in unity! The example is given by the tree. Some are longing for the day with exceeding joy in their hearts; some with indifference; some with aversion; some with antipathy, and some with even imprecation. Some say they are “free-born subjects” and do not wish to be remembered of slavery, because the idea of being descendants of slaves makes them blush with regret.

We find, in Gen. 10, 22, that Ham and his descendants were cursed by Noah to be slaves while he was drunk; and from that time slavery was named „the child of drunkenness” by its parent Sin. Slavery is one of the many mysteries that is inexplicable by men. It was so terrible in Egypt that God, to weaken its power, thought it wiser to set his chosen people to flight; they wandered for forty years in the wilderness, at cost of lives, before they enjoyed the sweet delights of liberty. So then it is clear for us to see that slavery is not from God; it is a child of Sin, and it is even worse than the devil in its disposition; for centuries it was allowed to reign by Mystery.

The Jews were taken away from slavery, but slavery was not taken away from them. We are told by Gibbon the historian that the colloseum in Rome was erected by twelve thousand Jews who were captured especially for that purpose, the slave markets in Rome were always crowded with slaves, and well visited by buyers for the fair sex; the most beautiful of them were carried for negotiation, Greeks, English, French and Germans were all slaves of the same blood as their masters. At Athens the amount of slaves was once four hundred thousand against that of the free which was only eighty four thousand. The amount of slaves in Rome was many millions once; there was great need of them because in every tournament - the favourite feasts of the inhumane monarchs - about two thousand slaves were slaughtered for pleasure.

When all this was going on - when slavery was swaying its sceptre over Asia and Europe, your forefathers who were descendants of cursed Ham - the Africans - were yet free subjects of God, enjoying life with pleasure. But was it right for the white brothers to be alone in slavery? No! It was right for our forefathers to be in slavery also. Why then should we who are

their descendants be ashamed, when almost every man and woman now in existence are descendants of slaves? Slavery reigned over the whole world, but how the slave-trade came in existence is what some of you will like to know. The historian Tacitus tells us that the trade in slaves was brought about by three causes.

Firstly: When men ran into debts and could not pay their indebtedness it was the custom among them to give over their liberty to the creditors for the indebted amounts.

Secondly: In gambling men staked their liberties; and after they were won, the winners not having the desire to tantalize their friends, sent the losers to market and exchanged them for gold. To become a slave in those days was an honour; the losers never opposed the winners because they were made slaves by their own consent.

Thirdly: All prisoners made in war were condemned to slavery. Slavery reigned undisturbed from the earliest days to the coming of Christ, but at last its enemy Christianity, - the mighty combatant and friend of humanity, - intervened and preached love to the races. The light of liberty then started to gleam over the world which was covered with the darkest shades of sin.

As Columbus went out to sea in search of the New World slavery, being tired of the persecutions of Christianity in the Old World, went on board his ship, and after the discovery was made, a little flame which was a terrible sign of the shameful future, was seen on the topmast of the ship. That flame was the symbol spoken of by the devil concerning America and Africa; it was destined to put the souls of men in an unquenchable fire. Violence, war, massacre and

slavery stood around it and supplied it with fuel continually. At last the time came when there was a great need for labourers to dig for gold and other hidden treasures in the earth, and Africa was then selected for the purpose of obtaining them. Fifty-eight years before the discovery of America, it was the custom of a Portugees, Alonso Gonsalves, to steal away in a quiet manner, small amounts of blacks and sell them here and there. He was the inducer of that satanic habit the consequences of which were so serious that no language can definitely describe it.

Slavery in Surinam!

Slavery lasted longer in Suriname than any other colony in the West. England gave freedom to seven million slaves in 1838, at the cost of twenty million pounds sterling, and her example was followed by France in 1848. All the West Indian, Swedish and Danish Colonies were enjoying the sweet taste of lib-berty when you and your forefathers were groaning and sighing under the tyrannic strokes of the whips. Are you ashamed to celebrate your Emancipation Jubilee? They asked for contributions and you refused to give; they asked for your sympathy and you say no.

Listen to some of the answers that were given to me.

1. "My grandmother was a slave; not I."
2. "I will contribute to it with money, but not with my sympathy."
3. "I am free-born and would have been a free subject if slavery was still in existence, because my mother was not an African."
4. "I don't care for the day."

The last answer was so foolish, that I was obliged to come to the conclusion of giving this lecture because I am convinced that the history of liberty acquired

is not known at all by the young people.

The answer is this: I feel nothing for the day the celebrations will be a failure; it was no tradition; we have got freedom as a gift; we did not fight for it; we did not ask for it.”

No Tradition!

As a gift! My friend you have not read. You have not perused history. Have you read the works of Stedman, Teenstra, Wolbers and others? Can you tell of the horrible deeds that were committed in Berbice - then a Dutch colony - by your ancestors ? Are you acquainted with the forced negotiations of peace between Governor Mauritius and the deserted negroes, when Baron Yoli Coeur was the heroic leader of the insurgents ?

Is the history of the Guerilla war against the maroons unknown to you? Were Boni, Adoe, Sambo and others, nice little boys to play with? Do you know anything of the invasion of Broos in 1861, two years before emancipation? The right arms of the murdered slaves who rebelled that were brought to town (Paramaribo) in heaps for the promised compensations, are they not evidence of fighting? Do you know anything of the war that was fought by Christianity for emancipation, and the controversies in the presses here and in the Netherlands, by which result you are privileged today to enjoy freedom? If there was no opposition by the slaves do you think the laws would been revised and changed to stop their agitation and flight to the forest?

The oppression of your forefathers was so terrible in this colony that the very genius of the Constitution trembled at the unrighteousness of the slaveholders; and in 1857 Cohen Stuart at a meeting of the Anti-Slavery

Society in Netherlands bled the hearts of his hearers by his appeal for the abolition of slavery.

In his appeal he said: “There on the other side of the sea, under the sultry tropical heaven. On the evergreen banks of Suriname and Saramacca rivers is a land to be found where Netherlands’ flag is floating and Netherlands’ laws command. It is a land that is privileged by God to be rich with creeks of treasures. In her grassy fields and gloomy forest grows and blooms a mighty vegetation which even our beautiful Java scarcely can compare. It is a land made by the Creator to be a paradise. Everything there seems to be enjoying life with great pleasure, might and main. All is wonderfully blessed with the exception of the black slaves.

There live forty thousand of your fellow creatures under the heavy pressure of immorality and unrighteousness, they are not considered as men because they were sold and bought as slaves. Under the lashes of the biting whips that lacerate the body they have to work your colony, and on the coffee and cocoa which are your dainties, cling their sweat and blood. They are condemned to hard labour for life, for no other crime but because they are descendants of the African negroes who were taken unlawfully away from their native land by your fathers. You are proud today because your forefathers fought for their liberty, but the sighs of the unfortunate blacks for liberty, you count as an offense and their subjection to slavery as supreme virtue. The masters of those men are your countrymen. Netherlands are enriching themselves at the cost of the bloody stripes on their slaves, they live upon the lewdness of their female slaves, while the victims of such option have no right to any means of defence and scarcely any right of protection.

In the name of your King and law Netherlands’ subjects are punished for every resistance against compulsion. “Justice, piety and faith” is the motto

on the coat of arms of Suriname, but as long as that cursed slavery is existing there, the words on that Banner are a lie, because injustice, impiety and sin are the rulers, when such pestilence is allowed in a community.

Otto Tank one of the leading members of the Moravian Missionary Society wrote: After I got to know Suriname thoroughly, I went forth and visited the other slave Islands in the West Indies and also North America; I paid attention closely to the treatment of slaves, and the result of my experience is that no where slaves are under such brutish treatment as in Suriname. After an intermission of ten minutes Mr. Rustwijk continued and spoke of what he had experienced in British and French Guiana. He said: It is now twenty-five years since British Guiana is ahead in freedom, and it seems to be fifty or more.

Her progress in general civilization is being greatly developed by her people, development is to be observed in every branch of knowledge, and there is more unity among her citizens.

Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' is the motto of French Guiana, and there is harmony in the colours. No white man can say of them there: "Gij zijt geen volk! Gij hebt geen hart voor Uw land!" (You are no people! You have no heart for your land! - A. E. Boers).

It is time enough for you to consider and be interested in your race and country!

It is time enough for you to prevent such shameful assertions!

Freedom was proclaimed in this colony in 1863, but it was under State Control for ten years. During that long period, the people was in a semi-slavery

condition which was worse than entire slavery, as is described by history, they were compelled to remain on the same plantations where they were once treated as beasts of burden to work for wages when they liked. The same overseers who condemned and drove them to hard labour with the whips, had then to speak to them friendly.

As time rolled on, the situation became critical; and supreme hatred for employers by employees who were formerly illtreated began to reign, the result of which brought Suriname and her plantations to ruin.

In the other colonies liberty was given and it remained unmolested; the emancipated were privileged to go any-where and every-where to work for their living; who had it bad on one estate changed that for another, but the fifty years' freedom in Suriname can only be counted as forty.

After ten years' control of the State was expired on the first of July 1873, the Immigration of British East Indians began. The owners of the plantations were glad also to get as many coolies on their estates as was possible, many were glad also to get rid of the negroes, as well as the negroes were glad to go away from their old masters, because they had enough to do with one another during the cursed ten years of semiliberty.

Most of the negroes came to town (Paramaribo) in search of their livelihood and engaged themselves in agriculture on small scales, although they were brought up with the love of tilling the soil to supply themselves with food; - it is known that Governor de Veer, had to compel the slaveholders by law on to keep land in cultivation for the consumption of their slaves because very often the poor slaves had to go to bed with empty stomachs after performing very hard labour in the fields.

Two years after the abolition of slavery in 1873 the shout of Gold! Gold! was heard, and the young negroes went to the interior in anticipation that they would have returned with fortunes that would put them on the same level with their former masters; but that same gold, followed by balata, which was keeping the colony in a balance, has helped to bring the curse spoken of by Mystery on agriculture: gold and balata have kept the people alive, but they have also ruined the morality, civilization and constitutions of the negroes of this colony; gold and balata are the saviours of our colony, but they have caused agriculture to be neglected for which the negroes of Suriname are called „lazy bones”.

The Negroes Might Have Been Lazy But Not Now! I want you all to celebrate the coming day because you are a people who was in danger but not lost. Because among the ripe fruits of Emancipation you are proud of those that are looked upon as masters and mistresses of schools, doctors, chemists, lawyers, musicians, merchants, artists, members of state etc. etc!

I want you all to celebrate that day in anticipation of better times with the love of colour and of race! The truly educated civilized and intelligent man or woman will never be ashamed of his or her colour, or look upon others with disdain. Many educated white men have contributed to the celebrations.

The Governor Is Foremost!

I appeal to you! I invite you all as one!

Your colony wishes a festival for her new born sons and daughters of 186 !

I invite you! Not in the sense of being descendants of slaves; not because your mother was a freeborn or because she was made free by certificate I know that (with scorn)

I invite you! Not in the painful terms of descendants of slaves. No! (with disdain)

I invite you merely because it is fifty years since Christianity gained victory to the benefit of your illegally treated fathers, grandfathers, mothers and grandmother of Africa in Suriname, and brought freedom to them and to you! I invite you because you are offspring of the negro race to which you are found by blood!

My friends I have quoted sufficient from history to break your pride and build up your sympathy to the approaching day. Be contented, take things as they are and be interested in the feast; the leaves on the tree of liberty though they vary in colour have one form, fruits do not despise the tree. Emancipation brought compulsory education to you, why then should you treat it with contempt and ingratitude? The man or woman who is ashamed of his or her parents does not worth existing. Black, coloured and white were all made after the likeness and image of the Creator.”

Bovenstaande tekst van G.G.T. Rustwijk is in 1913 gepubliceerd in het boek ‘The Emancipation Jubilee’ van E. A. Van Rossum.

Lees ook het artikel “Vier de afschaffing van de slavernij (zei deze dichter al meer dan honderd jaar geleden)” op [De Correspondent](#).

1 E.A. Van Rossum leidde in het boek 'The Emancipation Jubilee' uit 1913 Rustwijk's tekst als volgt in:

"Although George Gerhardus Theodorus Rustwijk is being over-looked for "objects more illustrious" in the views of many in this colony yet it is to be confessed by the scientific mind that he is one of those mighty geniuses who is walking among his countrymen like something superior to ordinary mortality. His picture does not appear in the group of Committee owing to his illness shortly before the Celebrations, but he is also a worthy and useful member of the Committee. He is a well-known professional artist, an amateur of music and poetry and an actor of great ability. His performances of children operettes in this colony – mostly given in aid of Churches and for the benefits of the poor – is a phenomena in the world of children's plays. More than one thousand children have already taken part in his plays, and mothers and fathers still remember the happy, enjoyable Rustwijk plays and are singing the old songs to their little ones. Nearly one hundred newspaper cuts, now in his possession, are praising his works in the different branches of the Arts.

Some years ago he left his homeland, Surinam, for a visit to French and British Guiana; in the latter he won – among sixty competitors – a prize for making the Kaiteur Falls on a book cover; he also made a successful picture of Halley's comet which is a remembrance of him in that colony. On his return home from British Guiana, he gave a great lecture on the Sanitary conditions, Waterworks, Town Council and popular laws of British Guiana, the result of which many reforms were brought about in this colony, and which was greatly approved by the leading newspapers.

On May 12 he delivered an edifying and striking lecture entitled "An invitation to a feast", in the "Voorzorg Hall"; and by the request of the Committee of the Celebrations it was repeated with great success. His aim was to win the minds of those were against the idea of celebrating their Emancipation Jubilee. The various pursuits in which he honestly engaged himself appeared indeed to have been subservient only to the great purpose of humanizing and improving many of the mulattoes who are puffed up with ignorance instead of intelligence and education, and after driving the arrows of conviction from the bow of Truth, he succeeded in bringing many to repentance."

Coverillustratie Brian Elstak

