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Claiming a postcolonial differential citizenship. Contestation of family migration rights in the Netherlands in the wake of Suriname's independence

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Abstract

Political struggles over national belonging often involve ideas on what a 'proper' family looks like. This article connects this important insight from the field of family migration politics to the study of postcolonial citizenship. Rather than focusing on dominant (State) perspectives, we ask: how do citizens from formerly colonised territories themselves conceptualise 'the family' and 'the nation' in the former metropole? We do so in a historical exploration of the political claims that three different Surinamese–Dutch organisations made regarding family migration rights, in the wake of Suriname's independence (1975). We find that the organisations collectively claimed the recognition of Suriname-specific family forms in Dutch migration policy, such as unmarried coupledom (*konkubinaat*) and temporary foster children (*kweekjes*). Thereby they put forward a vision of postcolonial citizenship which challenged dominant conceptions of nationhood in the Netherlands, assuming instead that formerly colonised subjects and their 'difference' inherently and inevitably belong to Dutch national history and identity. In this vision, they reframed the Dutch nation's spatio-temporal boundaries (the colonial past did not end at independence and there are ongoing transnational ties), and cultural boundaries ('Surinamese difference' is a constitutive element of Dutch postcolonial citizenship). In view of contemporary calls for decolonisation of European societies and scholarship, these claims represent important and inspiring contributions to ongoing debates on citizenship in a postcolonial nation.

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Keywords: family, migration, postcolonialism, citizenship, multiculturalism, claims-making

1. Introduction

The Dutch government wants to limit family reunification by not recognizing the Surinamese *konkubinaat* [non-marital coupledom]. We strongly reject this attitude. After all, the *konkubinaat* is an important form of cohabitation in our community (LOSON 1980(9-10): 5).

This statement in the magazine of a Surinamese–Dutch activist organisation illustrates how Suriname’s decolonisation from the Netherlands (1975) was first and foremost a crisis for Surinamese–Dutch families. After a long shared history, inhabitants of Suriname suddenly lost their Dutch citizenship and their right to move freely to the former metropole and lead transnational family lives between Suriname and the Netherlands. From then on, they were subject to migration law and policy, whose definitions they had to ‘fit’ in order to be able to settle together in the Netherlands. They often, and increasingly after 1980, faced restrictions and rejections in attempts to migrate and reunite with family members.

The process of decolonisation consisted of two moments of crisis: independence in 1975 and the tightening of migration law in 1981. The effects are still felt by some families, through interrupted transnational family relations and the forced separation from loved ones. The effects are also still visible in Dutch society, in ongoing debates on the meaning and scope of Dutch national identity and citizenship. In that process of political contestation over citizenship and belonging in a postcolonial nation, the Dutch State is far from the only actor. Surinamese–Dutch citizens and the organisations which act on their behalf have taken up a specific role as political actors in this process by making political claims that question the dominant legal and discursive structures of the nation (Isin 2008). This article examines their (alternative) perspectives on nationhood and the family.

We explore these questions through the *locus* of the family, where the political crisis of decolonisation was and is most directly felt. Not only is this the place of reunion or separation of loved ones as a result of postcolonial migration schemes, it is also a site of contestation over national belonging. Scholarship on the intersecting politics of intimacy and belonging (Stoler 1989, 2002; Bonjour and De Hart 2021) has shown that definitions of ‘who belongs’ are closely tied to definitions of ‘who/what a proper family is’ (Bonjour and De Hart 2013; Bonjour and Cleton 2021). In other words, the extent to which someone ‘does family’ (Strasser et al. 2009) properly according to dominant norms, is a key measure of someone’s perceived ‘Dutchness’. In claiming migration rights for Suriname families, activists not only claimed space for individual families to reunite, but also space for Surinamese ways of being to belong in the Netherlands. We ask: how did Surinamese–Dutch activist organisations define postcolonial citizenship in their political claims-making on family migration rights between 1975 and 1985?

The article concludes that in their political claims, the activist organisations put forward a shared vision of postcolonial belonging in the metropole which challenged dominant conceptions of nationhood in two important ways. First, they reframed the *cultural* boundaries of the Dutch nation by claiming recognition of Suriname-specific family forms and by assuming that formerly colonised subjects and their ‘difference’ inherently and inevitably belong to Dutch national history and identity. Second, they contested the nation’s *spatio-temporal* boundaries through a recalling of the century-long transnational ties in the Dutch colonial empire. The existing literature on family and bordering focuses on spatial and cultural borders, but our analysis shows that the temporal dimension is inseparable from the former. This article proposes that we learn from the critique of Surinamese–Dutch activists that the colonial past did not end at independence. Rather, they claimed, it has translated in a postcolonial present with inherent and ongoing transnational movements between Suriname and the Netherlands, not least by Surinamese–Dutch families themselves.

2. Claiming postcolonial differential citizenship by claiming family migration rights

Scholars in the field of family migration politics have demonstrated that family norms and related gender and sexuality norms are routinely mobilised to draw boundaries around national, cultural, or racial imagined communities (Van Walsum 2008; Schrover 2009; Strasser et al. 2009; Bonjour and De Hart 2013, 2021; Horsti and Pellander 2015; Wray 2016; Bonizzoni 2018; Odasso 2021). Thus, the nation and its Others are constituted through ‘conceptions of what the roles of men and women ought to be, what marriage ought to be, what parenting ought to be and what family ought to be’ (Bonjour and De Hart 2013: 62). This practice of governing intimacy in political boundary-making is not new. Feminist scholars of nation and empire have shown that European nations are historically constructed through invented difference along intersecting racial and gendered lines, rooted in histories of colonial racism (McClintock 1993, 1995; Yuval-Davis 1997; Stoler 2002; Hajjat 2012).

However, nation-states and empires are not the only ones to engage in these intersecting politics of intimacy and belonging. Many other actors, ranging from individuals to lawyers and civil society organisations also engage in ‘performing intimate citizenship’ (Bonjour and De Hart 2021: 9–10), that is in making claims that challenge or confirm the meaning and function of citizenship and nationhood on the one hand, and family and intimacy on the other hand (Block 2021; De Hart and Besselsen 2021; Odasso 2021). Civil society organisations, including organisations formed by immigrants, formulate specific claims on the basis of normative assumptions present in their constituencies. These organisations derive much needed legitimacy from their conformity to a set of established norms and values on different topics among members of communities they originate from (Gnes and Vermeulen 2019). In studying how these organisations claimed recognition for particular ways of ‘doing family’, we can learn how they strove to shape their communities’ postcolonial citizenship.

Historian Gert Oostindie (2012: 119) writes that Surinamese–Dutch organisations claimed that ‘we have always been Dutch’ while at the same time affirming their ‘unique ethnic identity’. Oostindie refers to these parallel claims as a ‘predicament’ and ‘seemingly contradictory approaches’ (Oostindie 2012: 120). There is no predicament or contradiction however, when we understand that the claim of these organisations to be recognised as equal and different rested on a contestation of prevailing views of what it means to be ‘Dutch’. As former colonised subjects, these activists claimed recognition of their century old belonging to the Dutch nation-state *as Surinamese*. They affirmed that Surinamese society and cultures had been an intrinsic part of the Netherlands for centuries. Their claim to Dutchness was similar to the claim to Englishness expressed by the Jamaican-British scholar Stuart Hall (1997: 48):

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea.

The Surinamese–Dutch claim of the right to belong *and* be different bears significant similarities to normative theories on multiculturalism. In his famous book *Multicultural citizenship* (1995), Will Kymlicka argued that ‘group-differentiated rights’ are a necessary tool for ‘multicultural states’ to do justice to ‘cultural minorities’. In this view, ‘recognition and accommodation of their “difference” is needed’ to enable marginalized group to ‘become full and equal participants in the mainstream society’ (Kymlicka 1998). However, postcolonial theorists, while sharing with proponents of multiculturalism a commitment to emancipation and agency of minoritised groups, have expressed stringent critiques of multiculturalism. Sneja Gunew (1997: 22) writes that multiculturalism is often seen as ‘automatically aligned with and hopelessly co-opted by the state in certain kinds of conscious nation-building’. For thinkers like Homi Bhaba, the multicultural ‘emphasis on the state’s bestowment of rights . . . risks reinstating the old colonial binary opposition between “Europe” and its “others”’ (Mookherjee 2010: 183) and may ‘entice the latter to accept asymmetrical relations’ (Mookherjee 2010: 182).

As we shall see, the Surinamese–Dutch organisations studied here based their claims neither on the universalist values of justice and freedom that Kymlicka mobilised, nor on a vision of multiculturalism as a new project or reality of the Dutch nation-state. Rather than accepting the dominant frame of the metropolitan nation-state, they put forward a transnational perspective by placing their claims ‘in a broader analytical framework that crosses territorial borders and comprises both motherland and colony’ (Jones 2014: 317). Thus, they emphasised that the Dutch Kingdom had spanned the globe and been multicultural for centuries, and formulated their claim for differentiated rights as part of a claim for recognition of their specific longstanding relation with the Dutch nation and state as postcolonial citizens.

Jones (2014) has called for more scholarly attention for the (post)colonial nature of citizenship. He argues that:

Citizenship theory’s predominantly modernist notions of formal equality, legal protection, and legal and socio-economic improvement . . . are still largely informed by a focus on the position of accepted members within the borders of the metropolitan nation-states. (p. 317)

Jones' own work explores how Dutch state actors have defined the postcolonial citizenship and belonging of Dutch citizens in the Netherlands who resettled from former colonies. He finds that:

the symbolic and physical presence of 'othered' citizens enabled many politicians of the majority group to construct the characteristics of the Dutch nation. Postcolonial citizenship, in this sense, produces a 'postcolonial' majority through narratives on 'postcolonial' minorities. (Jones 2014)

By employing the concept in this way, his work departs from previous research on postcolonial citizenship which focuses solely on the relationships between citizens and a political community in formerly colonised states (Van Klinken 2013; Sadiq 2017). Following Jones, we argue that the postcolonial must also be studied in the former metropole. Our article complements Jones' focus on State discourses by exploring the (limited) space where citizens from former colonies contested ascribed citizenship and formulated their own ideas of national belonging: their political collective claims on 'doing family'. We conceptualise political claims-making in its double definition of (1) the public articulation of a political demand by a claimant to at least one addressee (Lindekilde 2013) and (2) a performative practice 'through which we both represent *and* shape, reflect *and* constitute the world in which we live' (Zivi 2011: 8). This conceptualisation allows us both to trace and represent the actual claims made by the organisations (their content), and to interpret claims as collective acts of citizenship (the practice of reshaping norms of belonging) (Isin 2008).

3. Historical context

Suriname, a country on the north coast of South America, was colonised by the Netherlands for over 300 years until gaining formal independence in 1975. Under Dutch colonial rule, around 200,000 persons from diverse countries in Sub-Saharan Africa were enslaved and brought to Suriname to work on plantations (National Archives of the Netherlands n.d.). After the abolition of slavery in 1863, the Dutch colonial government and planters recruited over 60,000 indentured labourers mainly from British India, but also from Indonesia (Java) and China (Hoeft 1987). Colonial governance of enslaved and indentured labour has to a large extent produced the demography of Suriname, which is multi-ethnic up until today. In 1970, nearly 350 thousand people lived in Suriname, with the Indian-Surinamese as biggest ethnic group (142,049) followed by the Afro-Surinamese (125,240) and Javanese (57,893) (Lamur 1973: 135–44). This multi-ethnicity is also reflected in the various ways of 'doing family' that have existed in Suriname. For instance, legal marriage has been described as the typical family form for the Javanese and the Indian-Surinamese (Lamur 1973: 76). Among the Afro-Surinamese, recomposed families with children from other/previous relationships have also been common, as well as female-headed (matrifocal) families and living together without being married (referred to as *konkubinaat*) (Wekker 1994; Terborg 2002). Scholars have pointed out numerous explanations for these differences, often connected to colonial governance of family life and the different cultural traditions in the ethnic groups (see Terborg 2002

for an extensive analysis of Afro-Surinamese family structures). At the same time, [Terborg \(2002: 45\)](#) warns that the European imaging of a 'loose' black sexuality is strongly tied to a history of colonial racism, and that notions of difference must be analysed in light of some persistent racist myths.

In the 1970s, an increasing number of Surinamese from all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds came to the Netherlands ([Vermeulen and Van Heelsum 2012: 78–9](#)). This marked the start of what scholars called the 'exodus' from Suriname ([Oostindie and Klinkers 2003](#)). Before then, migration from Suriname to the Netherlands had been small-scale 'elite migration' for work and study purposes. Between 1973 and 1980, however, 'approximately 130,000 (former) Dutch nationals from Suriname settled in the Netherlands' as a direct result of decolonisation ([Jones 2014: 315](#)). That was more than a third of the total population of Suriname in 1980 ([Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek in Suriname n.d.](#)).

The metropolitan Dutch society and policies of the 1970s and 1980s that these Surinamese migrants met upon arrival have often been described as 'multicultural'. However, as Maarten Vink has shown, 'multiculturalism was never accepted or practiced as fully as suggested in more stereotypical depictions of Dutch integration politics' (2007: 339). While government policies of the time did promise that 'ethnic minorities' should 'have equal opportunities to express and experience their identity', there was no expectation that Dutch society adapt or change in any fundamental way, since as the government put it: 'after all, the confrontation of minority cultures with the majority culture is a confrontation between unequal partners. The majority culture is anchored in Dutch society' ([Netherlands Government 1982: 107–8](#)). [Jones \(2014: 129\)](#) has shown that in the 1970s, Dutch politicians combined progressive calls for decolonisation and emancipation with essentialist views of cultural difference to call for speedy independence of Suriname and for Surinamese to stay in Suriname, where they allegedly belonged:

Dutch politicians began to represent relations with the remaining overseas parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Suriname and the Dutch Antilles, as a neo-colonial anachronism that hindered the overseas citizens from becoming familiar with 'their own place and identity'.

This ambiguous vacillation between recognition of minority cultures, equal opportunities, and decolonisation on the one hand, and the sharp drawing of boundaries between the 'Dutch' and so-called 'ethnic minorities', including postcolonial citizens, on the other hand, also characterises Dutch regulation of family migration from Suriname in the aftermath of Surinamese independence.

4. Selected organisations: representation and organisational field

This article analyses publicly expressed political claims related to family migration rights by different Surinamese–Dutch activist and civil society organisations in the Netherlands. We understand these organisations as actors who claim to represent and articulate the collective, but diversified, interests and norms of the diverse Surinamese immigrant

community in the Netherlands (Schrover and Vermeulen 2005; Vermeulen 2006; Gnes and Vermeulen 2019). Among the manyfold Surinamese–Dutch organisations and networks that were active between 1970 and 1990, this article zooms in on three specific Surinamese–Dutch organisations: the National Federation of Welfare Foundations for Surinamese (hereafter called ‘the Federation’), the National Consultation of Surinamese Organisations in the Netherlands (‘LOSON’), and Ashanti.¹ Together these organisations represented different voices from the Surinamese community in the Netherlands, which is highly diverse in terms of socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic background. We consider these organisations as representative for the many sub-communities, identities, and political claims that existed within the highly diverse Surinamese community. We will briefly sketch the origins, constituency, and positions of these organisations and how they were situated in the organisational field.

The Federation was one of the best known Surinamese migrant organisations in the Netherlands (Van Heelsum and Voorthuijsen 2002: 10). It was an umbrella organisation consisting of many smaller welfare foundations that provided direct support to Surinamese immigrants in the Netherlands. Of the three organisations selected, the Federation was most often included in consultations with the Dutch government and it was one of the organisations that received large sums of public funding to implement different social and cultural programmes. The organisation claimed to represent all Surinamese living in the Netherlands rather than a specific ethnic group. It cooperated with a large network of other organisations, as well as with churches and lawyers.

LOSON was created in 1973 from existing anti-imperialist and socialist Surinamese (student) initiatives in the Netherlands. It aimed to represent and unite Surinamese workers—of all ethnicities—in a Marxist-Leninist struggle against multiple oppressions in both the Netherlands and Suriname. LOSON framed the struggles of various ethnic groups as a common one against (neo)colonialism, racism, and imperialism. The organisation was highly critical of other organisations’ dependency on subsidies. It expressed the majority of its political claims through public protests, the publication of brochures, and advocacy in Parliament. LOSON explicitly sought the connection with ‘Hollanders’ and other immigrant groups who shared the same anti-racist and anti-imperialist agenda. The organisation was not always taken seriously by other organisations or the Dutch government, who saw LOSON’s activism as too ideological and oppositional. LOSON was renamed the Suriname Labourers and Workers Organisation (SAWO) in 1985, which was formally dissolved in 1992.

Ashanti differed from the other two organisations in that it functioned more like a platform than an organisation, as it did not have formal members. Like LOSON, Ashanti insisted on remaining financially independent. It presented itself as a magazine for and by Surinamese women in the Netherlands, who, it said, were underrepresented in other organisations. Ashanti’s core group consisted of Indian-Surinamese women, but they explicitly aimed at giving voice to all Surinamese women. The editions appeared from September 1980 to September 1987. Ashanti supported other organisations, for instance, the Surinamese Gay Organisation (SUHO). In its positioning as a feminist initiative for women of colour, seeking cooperation with white or native Dutch activists was not its priority.

The three organisations operated in a much larger Surinamese organisational field, yet they were the most significant *visible* actors in the public-political debate on family migration for Surinamese in the Netherlands. Through their publications, we were able to explore the diverse voices of the Surinamese community. The claims-making of all three organisations had a trans- and international character in the way they included other immigrant communities in their framing, as well as in how they targeted actors in both the Surinamese and Dutch contexts.

5. Materials and methods

The data consist primarily of the archive material of the Federation, LOSON, and Ashanti. Publications include the magazines, newspapers, and brochures of the organisations. These archival sources were chosen as the basis for the analysis to shed light on the claims-making of migrant organisations in their navigation of family migration politics. We specifically looked for claims about family migration rights. Organisations made such claims when they perceived friction between what Surinamese–Dutch families needed and what Dutch law allowed for. The experience of the many normative families, such as married couples, is invisible in the organisations' claims, since Dutch migration law posed no obstacles to them. As a result, the analysis highlights claims regarding Surinamese 'difference'.

The material was collected and analysed by author 1, who received special permission by the archive holder to consult the LOSON archive. The other archives were freely accessible. Some publications from the Federation were accessed from the private archive of the Federation's lawyer, as well as several of his books. The material was collected in Atlas.ti, from where we manually created an overview of all claims expressed by the organisations regarding family migration rights between 1975 and 1985. We counted as claims:

- a. text segments that were literally phrased as political demands, including copies of letters sent to political actors, and manifestos;
- b. text segments describing political actions by the organisation, for example, a report on how members protested in Dutch parliament;
- c. text segments (including published interviews) that reported the community's daily struggles related to migration law and policy;
- d. text segments that commented on or interpreted recent political events;
- e. informative text segments that explain historical or cultural aspects of the Surinamese community and its family structures (we consider this an integral part of the performative practice of rights-claiming; Zivi 2011: 8–9);
- f. explicitly political cartoons (e.g., depicting a politician).

In order to better grasp the context in which the organisations operated, author 1 also conducted four interviews with former members (two from LOSON, one from Ashanti, and one from the Federation). All interviewees held key positions in the organisations for many years. Doing more interviews proved impossible due to the Covid-19 restrictions, especially since these former activists were at high risk due to their age.

6. Discussion

In what follows, we sketch the political claims made by the three organisations regarding family migration rights between 1975 and 1985. These claims were expressed against the backdrop of key legal and political moments. We divided this period in two phases. The first constitutes the immediate aftermath of independence (1975–9) and is marked by the bilateral agreement on residence and settlement of 1975. The second (1980–5) intensified the crisis for Surinamese–Dutch families, as a visa requirement was installed and a new Agreement on residence and settlement marked the end of the transition period, which abruptly decreased migration possibilities.

6.1 The immediate aftermath of independence (1975–9)²

On 25 November 1975, Suriname gained independence from the Netherlands. By then, due to difficult socio-economic conditions in the country and uncertainties about the upcoming independence, many people had left Suriname and settled in the Netherlands. It was feared that free movement³ to the Netherlands would be banned and that independence would spark political instability in multi-ethnic Suriname. The Dutch government was keen to speed up the independence negotiations to ‘get rid’ of the colony, in order to be able to restrict ongoing immigration, but also because the centre-left government at the time took a moral stance against colonialism (Bonjour 2009: 129). As a result of the Dutch wish that Suriname would quickly become independent, the Surinamese government had considerable leverage to shape the outcome of the independence negotiations (Bonjour 2009). Eventually, the delegations agreed that all Surinamese residing in Suriname⁴ would lose their Dutch citizenship and therefore the right to freely settle in the Netherlands. This was a major goal of the Dutch delegation, which refused the option of a dual nationality (Bonjour 2009). However, the Dutch did agree to a transition phase until 1980, during which Surinamese citizens had the right to move to the Netherlands and opt for Dutch nationality (Oostindie and Klinkers 2003: 185). Moreover, the Dutch government complied with the Surinamese request that given the ‘special historical bonds’ between the two countries, migrants from Suriname would not be treated ‘like any other foreigner’ yet would receive preferential treatment (Koninkrijkscommissie 1974: 14). The newly founded National Federation of Welfare Foundations for Surinamese, however, remained critical of this promise and wondered what the special status would practically entail (Ahmad Ali 1984 [1978]: 11).

One of the ways in which the special status was expressed, was in the lenient criteria for family reunification. The Bilateral Agreement on Residence and Settlement (part of the 1975 Independence Treaty) allowed for reunification—provided that suitable accommodation had been found—with a wide range of family members, as specified in article 5:

- the spouse;
- the person with whom the concerned individual maintains a durable and exclusive personal relationship;
- minor children who factually belong to the family of the individuals and over whom one of the parents exercises authority;

- other family members, who factually belong to the family of the concerned individual and who are dependent on him.⁵

This broad formulation was chosen to respect the Surinamese delegation's demand that specific family relations and constellations from Suriname should be taken into account. These included unmarried partners (second indent—referred to as *konkubinaat* in Suriname), foster children (third indent—also those raised by their grand-parents), adult children, parents, grandparents, and cousins (fourth indent).⁶ This inclusiveness was remarkable, as many of these family forms were not common to the Dutch context at the time.⁷ While norms were in fact rapidly changing, and new categories such as unmarried partners had just been introduced into regular Dutch migration policy, the bilateral agreement with Suriname clearly took this a step further.⁸ According to legal scholar Bert Swart (1978: 411), the Agreement was the first generally binding arrangement in the Netherlands in which alternative forms of cohabitation were equated with marriage in so many words. Under the conditions set by this post-independence migration framework, which Dutch government officials perceived as very 'lenient', immigration effectively did not decrease between 1975 and 1980 (Bonjour 2009: 129–30).

However, Surinamese–Dutch organisations did not think the Treaty was lenient at all. Losing the 'age-old status as Dutch nationals' that 'they were born into' meant a lot, both legally and symbolically (Jones 2014: 319). The Federation claimed that the preferential treatment was not realised: there were too few provisions that enacted the special status of Surinamese people. We understand this as a claim on century-old or self-evident belonging to the Dutch nation: for many (post)colonial citizens it was painful that free movement was restricted in the first place.

The organisations contested not only the scope, but also the implementation of the Treaty. Particularly LOSON and the Federation reported that many people were harmed by unjust and arbitrary implementation of the 1975 Treaty. The Federation stated that this could either have been done on purpose, or might be the result of ignorance among bureaucrats who implemented the measures from their own (Western-European) perspectives and without understanding the special legal position of the Surinamese or their specific family forms:

It is extremely painful that the implementation of the Agreement depends on the willingness to assume a preferential treatment in favour of Surinamese citizens. (...) we must not turn a blind eye to the phenomenon that leniency in the implementation of the Agreement is lacking sometimes. This applies, among other things, to family reunification, in which the term family is viewed exclusively through a Western European lens.⁹

This claim reflects the notion that street-level implementation practices of migration policy are guided not only by the letter of the law but also by unwritten norms, including family norms, as well as by conceptions of deservingness and belonging (Scheel and Gutekunst 2019; Welfens and Bonjour 2021). Migrants may be denied family reunification rights if the civil servant assessing their application perceives them as 'doing family' in inappropriate ways or does not perceive them as 'doing family' at all. Especially when implementing actors do not share or understand the family norms underlying the Suriname-specific rules, implementation mistakes may occur, also unintentionally. In an

interview, a former LOSON activist sketched the normative difference that she encountered upon arrival in the Netherlands in the seventies:

Now there are many forms of living together in the Netherlands. Many people get divorced, get back together, or don't want to marry in the first place. Yet in the 1970s, that was not the case. We were very often confronted with conservative questions, such as: how come the children have different fathers?¹⁰

The Federation claimed that, even if Article 5 of the Agreement was supposed to acknowledge specific Surinamese family patterns, the implementation practice did not do them full justice. First, while the Agreement proscribed admission of 'minor children who factually belong to the family of the person', the Federation noted that the Dutch authorities did not admit children living under temporary guardianship even though, according to the organisation, these children did 'factually belong' to the family, in the Surinamese context, and by Surinamese law (Ahmad Ali 1979: 22-23, 47). Thus, the Federation aimed to defend the rights of families who took care of *kweekjes*: temporary foster children.¹¹ A former Ashanti member described this Surinamese practice as follows:

A *kweekje*, you know, then the family had a child of someone for whatever reason, and it grew up in the family. Not necessarily childless couples, there were also other families who had a *kweekje* sometimes. You know, one who had limited prospects, or a family member. Or, like in our family, someone who just clicked [laughs].¹²

The Federation took this up as a Suriname-specific family form and claimed that this category of children should fall under the second paragraph of Article 5, to be equally eligible for family reunification.

Second, the organisations claimed that showing proof of particular relationships often turned out to be difficult or impossible. Meeting the criterium of proving a 'durable and exclusive personal relationship' (referring to *konkubinaat*) was hard if the partners did not have children, if the male partner had not legally recognised his children, or if applicants could not show proof of registration at the same address in Suriname. In an interview, a former Federation member said that this also problematic for

people who worked in the inlands of Suriname, for instance in forestry management or the mining industry. They were often away from home for a long time: they could not prove that they factually lived together.¹³

The same problems arose when proving that 'other family members' (last category listed in Article 5 of the Bilateral Migration Agreement) 'factually belonged' to the family. In the implementation practice, this also meant having to prove that one lived in the same house. This burden of proof reflects particular (Dutch) interpretations of what 'durable and exclusive' and 'family member' entails: living at the same address. It also reflects a particular administrative culture, as a former Federation member explained:

Of course, according to Dutch standards it is realistic that cases are rejected if one cannot prove [a relationship] with documents, because here [in the Netherlands] one can much more easily be included in the bureaucracy. Yet in Suriname back then... [this was not the case].¹⁴

Neither this interpretation, nor this particular form of proof, is self-evident. The Federation proposed other ways of judging the ‘realness’ of a family relationship:

After all, especially in Suriname, family relationships have a strong character of mutual assistance. Within this family system, it is therefore a common phenomenon that family members in need of support, participate in the household of a relative without there necessarily having to be a question of actually living together. Therefore, in those cases, the financial dependency aspect should be decisive in assessing whether there can be family reunification (...) (Ahmad Ali 1979: 24).

The claims-making in this period suggests that the Dutch authorities had much room for manoeuvre in the interpretation of ‘factually belonging to the family’. The Federation concluded in 1978 that ‘if the purpose of both criteria regarding family reunification is to do justice to typically Surinamese family structures in the Treaty, then in any case this barely shows in the implementation’ (Ahmad Ali 1984 [1978]: 17).

6.2 Severing the ties (1980–5)

In September 1980, the Netherlands unilaterally installed a visa requirement for people arriving from Suriname. This happened a few months before the official end of the 1975 Bilateral Migration Agreement and was sparked by the Dutch government’s wish to limit the ongoing ‘mass’ migration from the former colony sooner rather than later. The decision was actively contested by Surinamese–Dutch organisations in the Netherlands, which called for an immediate abolition of the visa requirement.

They based their claim first and foremost on the far-reaching consequences for family migrants—such as long interrogations by the customs authorities at Schiphol airport, detention, deportation, and forced separation of families:

At almost every incoming flight, one can encounter crying mothers, whose children—who came to the Netherlands for family reunification—are being sent back. They are not even given the opportunity to have their children stay temporarily, in order to do the necessary paperwork (LOSON 1980(3): 5).

The organisations protested that the Dutch government did not care enough about the human consequences of its policies. This was a shared goal among all three organisations: bringing into the discussion the suffering of families who were strongly impacted by the new measures. While Ashanti focused on showing the harsh consequences the measures had on the lives of women, the Federation and LOSON also connected the visa requirement to broader issues of exclusion and belonging of Surinamese postcolonial citizens. They saw the visas as ‘revealing’ of what they had been suspicious of before: the broken promise of preferential treatment.

The LOSON called the visa requirement a racist decision and linked it directly to the colonial past. They stated that the unilateral move mirrored colonial power relations in that it furthered the interests of the Dutch government and not those of Surinamese people, adding that:

(...) Unilaterally imposing the visa requirement offers no solution. It ignores the reasons why there is such a large migration. This migration is caused by the continuous misery and uncertainty in the country, as a result of the plunder by particularly the Netherlands itself. The Netherlands causes the migration, but does not want to pay for the consequences of its plunder politics (LOSON 1980(7): 3).

The Federation did not explicitly refer to colonialism, but presented the existence of intense transnational family relations—and therefore movements of persons—between the Netherlands and Suriname as an inevitable part of the postcolonial present that was now severely obstructed:

The large size of the Surinamese population in the Netherlands, as well as the close family ties back and forth, will result in the need for intensive movement of persons for a long time to come. In this context, a visa requirement should be seen as an impeding factor to consolidate and continue family relationships (Ahmad Ali 1984 [1980]: 62).

When the Surinamese government in turn installed a visa requirement for Dutch nationals, LOSON and the Federation contested that decision as well, since it would apply to persons born in Suriname who had opted for Dutch citizenship. LOSON called it ‘a humiliating stamp for a visa to visit your own country’ (LOSON 1980(9-10): 19).

Despite the active contestation of the organisations and various other actors, the visa requirement for Surinamese nationals remained in place. Against this background, the Surinamese and Dutch governments met to discuss a new agreement on migration and settlement. While the 1975 Migration Agreement had already expired, the bilateral talks ran into deadlock. While the Surinamese delegation called for lenient (family) migration criteria, the Dutch government wanted to strongly restrict these.

Alerted by the visa crisis, the organisations critically followed the run-up to the 1980 bilateral negotiations on a new migration agreement. They argued that a decent transitional arrangement should be put in place and called for lenient migration criteria. Particularly, the Federation requested that the lenient conditions for family migration of the 1975 Agreement be retained in the 1981 Agreement (Ahmad Ali 1984 [1980]: 54). It based this claim on the same argument it used to protest the visa requirement: that decolonisation would take a few more generations, and that transnational family lives that required mobility between Suriname and the Netherlands would be inherent to that decolonisation process. The organisation claimed that family migration rights were of crucial importance to Surinamese people. In contrast, it suggested that labour migration rights could be restricted, as those were primarily in the interest of the Dutch state, not of Suriname or the Surinamese (Ahmad Ali 1984 [1980]: 60).

Eventually, in January 1981 the two countries reached an agreement. Contrary to Surinamese goals, admission criteria for Surinamese were now almost the same as the general Dutch immigration policy (Bonjour 2009: 133). Surinamese applicants now had to go through regular naturalisation procedures to obtain Dutch citizenship, and family members eligible for family reunification were reduced to the following:

- the spouse and minor children belonging to the family insofar as one of the parents is charged with legal custody of these children;

- other than the above-mentioned family members if they already factually belonged to the family of the Surinamese national who settled in the Netherlands and were dependent on him; in this context, parents in need of support should be considered; in special cases, mothers who become widows or children who become orphans, and for whom not any shelter is possible in Suriname, may qualify for an extended form of family reunification.¹⁵

In the new migration agreement, unmarried partners, ‘factually belonging’ children and ‘other family members’ were left out as categories eligible for family reunification. Surinamese–Dutch activist organisations showed the impact that the restriction of family migration rights had on (transnational) Surinamese families. All three organisations reported that the new rules proved particularly problematic for unmarried couples (living in *konkubinaat*). This Surinamese family form was included in the agreement of 1975 at the request of Surinamese negotiators, yet now it was removed. The organisations then started to campaign for its re-recognition. In doing so, LOSON and Ashanti based their claim on the colonial history. While they did not explicitly call on the (moral) responsibility of the Dutch, they claimed that *konkubinaat* was a remainder from slavery, as enslaved people were not allowed to marry.

Another djam [trap] is that family reunification is rendered impossible through the non-recognition of *konkubinaat*. *Konkubinaat* is a heritage from the period of slavery and is very normal in the Surinamese society now (LOSON 1982(2): 8).

Cohabitation or ‘living in *konkubinaat*’ as we call it, is a very old and well-known phenomenon for us. (...) In Suriname, people cohabit since the time of slavery. Male and female enslaved people were not allowed to marry at the time, so they went to live in *konkubinaat* (Ashanti 1983(1): 11).

Scholars have diverging views on the complex question of how the colonial past has shaped family forms and practices among formerly enslaved peoples (on this see Terborg 2002). The organisations that we studied also expressed different views. Unlike the other organisations, the Federation did not link the *konkubinaat* to colonialism. Rather, it called on the responsibility of the Dutch government to address a pressing need in the Surinamese–Dutch community. Not recognising this family form would have humanitarian consequences: ‘a man can apply for reunification with his children but not with the mother of these children if he lives in *konkubinaat* with her’ (Ahmad Ali 1984 [1980]: 68). It added that the ‘Dutch delegation did not do their research’, rejecting the Dutch argument that it was a form of ‘sham migration’ and implying a reprehensible lack of understanding for these family norms that differed from the Dutch norms (Ahmad Ali 1984 [1980]: 68). Women activists from Ashanti and LOSON drew attention to the particular suffering of women as a result of the law change. Ashanti claimed that the non-recognition of unmarried partners forced women into marriage and had a negative effect on women’s emancipation:

Surinamese women in *konkubinaat* do not have any legal status under this law. They therefore have to get married if they want to reunite with their husbands in the Netherlands, usually shortly before their departure. This means that she will have to be in the Netherlands for three years to obtain an independent residence permit. Also, a Surinamese woman, who is often the breadwinner, cannot let her

husband and children come to the Netherlands without marrying him first, which also changes her position. In short: on the one hand, unmarried coupledom is increasingly accepted in the law as a form of cohabitation, partly because it is emancipating for women. On the other hand, absolutely no attention is given to the—already longer existing—other forms of cohabitation of non-Dutch nationals (Ashanti 1982(13): 10).

Ashanti's claim touches upon the fact that as of the 1970s, unmarried couples were increasingly recognised in Dutch society and law. They were allowed to reunite under regular Dutch migration law since 1975 if one of the partners was a Dutch citizen, which made the removal of this category for Surinamese—who had lost Dutch citizenship so recently—particularly harsh.

Whereas most other Surinamese–Dutch family migration rights claims found little resonance in Dutch political circles, the *konkubinaat* claim was taken up in Dutch parliament when three left-wing MPs filed a motion in which they urgently called for re-inclusion of the *konkubinaat* in the new regulations.¹⁶ One of them, the Social Democrat Van Thijn, argued that *konkubinaat* was unjustly removed, as it was an 'unquestionable element in the Surinamese culture' and not recognising it was contrary to the agreements made at independence and harmful to a large number of Surinamese women.¹⁷ Socialist party-member Van der Spek added that the new Agreement 'incorporates a Dutch view on the nuclear family. A mature, equitable treatment of *konkubinaat*, as it exists in Suriname—as elsewhere by the way—as a family relationship, has disappeared'.¹⁸ Interestingly, both Parliamentarians highlighted that unmarried coupledom was not uncommon in the Netherlands either. This argument was resisted by the orthodox Calvinist political party SGP which supported the 'very restrictive attitude of the Dutch government towards the import of this sinful form of cohabitation'.¹⁹ The motion was eventually rejected since most parties did not consider the non-recognition of *konkubinaat* a substantial problem or demanded that the Surinamese government first draft an internal regulation on the matter.²⁰ Thus, the claim to re-include the *konkubinaat* in the 1981 Agreement to recognise Suriname-specific family structures was not successful. It must be noted that *konkubinaat* explicitly also referred to non-marital same-sex relationships in the regulations of 1975. Yet, we found that the claims made by Surinamese–Dutch organisations over the whole period referred to heterosexual couples only. In the data, including the archive of the gay rights organisation SUHO, we have found no political claims-making on family migration rights for or by Surinamese same-sex couples.

Overall, we observe that the redefinition of Dutch nationhood and citizenship in the wake of Surinamese independence proceeded through not one but two different moments of crisis: not only independence in 1975, but also the tightening of migration law in 1980–1. It is the second moment, rather than the first, that the organisations responded to most fiercely: they interpreted the restrictive measures as a shocking confirmation that the Dutch vision on postcolonial citizenship did not include a special status for Surinamese–Dutch citizens. Immediately after independence they still expressed some hope that the Dutch promise of preferential treatment would translate in a more inclusive approach to former citizens of the Dutch colonial empire. As of 1981, however, Surinamese nationals held the status of 'regular aliens'. It suddenly became much harder for Surinamese–Dutch families to live together in the Netherlands. Despite the efforts of activists, who put

forward alternative visions on postcolonial belonging, the restrictions remained in place. Migration from Suriname diminished strongly from 1981 onwards (Bonjour 2009: 133–4). Thus, the biggest crisis in the relationship between these Surinamese–Dutch organisations and the Dutch state was not the political independence of Suriname, but the moment that Surinamese came to be treated as ‘regular foreigners’ in Dutch migration law. This reveals the crucial importance of mobility rights to Surinamese–Dutch activists’ conceptions of postcolonial citizenship.

7. Conclusion

‘The family’ was the home of two interrelated crises in the direct aftermath of Suriname’s independence from the Netherlands (1975), which required the re-invention of what it is to be a (transnational) family in postcolonial times, as well as the re-imagining of what ‘Dutchness’ entails—two crises that impact individual families and Dutch society until today. In this article, we have explored the perspectives of Surinamese–Dutch activist organisations on both the family and the nation, by analysing the claims they made with regard to family migration in this key historical phase. The analysis shows that, in claiming differential rights to family migration, Surinamese–Dutch organisations put forward the vision that formerly colonised subjects and their ‘difference’ inherently and inevitably belong to the Dutch post-colonial nation. Thus, these organisations have brought into Dutch debates a vision of post-colonial citizenship that challenged dominant conceptions of nationhood in the Netherlands. We found that they did so collectively, based on a common Surinamese identity, even if the community they represent is in many respects highly diverse.

This postcolonial conception of citizenship as ‘difference in equality’ challenged the dominant frame of the Dutch multicultural nation-state in two crucial ways. First, it challenged the *cultural* boundaries of the Nation-State, deviating from a vision of multiculturalism as ‘other cultures existing next to the Dutch’ by placing ‘Surinamese difference’ right inside Dutch postcolonial citizenship. In this vision, special attention was paid to matters that were important to former citizens of the Dutch colonial empire. Surinamese–Dutch organisations called on the Dutch authorities to acknowledge Suriname-specific family forms—such as temporary foster children (*kweekjes*) and non-marital couples (*konkubinaat*). Also, they asked for an implementation practice that went beyond a Western-European interpretation of ‘who belonged to the family’, to do full justice to the various ways in which Surinamese–Dutch families lived together. Second, the organisations reframed the nation-state’s *spatio-temporal* boundaries by asserting that the colonial past did not end at independence, but that it had translated into a postcolonial present of ongoing relations and movements between Suriname and the Netherlands. They did so by actively contesting the visa requirement, the ways in which (family) migrants were treated by the Dutch authorities, and the much stricter Agreement of 1981. These findings highlight the importance of including the temporal dimension in the studies of national boundaries. Namely, we show that the activist organisations based their claims for differential rights on a broader claim of age-old and self-evident belonging, in which they (re)shaped what is recognised as ‘shared history’.

The organisations based their claim for differentiated rights on their communities' longstanding relation with the Dutch nation-state as postcolonial citizens. For Ashanti and LOSON, the 'difference' of Surinamese and their families was a product of Dutch colonial history and therefore there should be room for it in the postcolonial Dutch Nation-State. The Federation, in contrast, did not explicitly link 'difference' to colonialism. Rather, it presented the belonging of Surinamese in the Netherlands as self-evident, regardless of how 'different' families were or were not. Their presence and transnational movements were—according to the organisation—a postcolonial reality that the Dutch just had to accept.

These are important counternarratives, providing an insight into how postcolonial citizens themselves conceptualised citizenship as political actors in a critical phase in the history of the Dutch nation-state: the aftermath of Suriname's decolonisation. Yet, despite the existence of considerable exchange with political actors and visibility through publications and protests, none of the organisations' political claims regarding family migration rights led to concrete policy change. This seems to confirm Jones' (2014) findings that the space for agency to challenge conceptions of belonging was limited for postcolonial citizens, and that postcolonial citizenship is mostly *ascribed* by dominant political discourses in the metropole. In view of contemporary calls for decolonisation of European societies and scholarship, however, these historical claims represent important and inspiring contributions to ongoing debates on citizenship in a postcolonial nation.

Notes

1. We also explored the archives of the SUHO and the Indian-Surinamese Foundation Lalla Rookh, but we did not encounter any claims regarding family migration rights in the available archive material. For Lalla Rookh we were able to access and analyse the newsletters between 1979 (edition 1–2) and 1985 (edition 6–7). For SUHO, we analysed the magazines between 1980 and 1984.
2. This first part of the analysis is based on the material of the Federation and LOSON only, since Ashanti was not yet active in this period.
3. Since 1954, colonial citizens with the Dutch nationality had to right to travel freely within the Kingdom.
4. Surinamese citizens living in the Netherlands would in principle keep the Dutch nationality, but could opt for Surinamese citizenship (Bonjour 2009: 129).
5. Own translation of Article 5 paragraph 2 of the 'Overeenkomst tussen het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden en de Republiek Suriname inzake het verblijf en de vestiging van wederzijdse onderdanen', Paramaribo 25 November 1975. Tractatenblad 1975: 133.
6. Tweede Kamer 75/76, 14048, nr. 1, 10 September 1976
7. While marriage was also very influential as a norm and practice in Surinamese society, the Surinamese government and the activist organisations stood up for the rights of Surinamese families that were not recognized in Dutch law. That explains the focus of this paper on 'different' Surinamese family forms, rather than normative ones.

8. In this agreement, the admission of ‘other family members’ was turned into an obligation, while in general migration policy that category was ‘considered’ (*Bonjour* 2009: 132). Also, in 1975, Dutch citizens could only reunite with foreign non-marital partners if they met an income requirement, while this was not required of Surinamese immigrants (*Bonjour* 2009).
9. H. R. Roseval, Director of the Federation. In: *Ahmad Ali* (1979: 5).
10. Interview with a former member of LOSON, conducted on 8 April 2021.
11. Interview with a former member of the Federation, conducted on 12 January 2021.
12. Interview with a former member of Ashanti, conducted on 2 August 2021.
13. Interview with a former member of the Federation, conducted on 7 September 2021.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Attachment 1. Overeenkomst tussen het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden en de Republiek Suriname inzake de binnenkomst en het verblijf van wederzijdse onderdanen, Paramaribo, 23-01-1981, retrieved from <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBV0002242/1982-12-01>.
16. TK 80/81, 16489, nr. 8, 27 January 1981.
17. TK 80/81, 27 January 1981: 2567.
18. *Ibid.*: 2553.
19. *Ibid.*: 2553–4.
20. TK 80/81, 3 February 1981: 2773.

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