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(Gedwongen) verplaatsing, veerkracht en overlevingskunst in de levensverhalen van drie generaties Javaans-Surinaamse vrouwen

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Abstract

Supported by women – (Forced) displacement and resilience in the life stories of three generations of Javanese-Surinamese women.

Between 1890 and 1939, around 33,000 Javanese women, men, and children were shipped from Java (former Dutch East Indies) to the colony of Suriname, in order to replace the formerly enslaved people at the plantations after the abolition of slavery in 1863. Initially, the Dutch colonial administrators recruited indentured laborers from China and British India. Now that the latter proved to be less subservient than expected, they started to look for a more docile labor force who would be willing to accept the harsh working conditions as well as the low wages. They now turned their eye to their own colony: Java. On 9th August 1890, the first group of Javanese arrived in the colony. The period of indentured labor lasted from 1890 until 1930, followed by a period of 'free migration' between 1930 and 1939, in which Javanese families were brought to Suriname as small farmers, serving as a cheap labor reserve for the planters.

In this dissertation, I tried to break the silence around the hidden Javanese-Surinamese history of double (post)colonial displacement. Collecting the life stories of Javanese-Surinamese (grand)mothers and (grand)daughters, I examined the ways in which women, as (grand)mothers, looked back at their lives and their struggles, thus handing down modes of survival and resistance that enabled their (grand)daughters to counter (colonial and degrading) patriarchal constructions of 'Javanese-Surinamese femininity', thus constructing their own definition of what it means to be a 'Javanese-Surinamese woman'.

Applying the method of oral history proved to be a useful method to look into the memories and narratives of Javanese-Surinamese women. In the colonial archives, they rarely appear as subjects of their own, inviting them to tell their life story granted me the opportunity to reveal their ways of 'doing' and 'being', and write their own herstory. Reading against and along the archival grain, I critically looked into the way Javanese women coming from ten different families were portrayed in the colonial archives, applying these written sources to embed the life stories of the women I interviewed into a wider historical, social, cultural, and psychological context.

For my dissertation, I deliberately put the life stories of (grand)mothers and (grand)daughters in the center of my academic endeavor. Listening carefully to their life stories, I looked for common themes that formed a blueprint for the chapter division of this book. In the first chapter, I discussed the (forced) dislocation from Java to Suriname (1890-1939), as well as the dislocation from Surinam to the Netherlands (1970-1986). I examined the ways in which the narrators remembered three specific moments in the process of relocation: the moment before departure, the relocation itself, as well as the moment of

arrival. I was not so much interested in their experiences per se, as in their ways of remembering and narrating about their lived experiences, by way of presenting their identification with a Javanese family culture in which (grand)mothers play an active role in the social survival of the family.

In this light, I found that Javanese women who were brought to Surinam as contract laborers were not always forced to do so; some of them also voluntarily opted for contract labor as it enabled them to escape an arranged marriage or start their lives anew after divorce. Analyzing their memories of relocating to the Netherlands, it showed that Javanese-Surinamese women, as (grand)mothers and (grand)daughters, closely collaborated in the migration process, carefully preparing and organizing the migration of the family, as well as putting work into *home making*: the endless process of caring, cleaning, and cooking, thus providing the home the appearance of stability, where in fact 'home' still had to take shape. In the second chapter, I looked into the period of settlement, and the poverty and deprivation with which Javanese-Surinamese families were confronted after terminating their five-year contract at the plantation, and settling as small farmers in the districts. I was particularly interested in the relation between class and ethnicity. Using Bourdieu's conceptualization of class, where he discerns between economic capital (money, possessions), cultural capital (literacy, cognitive skills, degrees), and social capital (connections, group membership, privileges), I studied the ways in which (grand)mothers and (grand)daughters from two different families remembered their struggle for life, and the ways in which they created opportunities to escape poverty and deprivation, thus granting their children the opportunity to pursue upward social mobility. In doing so, I demonstrated that in post-emancipation Surinam, social stratification was no longer organized by 'race' or color *per se*; social class also depended on ethnicity, locality, education and profession, as well as access to the Dutch language and western/Christian values. Now the 'colonized' group had been diversified by transferring Chinese, Hindostani and Javanese ethnic groups to the colony, the Dutch colonial rulers introduced a new colonial policy of social and spatial segregation in which each ethnic group was assigned to a different social stratum. The Afro-Surinamese group, descendants from the formerly enslaved, were allocated to the city of Paramaribo where they were destined to become craftsmen or administrators; the Hindustani group was allocated to the outskirts of Paramaribo, where they were destined to become farmers and traders, providing the city dwellers with food and crops. The Javanese were destined to become small farmers in the districts. They were more or less left to themselves, as educational and job opportunities were deliberately minimized. Being the last group that arrived in the colony, they became an 'outcast' minority – a social position that was justified by the colonial myth of 'the lazy Javanese', in which it was stressed over and over again that the Javanese would lack character traits such as ambition or competitiveness that would have allowed them to escape their 'backward' social position. It proves how 'being-Javanese' as an ethnicized class, was not so much a natural social category, but a colonial invention, carefully fabricated by the colonial rulers to sustain the colonial project.

In this chapter, I analyzed the ways in which Javanese-Surinamese women responded to their social deprivation, and in doing so, how they made sense of themselves as 'Javanese-Surinamese' women. Analyzing the life stories of two different families, I found that women played an important role in the social and symbolic survival of Javanese families, as well as the wider ethnic group. The first family I examined, the Djasmin family, followed an ethnic strategy in which identifying with the poverty of the family symbolized a positive identification with 'being-Javanese' as an ethnized rural class. In doing so, women resigned to Javanese practices within their cultural baggage that were handed down from mother to daughter, such as earning a living through petty trade, following a gendered division of labor in which mothers and daughters closely collaborated to get all the work done, as a recreating the tradition of lending children to families and single women with better living conditions, thus enabling the children to go to school and pursue a better life. The second family I followed, the Sowiriono family, was not only able to escape poverty and attain upward social mobility; by carefully stacking different forms of capital, they eventually became part of the Surinamese elite. In this process, the grandmother of the family played a vital role. Looking into the life stories of these families, it proves that Javanese-Surinamese families did not just accept the ethnicized class to which they were assigned, they actively resisted their social deprivation, in which it was particularly the resilience of women that enabled upward social mobility.

In the third chapter, I looked more closely into the lives and experiences of the women I interviewed, adding gender to my research scope. I particularly zoomed into the 'female' defined domains of gender, such as sexual relations and marriage, motherhood and rearing children, kinship relations and gendered divisions of labor. Starting point of this chapter was the idea that colonialism was not solely established by dominating colonized groups through land grabbing and the exploitation of nature and human capital, but also by controlling matters around gender, sexuality and reproduction. I was specifically interested in the process of gendering, that is: how Javanese-Surinamese women were made into a 'Javanese-Surinamese' woman, and how they responded to (changing) constructions of 'Javanese-Surinamese' femininity. Examining the colonial sources, I found that during the period of indentured labor, the myth of the 'immoral and promiscuous Javanese woman' was invented, in order to provide men maximum access to their sexuality – even if they were already involved in a relationship. From the 1920s on, when the colonial administrators gained interest in replacing the system of contract labor for a system of 'free migration', Javanese women were designed to take on a different role. Instead of exploiting their sexuality to satisfy the sexual needs of men, they now had to play a reproductive role. As mothers, they would produce offspring, thus providing the colony with 'new' laborers. This change in colonial policy set in motion a process of 'housewivization' in which Javanese women were portrayed as 'docile and monogamous housewives'. The myth was created to justify a colonial policy that pushed Javanese women back into their reproductive role while still expecting them to continue working and equally providing for their families.

It is in this historical context that I explored the ways in which Javanese-Surinamese women responded to these colonial constructions of Javanese-Surinamese femininity, as well as to the recreation of patriarchal practices within their own community. By analyzing the life stories of (grand)mothers and (grand)daughters of twee different families, I specifically zoomed into the reinvention of the Javanese practice of arranged marriages, exploring the struggles of Javanese-Surinamese for emancipation and independence. In this first family I looked into, the Martosentiko family, the grandmother had traded Java for Suriname in order to escape an arranged marriage, yet reestablished to practice of arranged marriages by marrying off her own daughter. The strict surveillance over Surinamese girls, which was also practiced by other ethnic groups, should not be seen as merely a traditionalization of Javanese-Surinamese femininity. Within a colonial context where the success of the family largely depended on the success of future generations, it could also be seen as a sign of respectability to preserve and control the sexuality of daughters. Moreover, it could also be seen as a sign of unresolved intergenerational trauma, where the grandmother herself, as a female contract laborer, was continually exposed to sexual abuse.

In the second family, the Rasban family, the grandmother purposefully tried to break with the practice of arranged marriages, allowing her daughters to attend school and pursue a career that would keep them financially independent. This could be seen as a sign of creolization of Javanese-Surinamese femininity. Still, what I have shown is that the urge to remain independent from men is also part of their own cultural baggage, where the Javanese culture of the lower class provided women with relative equality between men and women. This chapter has shown that Javanese-Surinamese women were not only constructed as 'Javanese-Surinamese' women, they were actively involved in defining 'Javanese-Surinamese' femininity in their own terms.

In the last chapter of this dissertation, I invited the reader to looking into questions of 'home' and 'belonging' in postcolonial Netherlands. In order to acknowledge the diasporic nature of their roots, I used Glissant's notion of the rhizome as a metaphor to conceptualize 'home' and belonging within a diasporic space where 'home' is not situated in one singular origin, but located in multiple places and communities, depending on one's unique position at the intersection of ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and age. From here, I analyzed the life stories of Javanese-Surinamese women, coming from four different families, and the ways in which they remembered and narrated about (the absence of) 'home' and belonging. In doing so, I examined three dimensions of 'home' and belonging: the material, political, and the affective dimension. Exploring the material dimension, I looked at how the older generation of Javanese-Surinamese women looked back at the relative absence of 'home' within the context of colonial Suriname. In their case, 'home' was not a static, safe haven, but an unstable place that was under constant threat. Looking into the political dimension, I examined the aspect of national belonging (the right to equal citizenship) as well as cultural belonging (the right to preserve one's own culture and identity). In analyzing the life stories, I found that especially that middle generation encountered mechanisms of othering and saming, that jeopardized their sense of national belonging. Analyzing how the Dutch

postcolonial policy of 'integration while preserving one's culture and identity' of the 1980s played out in the life stories of Javanese-Surinamese women, I found that it led to an identity politics that forced women into performing 'traditional' notions of 'Javanese-Surinamese' femininity. As a result, for some women, the Javanese-Surinamese community felt like an 'unhomely' home, for which they had to negotiate hard in order to be accepted. Lastly, I looked into the affective dimension of 'home' and belonging, and the role that Javanese-Surinamese women play in creating a 'home place': an affective place where various generations can come together in order to undergo a process of uprooting and regrounding, in which they share stories of suffering and resistance, mourn over what was lost, and celebrate what was won, thus enabling the younger generations to (re)connect with their family and their ancestors, ~~as well as their (family) history~~, and create their own notions of 'being Javanese-Surinamese'. As such the affective dimension of 'home' and belonging is not only a spiritual journey, but also a political journey, in which the younger generation claims their right to belong to postcolonial Netherlands in their own terms. What this research has shown, is that 'being a Javanese-Surinamese woman' can take endless forms, yet is simultaneously rooted in a female heritage that is diasporically rooted in a Javanese peasant culture that is handed down from (grand)mother to (grand)daughter. In the cultural baggage of Javanese-Surinamese women I found the following:

- A female subjectivity that moves between adaptation and resistance, in which (grand)motherhood plays a central role;
- An instrumental attitude towards relationships with men, in which Javanese-Surinamese women show a strong desire for economic and emotional independence;
- An egalitarian kinship system, with great emphasis on the bonds between female family members, in which the relationships between (grand)mothers and (grand)daughters are more prominent than those between husband and wife, and in which (grand)mothers and (grand)daughters collaborate in running the household, taking care of children and elderly, and earning a living.
- A highly developed entrepreneurial spirit, in which women show great resilience and survival skills to enable the social and economic survival of their families and the broader Javanese-Surinamese group.

This cultural baggage, which is passed down from (grand)mother to (grand)daughter, forms a precious female heritage that enables them to claim their own position within post-colonial Netherlands. Now the future is theirs.