

# Symposium: Colonial history and global health among Dutch knowledge institutions

Report

23 April 2025

## Summary of the symposium

The symposium explored Dutch academic institutions' entanglements with colonialism and slavery, emphasizing the need for reflection, accountability, and future-oriented change.

Dr. Esther Captain opened with a keynote on Dutch slavery and its legacy, based on the book *Slavery & the Dutch State*. She highlighted the long-term impact of colonial slavery, recent institutional responses such as official apologies, and the need for healing through embodied practices. She called for inclusive and independent research and set out a forward-looking agenda for 2025–2035.

Prof. Leen Dorsman addressed Utrecht University's historical ties to slavery, noting that some funding and university buildings have roots in the colonial past. While steps toward recognition have been taken, the university's advisory report deemed formal apologies premature and emphasized the need for deeper research and faculty-level initiatives.

Dr. Larissa Schulte Nordholt examined Wageningen University's colonial legacy in Suriname and Indonesia, revealing how the institution both upheld and benefited from colonial systems. She stressed the importance of institutional awareness and continuous efforts toward decolonization.

Dr. Henk van Rinsum reflected on Utrecht University's role in producing colonial knowledge, showing how Enlightenment ideals were intertwined with imperial ambitions. He argued that development cooperation still risks echoing colonial ideologies and called for critical reflection on current academic practices.

Dr. Fenneke Sysling discussed the presence of human remains from colonial territories in Leiden's collections. She showed how racial science and imperial power enabled unethical practices of acquisition and underlined the urgent need to confront this troubling legacy.

Finally, Dr. Gani Jaelani presented his research plans on the Utrecht Medical School's involvement in Dutch colonialism. He will investigate how the faculty supported colonial power through specialized training, medical curricula, and ties to colonial trade. His research emphasizes how medicine not only served to heal but also to control and reinforce colonial hierarchies. Addressing this legacy, he argued, is essential to tackling present-day global health disparities.

Together, these contributions underscore the importance of critically engaging with colonial legacies in academia and fostering structural change.

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## Book and report recommendations

- *Sporen van de slavernij in Leiden*
  - *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht*
  - *Het koloniale verleden van Rotterdam* – Gert Oostindie
  - *De slavernij in Oost en West*
  - *Het koloniale en slavernijverleden van hoofdstad Den Haag*
  - *The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past*
  - *Explorative Report on the Colonial and Slavery History of Leiden University*
  - *Sol Iustitiae Setting? The Utrecht Law School and Its Relations to Slavery*
  - *Utrecht University and Colonial Knowledge*
  - *Europe and the People Without History* – Eric Wolf
  - *Orientalism* – Edward Said
  - *Decolonising the Mind* – Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
  - *The Invention of Africa* – V.Y. Mudimbe
  - *Verlangen naar verbetering* – Annemieke Klijn
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# Session 1

Keynote lecture by Dr Esther Captain (KITLV Leiden)

Navigating after the commemorative year

## **State and slavery and the Knowledge Agenda 2025-2035 as a compass**

### Slavery & the Dutch State

Dr. Esther Captain discussed the co-authored book *Slavery & the Dutch State*, which reconsiders both what we know about slavery and how that knowledge was produced. The publication explores the socioeconomic and political contexts of Dutch colonial slavery, its ongoing impact, and the ways society continues to engage with this painful history.

Questions the book addresses

- In what socioeconomic and political contexts did the Dutch engage in slavery?
- What are the lasting and current consequences of this history?
- How have different stakeholders responded to and dealt with slavery, historically and today?
- How can healing take place?

### Observations

- A ripple effect is visible throughout the Netherlands, marked by research, public initiatives, apologies, and new monuments.
- All four major cities, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague, have formally apologized.
- These efforts highlight that the legacies of slavery are not confined to the past. They remain visible today in issues like the Sinterklaas debate and the *toeslagen affaire* (childcare benefits scandal).
- **December 18, 2022:** Prime Minister Mark Rutte issued a formal apology on behalf of the Dutch government.
- **July 1, 2023:** King Willem-Alexander, speaking both as monarch and member of Parliament, asked for forgiveness, calling slavery a "crime against humanity. This legacy affects not only the Netherlands but also other parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It is a shared history that continues to shape society today."

### The role of medical professionals in slavery

- Medical professionals played a significant role in the system of slavery.
- Infectious diseases were a major concern. Enslaved people were examined both upon departure and arrival, not for their wellbeing, but to assess their market value.

- Enslaved individuals were *not* treated as human beings. Their bodies were viewed as objects; as tools for labor or experimentation.
- There was a widespread belief at the time that certain races felt *no* or *less* pain compared to Europeans. As a result, enslaved people were often subjected to medical procedures, including surgeries, without anesthesia.
- Enslaved individuals were also purchased specifically for medical experimentation, with no consent or regard for their suffering.

## Lasting impact on modern medicine

- Today, many medical practices are still based on the "model patient": a white, European male.
- This has led to significant biases in diagnosis, treatment, and medical research.
- There is a critical need for inclusive research that reflects the diversity of the populations being treated.

## Healing

- As the saying goes, "*the body keeps the score.*" This suggests that trauma is not only stored in the mind, but also deeply embedded in the body.
- **Talking alone may not always be enough** to process or heal from historical and generational trauma.
- **Embodied knowledge**, the idea that the body holds memory and wisdom, plays a crucial role in healing.
- Practices such as **theatre, dance, movement, and music** are being increasingly explored in recent research as powerful tools for healing.
- These forms allow individuals and communities to reconnect with their bodies, express what words cannot, and begin the journey of emotional and ancestral healing.
- For descendants of enslaved people, these embodied practices offer a way to process intergenerational trauma and reclaim agency over their own stories.

## Research agenda

- As a follow-up to the book *Slavery & the Dutch State*, a research agenda has been developed to guide future studies on Dutch colonial slavery and its enduring impact.
- A core goal is to amplify unheard voices, those historically excluded from academic and public discourse.
- The agenda emphasizes epistemic justice, rethinking *how* knowledge is formed and *who* gets to produce it. It calls for:
  - Re-examining academic standards and qualification frameworks
  - Recognizing grassroots organizations and community networks as legitimate sources of knowledge

- Re-evaluating hiring practices in academia and research institutions to ensure inclusivity and diversity in expertise

## Conclusion

The deafening silences surrounding the ongoing consequences of slavery are slowly being broken, thanks to the tireless efforts of activists, scholars, and community members. This is not the end, but just the beginning of a deeper journey toward truth, awareness, and healing. It will take time, care, and continued collaboration to truly understand and address the legacies of Dutch colonial slavery. But through open dialogue, inclusive research, and embodied practices, we are taking essential steps forward.

## Q&A highlights

### **Q: Could you elaborate on people contributing, even if they didn't want to contribute?**

- There's a complex dynamic at play. Some individuals or communities are seen as powerful or as having the means to contribute, even when they may be reluctant.
- This project was commissioned by the Dutch government (*overheid*), which can cause hesitation.
  - Some people choose *not* to contribute because they feel uneasy about the project being financed by the Ministry.
- It's crucial to be very clear about the independence of the research:
  - While the funding came from the government, the research team operates independently.
  - A fundamental condition of the project is no influence from the commissioning party. They cannot "think along" or "read along" during the process

### **Q: Do you really see this as colonial history, or as ongoing colonialism? Are we simply using different terms for the same thing?**

- This is an important distinction.
- Yes, it is history, but it is not only in the past.
  - From a historian's perspective, we refer to it as a historical event.
  - However, the afterlives of colonialism, its long-term, ongoing effects, are very real and continue to shape lives today.
- The term *ongoing colonialism* reflects how these structures and consequences still persist and manifest in the present day.
- The construction of colour is really important to understand. Then we can unpack the unequal power relations. Black and white is always contextual. The power of dynamics that goes with it

### **Q: With the afterlives of slavery, public apologies, growing awareness, and a rippling effect across society, do you see possibilities for reparations?**

- Reparations are often understood as financial, but that is only a small part of a much broader process.
- True reparations are about the restoration of relationships and recognition of harm.
- It involves listening to those whose voices have long been ignored, making space for the unheard to speak, and sometimes, knowing when to remain silent and simply witness
- Reparations require a deep awareness of historical context, social dynamics, and the present moment. It is about acknowledging, healing, and rebuilding, not just about money.

**Q: Do you think researchers today have enough ability to read between the lines, to uncover what isn't explicitly said?**

- Yes, I am quite optimistic. Especially among younger generations, there is a growing capacity to: read with nuance, understand the layers of silence and omission, and recognize the complexities of what is unsaid
  - There is more emphasis today on critical thinking, intersectionality, and emotional intelligence in research, all of which help scholars explore beyond the surface.
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## Session 2

Lecture by em. Prof. Dr Leen Dorsman (Utrecht Universiteit)

### Accountability

### **Context and content of the advisory report on Utrecht University and slavery**

Professor Dorsman presented on the developments around slavery and colonialism, and how universities are increasingly examining their historical roles in these systems. There's a growing focus on equality in academic research, and institutions are beginning to reflect critically on their own pasts. This includes their collections, curricula, and the legacies embedded in building names and other institutional symbols.

At Utrecht University, a portion of its historical funding was connected to slavery. Some buildings and rooms still carry the names of individuals with ties to slavery and colonialism. The university has taken steps to investigate this legacy, not only as a form of institutional self-reflection, but also to consider the question of apologies.

However, the advisory committee concluded that issuing apologies would be premature, as there was still too little known. Slavery, as a concept, was seen as too narrow to fully capture the

broader issues of limited freedom and colonial exploitation. They called for more in-depth research.

## Recommendations from the report

- Strengthen research on colonial and slavery-related histories
- Integrate these themes in education
- Develop outreach and community engagement strategies and maximize impact through institutional change

One of the key challenges is the variety of perspectives across different faculties, which makes a unified approach difficult. Each faculty has its own stance and priorities regarding this issue. While several plans have been implemented, the question remains: what are these efforts leading to? Should the current model be re-evaluated? Are there too many stakeholders involved? More focused guidance may be necessary.

## Resources

- [Steering Committee on the Slavery Past – UU](#)
- [UU Initiatives on the Slavery Past](#)

## Q&A Highlights

### Q: What advice would you give to Leiden University?

- It's clear that progress depends heavily on individual faculties, they must develop their own initiatives and find funding. While this autonomy can foster creativity, there's a need for stronger organizational direction.
- Universities should consider formulating shared questions that guide all faculties, while still appreciating the diverse approaches they might take.

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## Session 3

Lecture by Dr Larissa Schulte Nordholt (Wageningen University)

The colonial university

### **Wageningen University between the Netherlands, Suriname and Indonesia, 1876-2020**

Dr. Schulte Nordholt opened her talk by highlighting the significant lack of awareness within Wageningen University (WUR) regarding its colonial past. Her presence at the symposium, she

noted, was due to grassroots student activism—but she emphasized the lonely nature of this academic endeavor: “I stand here alone, just one postdoc.”

She explained that universities, including WUR, played a key role in upholding colonial systems through both education and research. Scientific endeavors often served to legitimize colonial hierarchies, including the defense of slavery and racial theories. European knowledge systems were positioned as universal, marginalizing Indigenous and local knowledge.

## Was Wageningen University a colonial institution?

Yes. Wageningen University was deeply embedded in, contributed to, and benefited from colonial structures well into the 20th century. The institution's current international prestige is, in part, built on this history.

### Historical timeline and key events

- **1876:** Establishment of national higher agricultural education in the Netherlands—formally oriented toward domestic agriculture but functionally directed toward colonial agricultural development.
- **1882:** First course on colonial commodities introduced.
- **1896:** Colonial education becomes institutionalized.
- **1903:** Arrival of the first Indonesian student at Wageningen.
- **1918:** Wageningen gains university status.
- **1920:** Approximately 65% of students are enrolled in colonial-focused programs.
- **1950:** Wageningen begins exporting its expertise globally, rebranding colonial knowledge as “development aid.”
- **1970:** Rise of student movements calling for decolonization and institutional accountability.

### Colonial connections: sites and networks

- **Medan, Sumatra:** In 1894, an experimental tobacco station was established. The rise of plantations necessitated plant virology to combat pests. Jan Honing, who worked in Medan, later became a professor of genetics at Wageningen and a central figure in its colonial academic network.
  - Quote from Honing: “If Darwin hadn’t already said that man descends from the ape, then I would have liked to say it myself... I’ve seen ape-like faces among the Chinese, Bataks, Javanese, and many mixed-race people...”
  - This horrifying quote illustrates the deep-rooted racism in early scientific discourse at WUR.
- **Pasuruan, Java:** From 1887, an experimental station focused on the sugar industry operated here. A sugar laboratory was established in Wageningen in 1903. Sugar, capitalism, and conservative politics were intertwined in both the Dutch East Indies and Wageningen’s academic agenda.

- **Buitenzorg/Bogor, Java:** From 1918 onward, agricultural research focused on native crops. Wageningen graduates were heavily involved in establishing agricultural schools and extension services. By 1940, a full agricultural faculty was founded, centered around rice and smallholder farming.
- **Suriname (Wageningen Town):** Established in 1949 as a mechanized rice farming settlement, intended to serve Dutch food security through development aid. The project involved deforestation and environmental degradation. Rice varieties engineered at WUR, often based on knowledge developed in Java, were exported to Cuba, Tanzania, Malawi, and other countries—this continued into the 1960s.
- **Paramaribo, Suriname:** A colonial research center was opened in 1965 to provide Wageningen students with hands-on tropical agricultural experience and to support faculty research. This initiative faced increasing criticism from students in the 1970s.

A quote from a contemporaneous source summed up colonial unease:

“Serious consideration has been given to appointing a professor of tropical agriculture... one who can be trusted not to steer things in an overly ethical direction—one that might challenge capital and, ultimately, Dutch authority.”

## Current challenges and institutional blind spots

- There remains a significant knowledge gap and institutional denial regarding WUR’s colonial legacy.
- Anti-colonial and decolonial student movements have reignited interest in these questions.
- There is an urgent need for collective research, reflection, and institutional responsibility.

## Ongoing initiatives at Wageningen University

- Active research and dialogue on decolonization
- Organization of conferences and public lectures
- First academic publications forthcoming
- Engagement with university leadership and external stakeholders
- Policy advice regarding historical accountability
- Development of new curricula integrating colonial history
- Advisory collaborations with local municipalities
- Community engagement and education strategies

## Q&A highlights

**Q: Was the agricultural knowledge developed in Java also applied in Suriname (e.g., Marienburg)?**

- This is currently being researched.

**Q: To what extent was tropical agricultural knowledge transferable between colonies?**

- Wageningen's rice research, for example, shows clear knowledge circulation between Java and Suriname, including pest control methods developed in Java and applied in Paramaribo.

**Q: How did the idea for your book come about?**

- Originally, I wanted to focus on specific actors or communities, but the scope proved too large. Eventually, I structured the book around key geographic sites instead. Some elements had to be let go in the process.

**Q: How do we move from documentation to action? What does knowledge translation look like?**

- This remains a vital question. Knowledge alone is not enough. Institutions need strategies to operationalize historical insights into meaningful change—through education, policy, and structural reform.
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## Session 4

Lecture by Dr Henk van Rinsum (Utrecht Universiteit)

Utrecht University, Colony and the Cape

### **Extracting, accumulating, controlling, and circulating knowledge through the Via Sacra**

Dr. Henk van Rinsum presented insights from his book, *Utrecht University and Colonial Knowledge: Exploration, Exploitation and the Civilising Mission since 1636*. The book explores how Utrecht University, from its earliest days, was embedded in the colonial project—actively shaping, legitimizing, and benefiting from colonial knowledge systems.

### Motto and mission

- University Motto: *Sol Iustitiae Illustra Nos – Sun of Justice, Shine Upon Us*.
- This motto reflects an Enlightenment-era belief in bringing "light" or "truth" to the world—a notion that often masked paternalistic and imperial motives.
- The 4 C's of the Colonial Mission:
  - Christianising
  - Civilising
  - Commercialising
  - Later: Cooperation

- These terms encapsulate the ideological justifications for colonial expansion and exploitation.

## Theoretical models and frameworks used

- Diffusionist / Modernization Model – Suggests knowledge and progress flow from “developed” to “underdeveloped” societies.
- Dependencia Theory – Highlights how colonial and capitalist systems kept colonies economically dependent.
- Postcolonial Discourse – Examines how colonial power continues through language, knowledge, and cultural dominance.
- New Imperial History – Focuses on networks of power, knowledge, and identity in colonial contexts.
- Networks and Inequality Model – Traces how institutions and ideas circulated unevenly.
- Global Intellectual History – Investigates how global academic thought has been shaped by empire.
- Edward Said’s Orientalism was also referenced: Orientalism can be understood as a corporate institution for managing and producing knowledge about the Orient. It authorized Western representations of the East, creating a system of domination, authority, and structured inequality.

## Colonial ideology and enlightenment

Van Rinsum highlighted the *double edge of Enlightenment*: While the movement promoted education and knowledge for all, it was often used paternalistically to justify colonial rule—under the belief that colonized peoples must be “enlightened.”

## Historical context and examples

- Jan van Riebeeck (1652): Symbol of early Dutch colonization at the Cape.
- 1658: First enslaved people arrived in the Dutch Cape Colony, taken from Angola on a Portuguese ship.
- Enslaved individuals came from Africa, India, Madagascar, and Indonesia, forming a society structured by forced labor and racial hierarchy.

## Colonial society composition

- Freeburghers
- Enslaved peoples
- Indigenous groups: Khoikhoi, San, Xhosa, Zulu
- Mixed-race communities

## Key colonial perspectives and strategies

- Mission: Confession and Conversion

- Theological arguments from the Reformation era claimed that all humans possessed an innate sense of deity—thus justifying missionary efforts.
  - Example quote: “There are no people so wild and barbarous that they do not know anything of a deity.”
  - A racialized spiritual hierarchy emerged: “Brown-skinned but white-souled Orientals.”
- Michiel Christiaan Vos (1759–1825): Recognized as the first Black writer in the Dutch colonial context. He wished to preach across Africa, but slave traders rejected his mission, fearing empowerment of the enslaved.

## Exploration and exploitation

- Colonial science centered on the collection and classification of knowledge about colonized lands and peoples:
  - Activities included: collecting, classifying, weighing, measuring, ordering, and mapping.
  - These practices fed into systems of control, extraction, and commercial expansion.

## Institutional involvement

- Dutch East India Company (VOC): Although its core interest was trade, it also played a role in structuring colonial knowledge. It often limited academic research that didn't serve economic aims.
- 1795: The VOC collapsed amid growing critique and corruption.
- In the 19th century, the Netherlands developed a national higher education system. This system was closely linked to its growing colonial ambitions, particularly in Indonesia.

## Utrecht University's role

- Two Utrecht academics, G.J. Mulder and F.A.F.C. Went, were instrumental in forging ties between the university and the colonies.
- The university trained colonial civil servants at the so-called “*Oil Faculty*”, co-funded by the oil and sugar industries in the Dutch East Indies. This became known as the Utrecht Colonial School.

## From colonialism to development cooperation?

Van Rinsum ended with a reflection on the ambiguous continuity between colonial ideologies and modern forms of “development cooperation.” Many of the values and frameworks underlying today's global aid structures can be traced back to colonial educational and religious missions. The central question remains: Is “development cooperation” merely a continuation of the colonial “ethical policy” under a new name?

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# Session 5

Lecture by Dr Fenneke Sysling (Leiden University)

## **Rabin, a Dayak from Sintang (Kalimantan), and other colonial human remains in the university's collections**

Dr. Fenneke Sysling presented her research on human remains collected during the colonial period, now held in university collections. Her talk focused on how colonial-era body parts, particularly those from the Dutch East Indies, ended up in anatomical and anthropological archives, specifically at Leiden University.

She referred to the catalogue of the anatomical museum, which includes references to preserved skin. One example noted whether white and Black skin differed biologically, demonstrating the era's fixation on racial distinction.

Between 1826 and 1888, a racial skull collection was created. The question she raised was: how did these remains come to be housed in European institutions?

She outlined four main ways in which human remains were obtained:

- Through the medical infrastructure of the colonies
- As a result of war and punishment
- During scientific expeditions
- Confiscated, bought, or stolen from local communities where skulls often held cultural or spiritual value

Both the Dutch Empire's imperial power and the scientific obsession with race are evident in this collection.

Her research emphasizes the tension between presence, the visible evidence of colonial violence, and absence, the silenced voices of those whose remains were taken, catalogued, and studied without consent or context.

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# Session 6

Lecture by Dr Gani Jaelani (UMC Utrecht)

Research plans

## **Diagnosing the legacy of Utrecht Medical School in the Dutch colonies**

Dr. Gani Jaelani presented his research plans focusing on the historical role of Utrecht's medical faculty in Dutch colonialism. His presentation began with a reflection on existing literature and a central question: To what extent was the medical faculty complicit in supporting colonial structures?

## Research focus

- Problem: The medical faculty upheld colonial power structures through its training and practices.
- Method: Archival research into medical records, correspondence, and institutional history.
- Aim: To investigate how medical knowledge and practices contributed to the colonial project.

## Historical cases

- 1822: Doctors were explicitly trained to work in both the East and West Indies.
- Curricula included specialization in colonial diseases, tailored to serve imperial interests.
- Ties to colonial trade policies were strong, particularly in relation to pharmacies that supplied colonial services.
- Over time, the connection deepened, human remains were collected for scientific research, often without consent.
- The research distinguishes between two main actors:
  - The medical faculty itself
  - The doctors it trained, who went on to apply this knowledge in colonial contexts.

## Why this matters

Dr. Jaelani stressed the importance of examining how medical knowledge both reflected and reinforced colonial hierarchies. This connects directly to the principle of epistemic justice, the recognition that knowledge systems can perpetuate inequality.

He posed a vital question: What remains, and what has changed since colonialism?

- Access to healthcare today remains deeply unequal, particularly in postcolonial regions. Medicine has not only served as a tool for healing but also for control, exploitation, and the exercise of power.
- Understanding this legacy is essential to addressing current health disparities and decolonizing medical education and practice.