

[This sample begins with excerpts from one of the introductory essays in the Dutch-language edition from 2020, "Frimangron" by Tessa Leuwsha. These are followed by the author's own foreword, "'Sranang,' Our Homeland," and most of the first two sections of Part I of the book, "The Era of Slavery." All footnotes have been left out of this sample. Word choices such as "Indian" and "negro" reflect the historical usage of Anton de Kom and the sources he quotes.]

**Tessa Leuwsha**

FRIMANGRON

I am standing in front of the birthplace of Anton de Kom in the Frimangron district of Paramaribo. It is a corner building. On the sidewalk in front of the house stands a memorial plaque with a quotation from the famous Surinamese resistance leader: "Sranang, my fatherland, I hope to see you again the day all your misery has been wiped out of you." Less than fifteen feet behind it, the two-story wooden house looks broken down. Drab vertical beams hang askew from nails, and part of the zinc roof has caved in. The shutter of one window is open, a curtain pulled aside; this is still someone's home. A banana tree beside it half-conceals the low house next door. Out of the passageway between the two homes, a skinny Black man comes out of the backyard. His hair and beard are grey. His T-shirt is too big for him, as are his flip-flops. Holding a flower rolled up in newspaper, he sits down on the sidewalk in front of the former De Kom family home. I'm curious who the flower is meant for. He pays no attention to me—so many people take photos here.

In the 1930s, hundreds of people stood here waiting to speak to Anton de Kom. Many were unemployed; others were workers struggling to survive on meager wages. After the abolition of slavery in 1863, the Dutch authorities had rounded up contract laborers in what were then British India and the Dutch East Indies to work on the plantations of Suriname. Later, when the agricultural economy went into decline, those laborers followed in the footsteps of the once-enslaved people, flooding into the city to find work. But Paramaribo, too, was riddled with poverty. They hoped for a chance to sit down at the little table in the back garden with the man who had returned from Holland, bringing a fresh wind of resistance.

Cornelis Gerhard Anton de Kom was born in Paramaribo in 1898. He became a bookkeeper and, for a while, worked at the offices of the Balata Compagnie, which was in the business of harvesting balata, a kind of natural rubber. De Kom was struck by the difficult lives of the balata bleeders: laborers, mostly creoles (the Surinamese term for the descendants of freed slaves), who tapped the rubber trees in the stifling heat of the rainforest. He quit and, in 1920, left for the Netherlands, where he married a Dutch woman, Petronella Borsboom. As one of the few dark-skinned people in the Netherlands, he came into contact with Javanese nationalists who were fighting for independence in the Dutch East Indies. That

was where he first felt the winds of freedom blowing. He began to write articles for a Dutch Communist Party magazine; at the time, that was the only political party with a staunch anti-colonial stance. His articles and the revolutionary thrust of his arguments caught the attention of the Surinamese labor movement. In those circles, he was most popular for criticizing reduced wages for contract laborers.

When De Kom and his wife and children—four by that time—sailed back to Suriname in late 1932 to look after his ailing mother, who died during their voyage, like-minded Surinamers were eagerly looking forward to his visit. In the backyard of his childhood home, he set up a consulting agency and took meticulous notes on his visitors' grievances. The Javanese, who felt disadvantaged relative to other Surinamese, were the group most likely to turn to "Papa De Kom," as they soon began to call him. Their heartfelt wish was that De Kom would lead them back to Java like a messiah. He wrote about this in *We Slaves of Suriname*: "Under the tree, however, the parade of misery passes my little table. Pariahs with deep sunken cheeks. Starving people. People too weak to ward off disease. Open books revealing the story, so painful to tell, of oppression and deprivation." De Kom submitted their grievances to the colonial authorities, but the unrest he caused was anything but welcome to Governor Abraham Rutgers. On February 1, 1933, Anton de Kom led a group of supporters to the offices of the administration. He was arrested on suspicion of attempting to bring down the regime.

[...]

Anton de Kom's son Cees, born in 1928, was four years old when the family arrived in Suriname. After his father's arrest, a crowd of protesters gathered in front of the administration offices to demand his release. The police opened fire. Two people were killed and twenty-two wounded. For more than three months, De Kom was held prisoner in Fort Zeelandia. By historical irony this was the very fort, built by the Dutch, where slaveholders could pay to have their purportedly unwilling slaves disciplined. The Dutch colonial authorities outdid both the English and French in their use of corporal and capital punishment: whipping, the cruel torture known as the "Spanish billy goat," the breaking wheel, and burning alive. The period of captivity must have fanned the flames of protest in Anton de Kom.

After he was exiled to the Netherlands, the intelligence service kept an eye on him. De Kom was seen as a communist, even though he never joined the Communist Party. He had the greatest of difficulty finding work. "I remember my father was always writing," Cees tells me, "wearing his pencil down to a stub to save money. When the Second World War broke out, he joined the resistance and wrote for the illegal press. On August 7, 1944, he was arrested by the Germans. My mother sat looking out of the window for hours, hoping he would come back. But he never came. My brother and I were deported to Germany, where we worked on a farm. After we returned, we were told we had to leave again, this time to the Dutch East Indies. Restoring law and order there, that was our mission. And my father had sympathized with the Indonesian fighters! I wrote a letter to the minister of defense asking for an exemption. My mother hadn't heard from my father since the liberation of the Netherlands. The most recent news we had was that he was being held in the German concentration camp Neuengamme. I didn't want to go before we found out what had happened to him, but this argument cut no ice with the Dutch authorities. Not until 1950 were we officially informed that my father had died in the camp on April 24, 1945."

[...]

To throw off the shackles of Dutch rule—that was De Kom's objective when he wrote the book that has now become a classic: "No people can reach full maturity as long as it remains burdened with an inherited sense of inferiority. For that reason, this book aims to rouse the self-respect of the Surinamese people." In 2020, the forty-fifth anniversary of Surinamese independence, those words are as powerful as ever. In *We Slaves of Suriname*, De Kom was far ahead of his time. Not only Suriname, but also the Netherlands, still had a long way to go. The country that the Netherlands had ruled for more than three hundred years would remain a colonial blind spot for many years. Only in the past few years has Suriname come to occupy a modest place in the Dutch collective consciousness—a shift that has not always proceeded smoothly.

[...]

The work of Anton de Kom is remarkable both for its eloquence and for the courage with which he pointed out injustices. It is a tirade against the prosaic commercial mindset, the narrow-mindedness, with which a country and its people were exploited. It is not a pretty story, but it is our shared story. Dutch forefathers in the colony drank, fucked, and tortured their lives away, partly out of boredom and frustration with the tedium of plantation life. Such decadence would have been unthinkable in their own strait-laced fatherland. De Kom, whose history lessons in his school days in Suriname had revolved around famous Dutch privateers like Piet Hein and Michiel de Ruyter and who had been required to memorize the names of the series of governors who had imported his ancestors from Africa in the holds of ships, tried to penetrate deep into the psyche of the slaveholders. He is hot on their trail, breathing down their necks, without letting up for a moment. You can practically see De Kom writing, leaning forward at the edge of his seat, pressing his pencil stub to the paper. His style is supple, essayistic, and sometimes lyrical, with unexpected imagery. Using the writer's toolkit, he suffuses his work with color and emotion. And not for a moment does he forget his background; in the pointed words of an *odo*, a Surinamese saying, the cockroach cannot assert its rights in the bird's beak.

When did the dismissal of this history actually begin? For many years, anyone who brought it up could count on a patronizing response, something along the lines of "But look what the French or the British did, or the Africans themselves!" It's like the excuses made by buyers of stolen goods when caught red-handed. They point an insistent finger at the thief and the fence: it was *them*, not *me*! Yet without demand, there would be no supply. In a few places, monuments are being erected to commemorate the suffering, and explanatory labels are being placed next to statues of role models fallen into disgrace. But turning around and looking your own monster straight in the eyes still requires some effort.

*We Slaves of Suriname* still holds a mirror up to us today. The book delivers a message about might versus minority, capital versus poverty. It is easy enough to find present-day parallels; just look at

the wretched situation of refugees in the Netherlands and other Western countries. Or Chinese shopkeepers working from early in the morning until late at night, in the clutches of a cartel. Or the drug rings in Latin America that extort money from ordinary citizens, or trafficking in women, or child labor in Asian textile factories. It is always systems that create the framework, and within them there are individuals who profit. Oppression also depends crucially on stereotyping: us against the strange, unknown other. The rise of right-wing leaders around the world is, in large part, based on this us-and-them thinking. The Other is lazy or criminal, or both. "Do we want more or fewer Moroccans?" Dutch populist politician Geert Wilders has asked. Even firmer language was used in the Dutch campaign slogan "Act normal or go away." [Translator's note: This 2017 slogan, addressed to immigrants, was part of a successful election campaign by the VVD, which is generally seen as a mainstream right-wing libertarian party and is now the largest party in the Dutch governing coalition, in the parliament, and in the polls.] "America First," but who does America really belong to? All these sound bites suggest a presumed right of ownership. De Kom was only too able to see through this type of spin. He followed the anonymous word "slave" with the phrase "our fathers." Our fathers, not mere nameless creatures.

What human rights activists will follow in the footsteps of Anton de Kom, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and Nelson Mandela, standing up to challenge supposed rights still taken for granted? Are the voices of opposition loud enough? Anton de Kom exposed the mechanisms of unfreedom. And of poverty. There lies the power of his work, even today.

On the sidewalk in front of Paramaribo's most famous hovel, the old man's flower is drooping in the heat. He rises to his feet and shuffles into the street in his oversized slippers.

## WE SLAVES OF SURINAME

by Anton de Kom

### "SRANANG," OUR HOMELAND

From 2 to 6 degrees south latitude, from 54 to 58 degrees west longitude, it stretches between the blue of the Atlantic Ocean and the inaccessible Tumak Humak Mountains, which form the watershed with the Amazon Basin, clutched between the broad expanses of the Courantyne and Maroni Rivers, which separate us from British and French Guiana, rich in formidable forests, where the yellow lapacho, the barklaki, the kapok, and the prized wacapou grow, rich in wide rivers, where herons, wiswis, ibises, and flamingos find their nesting places, rich in natural treasures, in gold and bauxite, in rubber, sugar, bananas, and coffee... poor in its human population, poorer still in humanity.

Sranang—our homeland.

Suriname, as the Dutch call it.

Their country's twelfth and richest, no, their country's poorest province.

Between the coast and the mountains our mother, Sranang, has slumbered for a thousand years and a thousand more. Nothing has changed in the dense forest of her unknown hinterlands.

The rainforests of the uplands seem sunk in a centuries-old silence, coming alive only at nightfall with the murmuring hum of thousands of insects like secret music. More romantic, but also more savage, is the landscape of the savannahs and the riverbanks. Winding curtains of vine hang from the trees and block the road; wild orchids bloom; here live the skittish pachiras, capuchin monkeys balance on branches, parrots let out their shrill cries, the jaguar lurks, and an armadillo probes for ants with its pointed tongue.

For thousands of years, the dark forests of Mother Sranang have been waiting, untouched and undeveloped. They are home to strange creatures, whose names are hardly known in the West: tree-dwelling tamanduas and prehensile-tailed porcupines, vireos and tanagers, the tigriman and the Finsch's euphonia, golden-collared toucanets on the high tops of the palms, and swarms of butterflies: the

magnificent blue morphos and the yellow and orange-colored cloudless sulphurs often rise to just below the crowns of the trees.

People?

People are scarcely present to enjoy this beauty.

In the lowland live the Waraos, the Arawaks, and the Caribs, Indian tribes now weak and dying out, powerless descendants of the indigenous people pushed out of the best places by the whites. In the highland, the Trios and the Wayanas. Their beadwork, artful braiding, and finely decorated ornaments for dancing all express their innate sense of beauty.

There are around 2,450 Indians in all, and around 17,000 maroons or forest negroes, of whom we shall speak later.

Twenty thousand people at most inhabit Sranang's interior, an area almost five times the size of the Netherlands. Beyond that, the forests are peopled solely by sloths and agoutis, by spider monkeys, tapirs, and capybaras, by the howler monkey, the anteater, and the anaconda.

History has passed Mother Sranang by; three centuries of Dutch colonization have left her interior untouched. Her river rapids power no engines; her fertile land is unsown, the rich treasures of her forests unexploited; in abject poverty, in shabby ignorance, the wild tribes live amid a natural bounty that goes to pointless waste.

Whites rarely venture into these wildernesses, where only the Indians and the forest negroes know the way. Along the river courses, a discharged French soldier, a British rowdy, or a Dutch naturalist sometimes penetrates the landscape. He plunges his knife into the white skin of the balata tree, releasing its precious, milky sap. But the former soldier returns to the coast, the rowdy drinks himself to death in a whisky haze by his lonesome campfire, the Dutchman is rowed back downriver by maroons in a canoe; the wilderness is left behind, the wounds in the rubber trees scar over, and the deserted camp is overgrown with creepers.

Of Dutch influence, Dutch energy, and Dutch civilization there is not a trace in the Surinamese interior: not a road, not a bridge, not a house in which Dutch history is inscribed. The whites felt nothing but fear in the face of that wilderness, in which their escaped slaves sought refuge. A pathetic, neglected railway, which goes nowhere and was never completed, is the sole witness to a short, delusional dream of gold.

The wide plains of the savannahs, the forests, and the tall granite mountains of Mother Sranang have been sleeping for hundreds of centuries.

For them no history has yet been written.

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

Red—

"Look, mother," the little white boy says in astonishment in Magdeleine Paz's wonderful book *Because I Am Black*, "you see? The negroes have red blood too!"

White—

The color of Crommelin's peace treaties.

And blue?

The color of our tropical sky, at which we gaze up through the dark leaves of our trees, to read in the twinkling glow of the stars the promise of a new life?

No, it is the deep blue of the Atlantic Ocean, across which the slave ships carried their African prizes, their living merchandise, our parents and grandparents, to their new homeland Sranang.

## THE ERA OF SLAVERY

### The arrival of the whites

"The ancient people that, to its own ruin, showed hospitality to the wealth-crazed crew of a Spanish caravel and to a man named 'bearer of Christ.' A people hounded..."

Albert Helman

"Fortunate the people," a French writer says, "that knows no history."

The history of Suriname dates back to the discovery of the Wild Coast (the Guianas) by the whites in 1499.

We know from Hartsinck how the Wild Coast looked in those days. It was then home to an Indian people who were lord and master of their realm. "Being hospitable," Wolbers writes in his *History of Suriname*, "they often received visits from other members of their tribe, during which the conversation tended to revolve around the cherished topics of hunting and fishing. They possessed a certain inborn honesty and righteousness that shone through all their actions; they even displayed a courtesy and friendliness that one would not expect of uncivilized peoples. When they conversed with each other, their tone was always calm and gentle; they never spoke scornful words to one another. They also had some understanding of the motion of the stars, which was very useful to them for finding the way in the wilderness."

This description remains consistent with what explorers tell us today about the character of their descendants, the Trios and the Wayanas. They too are calm and gentle people, among whom intense emotional outpourings and uproarious laughter are rarely observed; they too are renowned for their warm generosity, their courage, and their enterprising spirit; they too are excellent boat pilots with expert knowledge of the rainforest. And yet they are nothing but the vestige, stunted in its natural development, of what was once an independent and happy people.

What drove the whites to these "wild" shores? What sense of mission possessed them? What tidings, what happiness, what civilization did they have to offer this free and happy people? Did they, the first Spaniards who visited our coast, come to bring Guyana the blessings of the auto-da-fé and the Inquisition? Did they bring the same toleration, in the name of Christ, that Spain was then showing to

Jews and Moors? Or the white civilization of the breaking wheel, death by burning, and other tortures? Was that the legal basis for their invasion? Or was their sole reason for coming, with their red and gold flags flying, to bring the message that gold is always bought with blood?

We will allow the facts to answer.

In 1492, Columbus discovered America, and soon the exaggerated accounts of the new land and its riches exerted an irresistible pull on Europeans of every class and rank.

Professor Werner Sombart has written about them in *Der Bourgeois*: "One special form of piracy were the voyages of discovery, which became ever more multitudinous, especially from the fifteenth century onwards. Although these journeys were prompted in part by all sorts of idealistic motives, scientific and religious interests, the desire for glory, and the thirst for adventure, nevertheless, the strongest (and often the only!) incentive was profit. In essence, such voyages were nothing more than well-organized raids, the aim of which was the violent plunder of our overseas territories. It was especially after Columbus had made his discoveries and brought real gold dust home with him from his travels, along with the legend of the gilded prince, that El Dorado, the land of gold, became the overt or unspoken destination of every expedition. Superstitious treasure-hunting and superstitious alchemy united with the superstitious hope that a land existed where gold could be gathered by the shipload, and the result was an irresistible urge for conquest."

[...]

## **El Dorado**

El Dorado.

The Land of Gold.

Even today, the name has lost none of its wondrous power.

On the large passenger ship, a young doctor steps out into the night, his eyes dazzled by the lights of the ballroom, his thoughts swaying to the tipsy rhythms of the jazz band, and it seems to him as if he is the only living person to escape a frenzied gathering of display-window dummies.

He leans out over the rail and lets the night wind cool his temples. The inconstant light from a porthole projects weird flashes on the dark waves.

Veins of gold in granite.

El Dorado.

In the sound of the waves, the young doctor hears the distant song of the buccaneers, blowing in on the night wind from bygone ages.

He passes his days in his cabin, writing on the ship's immaculate stationery: recipes for American ladies suffering from seasickness and elderly gentlemen with liver trouble.

At night, when the jazz band falls silent, the sea wind is audible again, and only the hoarse shouts of few drunken planters can be heard from the smoking lounge, his heart comes alive with the madness of El Dorado.

In the night his good shirt, his tuxedo, his social position are all forgotten.

He feels a kinship with his ancestors, the wild raiders who hoarded gold in the holds of their ships, a kinship with the adventurers, the destroyers, the slave hunters.

Under the grey ashes of the daily routine, that same madness glows in the heart of every young white man: the feverish desire for El Dorado.

In 1499, Alonso de Ojeda and Juan de la Cosa reached the coast of the Guianas. Around the same time, Vicente Yáñez Pinzón discovered the mouth of the Amazon and the eastern Guianas. A rumor spread that far inland, a land had been discovered with immeasurable troves of gold and precious stones, and that the sandy shores of one infinitely large lake, named Parima, consisted entirely of gold dust.

Tempted by these rumors, Domingo de Vera undertook a voyage to the Guianas in 1593, claiming it for Spain with great ceremony on 23 April 1594. Commanders and soldiers knelt before a cross and offered up their thanks to heaven. "Then Domingo de Vera took a cup of water and drank from it; he took a second cup and threw it to the ground, as far as he could, drew his sword, and cut the grass around him, as well as a few branches from the trees, saying, 'In the name of God, I take possession of this country for His Majesty Don Philip, our lawful overlord!'"

This is also the earliest example of the misuse of God's name in the colonial tragedy. It was often said later, in Christian books, that the negro is not human, because humans are made in God's image and, after all, according to Bible scholars, God is not black...

So let us, here, as negroes, offer the assurance that we too believe we were not created in the image of the God whose blessing was always invoked by the whites of those days whenever they seized the land, bodies, and belongings of other-colored peoples.

The high expectations of the Spanish gold-seekers never became a reality. As no gold was found in the coastal areas, it was assumed that the natives were hiding it in the hinterlands. Armed men forced their way into the interior, and where the whites encountered opposition, they used bloodhounds, whose names have been preserved in the history books.

Yet El Dorado was never found.

And the embittered adventurers vented their wrath on the natives, depriving them of their freedom, binding them in chains, forcing them to labor, whipping them, and abusing them.

And when that race proved too weak to bring forth the treasures that the whites, in their frenzy, had believed would be theirs for the taking—when, beaten and abused, they died by the thousands—the Spanish in Suriname recalled the advice of Las Casas to import a stronger race than the Indians from Africa.

It was then that the slave trade began.

It was in those days that the first of our ancestors were brought to Suriname.

From that time onward, slavery in Suriname took shape. Each new ruler drove out the last—yet each one, after taking violent possession of the settlements of other Europeans, would begin by making the solemn declaration that under the new regime the right of property—which is to say, the right to use and abuse one's living chattels, to buy and sell our fathers and mothers—would still be held sacred and enforced.