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### **The Dutch Caribbean Connection**

I am honored and grateful to have been invited to PriceFest.

So much to say about your double career, for the greatest part a *joint* career (work & pleasure; plus lasting love affair) spanning more than 60 years. I will say something about how Rich and Sally inspired me, but I will make an attempt to do a bit more, by pondering the impact of their work in the Netherlands and Suriname.

I started working in Caribbean studies in the early 1980s—actually, on Cuban history, but once I got my first job, I had to switch to the Dutch Caribbean. I did my PhD with the famous Dutch Caribbeanist Harry Hoetink. I first met Sally and Rich in 1984, but Harry, who was their friend, was a precious link between us all the way until today.

By the 1990s, as I had started working on slavery in Suriname, I had of course read Rich's *Maroon Societies* and particularly *First-Time*, which blew me away. It was the kind of work combining the tools and concepts of both history and anthropology that I now understood as the ultimate goal. As something to emulate. I hasten to add that as much as this approach inspired me, I feel I never got near to that level of academic creativity and brilliance.

Rich and Sally: in my library, I have over 25 of your books, and believe it or not, I have read them all. Much of your work is on Suriname, and particularly about the Saamaka Maroons. Your love of Maroon culture is obvious and deep, but not without a critical gaze. I think here for instance of Sally's critical observations of Maroon machismo (if I may use that out-of-context concept) in *Co-wives and Calabashes*. Your admiration of Maroon arts is manifested not only in several books, but equally in your efforts to present Maroon arts in American and European museums. The work to realize these exhibitions, always in cooperation with Maroon artists, in turn inspired you to write several books such as *On the Mall* about the uneasy, sometimes hilarious, often also deeply embarrassing dynamics of intercultural exchange and misunderstandings. Of course, everything you discuss in that book pales in comparison to President Trump's present attacks on the Smithsonian, and on academia and culture at large.

Anyway, back to your work in museums, Sally's *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* brought that theme to a higher level of abstraction. When I come to think about it: over the decades, you somehow managed to turn everything you did and observed into yet another book. This amazing mix of anthropology, history, political engagement, and literary writing makes your work so fascinating. And deeply inspiring. And prize-winning, by the way.

I should say a few words about your political activism as well. This started in the civil rights movement while you were students, and has characterized much of your work since. Bringing

out culture is empathically a part of that. I remember a conversation we had decades ago in which you both deplored that many prominent scholars of the Caribbean, or the Afro-Americas at large, in the end didn't really care much about local cultures. You do, and not only about Maroon culture.

Your work on the French Caribbean likewise is incredibly rich in this respect, as is your work on the ways American and European societies “deal” with other cultures. Tragically, of course, these too are tales of cultures under threat – *bétonisation, merdonisation*, pardon my French ...

But your engagement was also directly political. Rich’s active participation in several court cases about brutal human rights violations against the Suriname Maroons in the years of military rule stand out in this respect, and there was more of that, too.

What impact did your work have in Suriname, and in the Netherlands? First, Suriname. I am not really sure how much impact your academic work has had among scholars in the country. The small Anton de Kom University has no departments of History or Anthropology; its priorities are elsewhere. In contrast, among Maroons and of course particularly among the Saamaka, your work has achieved something of an almost religious status. Books like *First-time* and *Alabi’s World* are considered as true renditions of what Saamaka history really was. I guess that’s what you can only get when you really win the elders’ trust, over many years. But your political activism also inspired genuine hostility and even outright death threats from the circles around the country’s military dictator (and later elected president), Desi Bouterse. That’s why you did not visit the country for 45 years. And the account you just published in the *New West Indian Guide* of your first return to Suriname, last year, does not really read like a happy trip down memory lane—much the opposite, alas.

What can I say about the impact of your work in the Netherlands? I asked two colleagues and friends of my generation that you know well: Michiel Baud and Alex van Stipriaan. Both recall how, as trained historians, they marveled at the ways you combined anthropology and history. And they mention how books like *First-time* and *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* inspired them and their students. How, through the juxtaposition of a range of different sources, from Saamaka oral traditions through colonial archives to Moravian diaries, you demonstrated the possibilities of truly incorporating multivocality in historical work. How “primitive” and “civilized” are nothing but constructions changing over time but invariably echoing deeply colonial ways of thinking. We got these points, and passed them on to our students. As I had the privilege of organizing various lectures you gave in the Netherlands, sometimes on the occasion of translations of your work, I can confirm that your audiences were invariably deeply impressed.

What about other colleagues? I am not so sure what to say. Several Dutch scholars of your generation made academic careers, or at least started their careers, by studying Maroon history or cultures. Their work never got the acclaim you won. Among younger scholars at universities and museums your reputation is excellent precisely because of your decades-long commitment to a

scholarship that was at the same time activist in nature. That's no doubt why you are still regularly invited for talks in the Netherlands.

It goes without saying that I learned a lot from you as well. Your books, of course. Even if my first full professorship, in Utrecht, was in Caribbean anthropology, I never became a real anthropologist—but as a historian, I benefitted enormously from your work, and not only on Maroons, Suriname, or African American studies. Your work on the *départements d'outre-mer* helped me to make sense of not only the French Caribbean, but equally about the non-sovereign Dutch Caribbean islands. In my inaugural address in Utrecht, over 30 years ago, I cited Rich's metaphor of Maroon knowledge as an endangered *sabiboto* (canoe of knowledge) to ponder the chilling effects of “modernization,” Caribbean-style.

Likewise, Rich's books on the French Caribbean have inspired my understanding of, and writing on, the cultural predicament of the Dutch Caribbean islands, and your joint work on not-really-that "civilized" Western places has helped me to understand my own country better, too. *Gran tangi* for all of that.

What about your observations about the Netherlands? This too was a subject that we discussed over the past decades during many visits – you over in the Netherlands, I with you in Martinique and in Paris, and a couple of times in conferences in the Caribbean or the U.S.

Perhaps I am overstating the point, but it continues to make me think, and sometimes worry. As it should, also because my type of scholarly work and sort-of-activism now as Professor of Colonial and Postcolonial History at Leiden University has brought me closer to political reckonings about the colonial past than I had ever thought I would venture. After editing books on the memory of slavery, I (co-)directed research projects on the colonial past of the cities of Rotterdam and The Hague and a huge project on Dutch policies, violence, and war crimes during the Indonesian War of Independence. Time and again, the results led to an official acknowledgment that the recorded history was very much at odds with a far too rosy self-image of a progressive, tolerant, non-racist, peace-loving nation. Presently I am directing a large research project on the colonial past of the Dutch monarchy, initiated and financed by King Willem-Alexander, who has demonstrated genuine leadership in this challenge of facing up to

the past. I am working enthusiastically and with conviction about the academic value and societal merits of this new project spanning over four centuries and the entire Dutch colonial orbit. Yet Rich's questioning keeps me from being too confident about the true significance of these attempts at historical reckoning. Sobering, but important.

Enough of that and back to the two of you. I may by now have said enough about your scholarship and activism. I don't want to overdo it, so no more on that. But I should mention one other dimension of your joint professional service, which is your work for the *New West Indian Guide*, or as you often call it, "The New *WIG*." In the early 1990s, this esteemed journal, published since 1919 and hence the oldest in Caribbean Studies, was moribund. Our mutual friend Harry Hoetink asked me to take over his position as managing editor, which I did mainly out of respect for him, but also because you assured me that you would continue as review editors. To cut a long story short, the best thing I did was to bring the journal to the KITLV and to insure that the journal would become an open access publication. My actual managing editorship, in contrast, did not last many years. Long ago, I convinced my colleague Rosemarijn Hoeft to take over this position, which she has fortunately held until this very day. She too sends her regards to this gathering.

*NWIG* has thrived, and the two of you have contributed to this in no small measure. Over the past decades, *NWIG* had boasted the richest and best book review section on Caribbean studies and possibly on all area studies of all times and places. And all of this simply because the two of you spent so much time on that, for years on end, in your own chosen time, without renumeration, drawing on a seemingly endless network of specialists on whatever. And of course, also for your yearly "Bookshelf" article, in which you review literally dozens and dozens of books each year, from poetry and novels to cookbooks and academic works. Many years ago I gave up the idea that one day I would be reading many of the books in the review section (which treats more than 100 book each year) and in 'Bookshelf.' It's simply far too much for any individual to swallow. But surely the two of you come closest to measuring and mastering that impressive corpus of knowledge that we know of as Caribbean or African American studies. You really encapsulate that particular *sabiboto*, too.

In all of this well-meant and well-deserved praise, I left what is perhaps most significant for last. Which is that you accomplished all of this together, for decades on end. Surely this doing virtually everything together has contributed to the brilliance and unrelenting energy of your scholarship and activism. But here I'd like to emphasize something else. It's really hard to think of any couple as close as the two of you. It's not for outsiders to speak of love supreme, but it's difficult not to come to that conclusion.