

Explaining the Keti Koti Table and the Keti Koti Dialogue Estafette



Picture: Keti Koti Table in Amsterdam Museum Gallery, May 5, 2013.

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After several centuries of colonialism, trade and slavery in both the East and West Indies, the Netherlands were late in abolishing slavery on July 1, 1863. This abolishment of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean is celebrated nationally only since a decade or so, after the national slavery monument was erected in Amsterdam, during so-called 'Keti Koti' – meaning 'breaking the chains' in Sranantongo (Surinamese language).

Even though the shared history of slavery has left many traces in both the black and white population of the Netherlands, Keti Koti does not really address those issues as it consists of a formal ceremony, followed by a music & food festival. Mercedes Zandwijken & Machiel Kestra, who developed the Keti Koti table, observed this lacuna particularly after having experienced several Jewish Seder tables. Although the period of Jewish slavery in Egypt is several millennia ago, Jews around the world do each year pause and reflect on that situation and discuss topics like liberty, identity, religion, culture, courage, suffering, and so on. These conversations are mixed with rituals which are connected to several edible ingredients (like the 'unleavened bread' –matzah- and the bitter herbs) and participants will together sing several songs and retell ancient histories. Interestingly, there are many varieties available of the Seder table as participants can include issues they deem relevant into the celebration, leading to feminist or ecological and other variants: the tradition is not just about history but also about the future and its connection to history. Having noticed how this tradition facilitates valuable conversations and connections while being open to innovation, Mercedes & Machiel decided to develop a similar kind of ritual for Keti Koti.

Since 2010, they have developed, organized and disseminated this Keti Koti Table and drawn attention from both black – mainly Dutch Caribbean – and white people in the Netherlands. Somewhat different from the Seder table, it is important that the Keti Koti Table focuses on the *shared* slavery history of black and white and can therefore only be successful if participants have a diverse background. Obviously, black and white participants will have different experiences with this problematic history: for black participants are usually well aware of the continued presence of racism, segregation and discrimination in the Netherlands while white participants often don't recognize that this history still matters. By exchanging experiences and discussing relevant topics, both groups have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the other group's perspective and to acknowledge these relevant differences and the specific challenges that come along with them. In the ritualized and safe context of this Keti Koti Table, these groups will engage in communication and end the silences about this shared past, present and future.

The Keti Koti Table

The Keti Koti Table is organized around a series of rituals and a meal. The main rituals are:

1. A prayer and libation to the ancestors
2. Participants then chew on kwasi bita, a Surinamese bitter tasting wood which makes them experience and reenact the bitterness of the past
3. Participants then rub each other's wrists with coconut oil to rub away the pain of being chained and with that the pain of slavery in general coursed
4. Meanwhile, participants or a choir will sing lamentations
5. Urged by questions from the youngest participant, a brief history of slavery and its abolition is being told by the participants

6. Emphasizing the importance of passing on such a (new) tradition, participants will pass on to each other the Ketu Ketu guideline “A Tori” (Story)
7. An extra seat with plate and cutlery is set of an unexpected guest, both in order to commemorate (former) fugitive slaves and to symbolize the importance of hospitality
8. Participants will then share a reconstructed meal for the enslaved
9. Through dialogue, participants will share personal stories and experiences with the history of slavery and its effects on the present
10. To underline the sweetness of freedom and hope for the future, participants will eat finally a sweet cassava coconut cake and chew sugar cane, while singing freedom songs
11. The end of the Ketu Ketu Table is signalled by puncturing 21 balloons, echoes of the 21 canon shots that were fired in 1863 during the slavery abolition ceremony



Every year, the Ketu Ketu Table is gaining in familiarity among different groups and cities as it is spread both bottom-up, by former participants who can download the ‘A Tori’ guide and organize a table at home, and top down, as Mercedes has successfully organized tens of tables in prominent locations like several city halls, museums (including the Amsterdam Museum, the National Maritime Museum, the Africa Museum, City Archive of Amsterdam, The Hermitage, the Jewish History Museum), art institutions, universities, etc. Again and again, participants tell that although being hesitant about conversations about this difficult, complex and sensitive topic, they felt that the Ketu Ketu Table offers a safe and inspiring context to do so.

Currently (Spring 2016), Mercedes and Machiel are working on a new edition of ‘A Tori’ which will include some stories, songs and rituals that have been presented and discussed during the past experiences, in which people from many different countries – including Haiti, the U.S. and Brasil – participated. In doing so, they demonstrate that the Ketu Ketu Table is meant to remain a ‘living tradition’ that can be adjusted to local contexts and narratives.



The Keti Koti Dialogue Estafette

After tens of Keti Koti Tables, Mercedes had heard many stories of discrimination and segregation in the Netherlands. Besides, she had become temporary involved in a national association of minority groups that organizes a national demonstration against discrimination and racism and asks for a public and political discussion of these topics. She came to realize that the lack of engagement of the white cultural and political establishment with Dutch slavery history and its aftermath forms an obstacle for making social and political progress. To promote their participation in the annual Keti Koti commemoration, Mercedes has established a Keti Koti Dialogue Estafette. The estafette starts the day before the commemoration at 9 o'clock in the morning and continues until the morning of July 1, 9 o'clock and takes place in front of the large 'slavery monument', devoted to the commemoration of the abolishment of Dutch slavery, located in an Amsterdam park. 24 couples of white and black origin engage for an hour in a facilitated dialogue, structured around a set of questions focusing both on personal experiences and ideas about the social challenges with regard to the history of slavery, racism and discrimination. Each dialogue couple will start with a few rituals from the Keti Koti Table, with chewing the bitter kwasi bita and rubbing each other's wrists with coconut oil, before engaging in dialogue.



Picture: Keti Koti Dialogue Estafette July 1, 2015 with Prof.dr. Gloria Wekker (U Utrecht), Mercedes Zandwijken, National Ombudsman Mr. van Zutphen

At the moment, Mercedes is developing this Keti Koti Dialogue Estafette into a method that would be suitable to discuss discrimination and segregation within organizations and commercial firms, by letting co-workers engage in such dialogues.

Whether as a table for a group or as a dialogue estafette, these Keti Koti events offer alternative ways of meeting the 'other', learning from each other's experiences and perspectives and of seeking novel ways of interaction and co-existence. Indeed, each individual or group is invited to tailor the Keti Koti Table or Dialogue Estafette to her or his needs and desires.

Information, including the guide 'A Tori', about the Keti-Koti Table can be found here <http://ketikotitafel.nl/> - still only in Dutch. Facebookpage: <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=ketikotidialoogtafel>
Machiel Keestra academic homepage: <http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.keestra>