

**Testimonies of Enslavement: Sources on Slavery from the Indian Ocean World**, edited by Matthias van Rossum, Alexander Geelen, Bram van den Hout and Merve Tosun, London and New York, Bloomington, 2020, 320 pp., (hardback), ISBN 978-1-350-12235-2

The edited volume on *Testimonies of Enslavement: Sources on Slavery from the Indian Ocean World* is a welcome provision of new source materials to the still largely unstudied past of slavery and slaves in the early modern Indian Ocean context. Matthias van Rossum and his research team at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam offer an empirical taster and conceptual *pars pro toto* of a larger project: 10 edited court cases from the Court of Justice to Cochin in Dutch together with their English translations from a larger corpus of 298 “criminal records” archived for the period of 1680 to 1682 and 1707 to 1792, many of which relate to slaves. The larger project is still ongoing at the IISH and will result in a digital database and indexing system to make researchable the *VOC Court Records Cochin, 1681-1792*. This edited volume offers 10 angles on the diverse experiences of slaves under the jurisdiction of the Dutch Company State as seen from Cochin on the South Indian Malabar coast and provides a first foray into the still largely uncharted territory of what van Rossum calls a ‘global subaltern social history’ (p. 15). It invites us into the quotidian interactions of the enslaved, enslavers and those who enforced the institutionalisation of their legal interactions.

As the conceptual introduction sets out, the selected cases illuminate the notion of ‘*slaafbaarheid*’ (enslaveability) an emic term that the editors develop into a conceptual category to capture the various contexts and experiences of slavery. As the editors point out, the central interest that permeates these documents is the ‘legitimacy of the transaction’ of enslavement and the ‘(il)legitimacy of the enslavement’ (p. 16) itself. From an analytical point of view, they propose to study ‘the different mechanisms of coercive labour relations’ by distinguishing ‘localizing regimes’ such as serfdom and ‘mobilizing regimes’ such as slave-markets that transform humans into enslaveable beings (p. 11). At the same time, an inquiry

into these regimes is also supposed to further our understanding of larger normative forces such as notions of 'caste' or *jati* and how they shaped those societal interactions and vice versa.

The selected court cases provide a kaleidoscope of experienced, contested and negotiated 'enslaveability'. The types of documents that make up the cases vary as well: we encounter confessions, witness-statements and transcripts of interrogations, certificates of enslaveability (*olas*), confirmation sentences, depositions, complaints, extracts of resolution. The documents of each case are carefully edited in Dutch followed by an English translation. Dutch key terms are retained in the English translation such as *coelij* ("coolie"), *meijd* ("girl", here "enslaved female") and *schagerije* ("local tavern") and explained in a glossary at the end, which makes reading the translated documents cumbersome, but nevertheless introduces and focuses on essential social historical vocabulary in Dutch in use at that time. We learn about cases where family members sold their kin into slavery, as in the affairs of Itti Commera, who was abducted by his cousin Fernando, a Christian *Mocqua* (member of a local fisherman community). Other cases investigate falsified slave *olas* (*slaafola*, "proof of someone's slave status"), instances where such documentation was missing and others where these documents held up in court to justify a person's legal slave status. Kidnapped children are brought into view, different shades of legality that people involved in the slave trade tried to uphold, as well as how different authorities, from the Dutch Company state to local polities on the Malabar coast, interacted with each other.

These court documents invite us into an exciting world that we generally do not encounter with other narrative and more quantitatively inclined source materials. It includes a range of social groups, for example local Christian communities (such as the St Thomas Christians) and different merchant communities. Studying these documents is a great way to "break the silence" that Markus Vink still detected in his article on the "The World's Oldest Trade": Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century" in

2003 with regard to the study of Indian Ocean slavery. For example, interrogation reports reproduce the voice of the *meijd* Calij from the Bettua caste, who flees from her landlord fearing to be sold, and converts to Christianity by with the help of a Jesuit priest. After due process she is released, not handed back to her landlord, but instead allowed to ‘search for a livelihood’ (p. 206). As a Christian convert, she falls under jurisdiction and protection of the Company. Here, religious affiliation translates into allocation to a judicial sovereignty. Seen from Calij’s point of view we can only presume that the many layers of legal obligations in Malabar enabled subaltern subjects like her to exercise her agency and change her social circumstances.

Thus, we do not only hear the multiple social voices of those people who stood in the court rooms in Cochin, who were deposed and interrogated. We also witness their encounters with legal procedures of Dutch jurisdiction and how these procedures shaped a part of their lives. At the same time, defendants and witnesses emerge as active historical agents from these documents. They employ their chance to speak out and record their point of view to negotiate their fate in the established legal framework. Hopefully future research will engage with these sources to write histories of those underrepresented people.

The volume is a great first step to rehabilitate the past of enslaved subjects and the conditions that shaped their lives. This collection of source materials will be of great interest to students and scholars of global slavery, legal history, South Asian studies and the growing field of Indian Ocean social and cultural histories.

Christopher D Bahl ([christopher.d.bahl@durham.ac.uk](mailto:christopher.d.bahl@durham.ac.uk)) is an Assistant Professor in South Asian History at Durham University. He studies early modern Arabic manuscript circulation to explore transoceanic histories of the western Indian Ocean region over the early modern period.