

Cape Slaves in the Paper Empire of the VOC

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This article examines the ways in which the voluminous archive of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) controlled, constructed and delimited the presence of slaves in the paper world of the VOC empire. The extensive paper archive of the VOC recorded slaves in ways which matched the concerns of the administration, such as enumeration in census returns and as objects for inheritance or sale in estate inventories. Nonetheless, historians have been able to uncover considerably more information about their experience and agency. Much detail is provided in criminal and (to a lesser extent) civil judicial records, which explains the emphasis on individual and collective resistance in the slave historiography of the 1980s. More recently Cape historians have adapted techniques of reading across the grain in order to explore the mentalité and cultural worlds of Cape slaves. However, the VOC archive was not only a record of the ruling classes. Slaves also used writing for their own purposes, either in alternative networks of literacy in Asian languages or by turning Dutch papers into documents for their own advantage, some of which has found its way into the official documents. The combination of these records with oral traditions and community memories have enabled Cape historians to transcend the apparent silence of the official archive.

In 2010 I was involved in making a televised documentary about an uprising of slaves being transported from Madagascar to the Cape Colony in 1766 aboard the ship *Meermin*.¹ *Slaveship Mutiny* used three people to help piece the re-enactments together and comment on what happened. Each had a different angle on the incident. The marine archaeologist Jaco Boshoff was a scientist, analysing ship plans and material objects in the laboratory, carrying out an airborne magnetic trace search for the wreck and leading the diving expeditions. As a historian I was shown inside the store-room of the Cape archives, poring over voluminous original manuscript documents on the uprising and the fate of its leaders. An activist Lucy Campbell was the slave descendant, walking the streets of Cape Town in search of her roots and bringing her inherited experience and personal understanding of the past. She identified especially with the leader of the revolt, Massavana, 'the first freedom fighter', and the film ends with her search for his grave in the cemetery on Robben Island. But his traces, like the wreck of *Meermin* itself, are elusive. At one point I show her the mark that

1 *Slaveship Mutiny*, written and produced by Joe Kennedy, directors Nic Young and Joe Kennedy, Off the Fence co-production with ARTE France in association with THIRTEEN and WNET.ORG, 2010 (52 minutes).

Massavana made as signature to his testimony, preserved in the judicial records of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) archive. The director carefully choreographed the shot and Lucy was not told in advance that such a document existed. When she saw the only physical trace of Massavana still surviving, the camera captured her gasp of breath and the tears that filled her eyes.

This incident epitomises three complementary aspects of the presence of Cape slaves in the paper archive of the VOC. One is elusiveness: Massavana left only a single mark in the kilometres of shelving at the Roeland Street depot, which required (the film implies) years of diligent searching by a professional historian. Another is the power of that mark for Lucy, and by implication for us all, nearly 250 years later. From such sparse traces, the story of the Meermin slaves was unearthed and brought back to life. Slaves in the VOC paper world might be elusive, but they are not absent and can be evoked, if only in a spectral form, by historians, film makers and activists today.² Thirdly, the staged portrayal of an encounter between the 'expert' historian who is imbued with access to the archive's inner workings and the 'outsider' who encounters it as an emotional revelation suggests that the archive is not a neutral space open to all but is rather an 'active site where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed.'³ The authority of the historian, the film suggests, comes from his presence in the archive and his ability to interpret it, that of the activist from her kinship ancestry and her emotional engagement.⁴

This filmic device is problematic. Historians of Cape slavery have certainly not remained locked in archive storerooms, detached from the emotional and contemporary implications of their subject of study. Much of the impetus behind the burgeoning of Cape slave historiography since the 1980s and 1990s came from the desire of engaged academics to make the wider public aware of a hitherto neglected past. Similarly, slave descendants have researched in the archives and made important contributions to our understanding of their history.

However, the point I wish to pursue here is the power of the VOC archive in shaping and delimiting awareness of that past.⁵ Much has been said about the ways in which the archive, and perhaps especially the colonial archive, imposes an authority over the past that needs to be carefully negotiated if we are to escape its powers of inclusion – and exclusion.⁶ The archive only records what 'people once thought worth recording and what other people once thought worth holding onto or suppressing,

2 Mbembe argues that those brought 'back to life' from the archive are spectres that cannot speak for themselves but only through another (the historian) and so in this sense they 'remain silent'. A. Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and Its Limits' in C. Hamilton, V. Harris, J. Taylor, M. Pickover, G. Reid and R. Saleh (eds), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 25–6.

3 T. Cook and J. Schwartz, cited in F. Blouin and W. Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 159.

4 C. Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 153.

5 For discussion of the politics of Cape slave history see N. Worden, 'The Changing Politics of Slave Heritage in the Western Cape, South Africa', *Journal of African History*, 50, 2009, 23–40.

6 Amongst others in a wide literature, see P. Joyce, 'The Politics of the Liberal Archive', *History of the Human Sciences*, 12, 2, 1999, 35–49; A. Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and Its Limits' in C. Hamilton et al (eds), *Refiguring the Archive*, 19–26; J. Anderson, '(Colonial) Archives and (Copyright) Law', unpublished paper, Sawyer Seminar on Knowledges, Ways of Knowing and the Postcolonial University, Social Anthropology Department, University of Cape Town, 18 February 2009; C. Hamilton, 'Forged and Continually Refashioned in the Crucible of Ongoing Social and Political Life: Archives and Custodial Practices as Subjects of Enquiry', *South African Historical Journal*, 65, March 2013, 1–22.

forgetting or passing on.⁷ This necessitates the practice familiar to the post-positivist historian of ‘reading *across* the grain’, that is extracting from archival traces material that was not intended by its creators but is nonetheless evident ‘between the lines’ as well as hunting outside the archive for what has been forgotten or suppressed. But it also demands, as Stoler has stressed, reading ‘*along* the archival grain’, that is, seeing how the form and structure of the documents both reflected and shaped power structures and decision processes.⁸

The Cape’s Paper Archive

These approaches are highly pertinent to an examination of the presence of Cape slaves in the VOC archive. Writing, Adrien Delmas has argued, was ‘an essential tool’ of the VOC, initially evident in the ship logs and navigational guides which enabled its maritime trading activities, and then for matters on land once the VOC had established trading posts and colonies, in the form of day journals and dispatches sent by local commanders to the chambers of the Company in the Netherlands as well as judicial and administrative documents retained in the locality.⁹ The VOC archives in its colonies were thus considerably more centralised than those in the Netherlands itself, where church, local municipality and civic organisations all produced their own documents that served a wide variety of public functions.¹⁰ Moreover, at the time the VOC records were ‘the preserve of a closed elite readership’ and jealously guarded as secret documents whose content needed to be kept from trading rivals. Only subsequently did they become the basis of an extensive paper archive now scattered across the diverse regions where the VOC once had a presence.¹¹ A proportion of the documents sent from the colonies and trading stations are now preserved in the Nationaal Archief in The Hague, although many financial and local papers were destroyed on the orders of the Dutch government in the 1830s on the grounds that they were no longer needed.¹² However, copies of many of these are preserved in Cape Town, where the VOC records are assembled in the Cape Archives Depot, housed without an apparent sense of irony in the former Roeland Street jail.¹³

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- 7 K. Appiah, ‘Identity, Politics and the Archive’ in X. Mangcu (ed.), *Becoming Worthy Ancestors: Archive, Public Deliberation and Identity in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), 99.
 - 8 A. Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, *Archival Science*, 2, 2002, 87–109; A. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009). The emphasis is mine.
 - 9 A. Delmas, ‘From Travelling to History: An Outline of the VOC Writing System during the 17th Century’ in A. Delmas and N. Penn (eds), *Written Culture in a Colonial Context: Africa and the Americas, 1500–1900* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2011), 96.
 - 10 H. Looijesteijn and M. van Leeuwen, ‘Establishing and Registering Identity in the Dutch Republic’ in K. Breckenridge and S. Szreter (eds), *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History*, Proceedings of the British Academy 182 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 211–51.
 - 11 C. Coetzee, ‘In the Archive: Records of Dutch Settlement and the Contemporary Novel’ in D. Attridge and D. Attwell (eds), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 139 cited in H. Twidle, ‘Writing the Company: From VOC *Dagregister* to Sleight’s *Eilande*’, *South African Historical Journal*, 65, 1, 2013, 146. The fullest study of the construction of a writing empire by the VOC is A. Delmas, ‘Les voyages du récit: Culture écrite et expansion Européenne à l’époque moderne: Le cas de la Compagnie Hollandaise des Indes Orientales’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 2010), with comment on the construction of a secret VOC archive at 171–3.
 - 12 M. A. P. Roelofs, *Van Geheim tot Openbaar: Een Historiografische Verkenning*, inaugural lecture (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1970). I am grateful to an anonymous reader for this point and reference.
 - 13 For an index and analysis of the Hague VOC archive see R. Raben and J. Pennings (eds), *De Archieven van de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (1602–1795)* (The Hague: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 1992). On the symbolism of the Roeland Street building as ‘an entanglement of building and documents’ see Mbembe, ‘The Power of the Archive and Its Limits’ in Hamilton et al (eds), *Refiguring the Archive*, 19.

The Cape material has been better preserved than in any other region of VOC activity outside the Netherlands and in consequence its archive was inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World register in 2005. In this sense the VOC archive in Cape Town is a prime example of Mbembe's characterisation of the archive as 'not a piece of data but a status'.¹⁴ This is the consequence of the importance that the VOC records held to the descendants of settler South Africans, and especially Afrikaners, who traced their family roots and cultural heritage to the VOC period. The day journals, starting with Commander Van Riebeeck's first 'diary' page, are the prized possession of this archive, carefully rebound in handsome red leather volumes as the 'founding document' of the white South African nation.¹⁵ The statutes (*plakaten*) of the Council of Policy were transcribed and published between 1944 and 1951, and the minutes between 1957 and 1981.¹⁶ Wills, household inventories and estate records of VOC burghers are carefully indexed and catalogued, enabling detailed genealogical reconstructions.¹⁷ This is in marked contrast to archives in Indonesia, Sri Lanka or India, where independence from colonial rule downgraded the importance attached to VOC records, not least because these countries possessed a rich indigenous written archive. As a result the current state of preservation and accessibility of VOC documents in Asia is decidedly less impressive than in Cape Town.

The UNESCO inscription was thus a recognition of the importance of the VOC Cape records. But their significance was changing. Since the 1980s a major process of historical revisionism led Cape historians to shift attention from white settlers to include a wider spectrum of the Cape's population. This was in response to both the contemporary political and social upheavals of the South Africa in which they were living and the international trend of writing history 'from below'.¹⁸ Several of them produced materials to encourage wider public use of the archives that related to the history of slavery.¹⁹ A major initiative was the transcription of estate papers, inventories, auction records and convict rolls for online access, chosen in part because

14 *Ibid.*, 20.

15 The 'Van Riebeeck diaries' were transcribed and published as founding documents of the nation shortly after the formal implementation of apartheid and at the time of the Van Riebeeck festival in 1952. L. Witz, *Apartheid's Festival: Contesting South Africa's National Pasts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Cape Town: David Philip, 2003), 109–10 and C. Coetzee, 'In the Archive' in Attridge and Attwell (eds), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, 141–3. This is paralleled by the veneration of archival documents in other settler nations. J. O'Toole, 'Between Veneration and Loathing: Loving and Hating Documents' in F. Blouin and W. Rosenberg (eds), *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 44–8.

16 M. Jeffreys (ed.), *Kaapse Plakkaatboek*, 6 vols, (Cape Town: Cape Times, 1944–51); G. C. de Wet et al (eds), *Resolusies van die Politieke Raad, 1651–739* (Cape Town: Cape Times; Pretoria: Government Printer, 1957–81).

17 G. C. de Villiers and C. Pama, *Genealogies of Old South African Families*, 3 vols, revised edn (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema, 1966); J. Heese and R. Lombard, eds, *Suid-Afrikaanse Geslagsregisters/South African Genealogies*, 17 vols (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council; Stellenbosch: Genealogiese Instituut van Suid-Afrika, 1986–2008).

18 N. Worden, 'New Approaches to VOC History in South Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 59, 2007, 3–18.

19 For example, N. Worden, R. Versveld, D. Dyer and C. Bickford-Smith, *The Chains that Bind Us* (Cape Town: Juta, 1996), C. Cornell, *Slaves at the Cape: A Guidebook for Beginner Researchers* (Bellville: History Department, University of the Western Cape, 2000, 2nd edn 2005) and R. Shell, *From Diaspora to Diorama: The Old Slave Lodge in Cape Town* (CD-rom, Cape Town: NagsPro Multimedia, 2013).

they revealed the names and details of slaves.²⁰ Another was the regular publication of newspaper articles on slave stories written by the historian Jackie Loos and based on the records of the National Library and the Cape Archives.²¹ Interest in the VOC archive was in these ways being reshaped by the democratising context of South Africa.

But locating slaves in the Cape's VOC archive is not an easy task. Very few of the catalogues and inventories produced by Cape archivists mention slavery at all. In part this is because the records are arranged according to the offices and departments that produced them, none of which specifically focused on the slave population, but also because they are usually ordered chronologically rather than by subject matter. The only archive inventory to deal specifically with slaves is that of the Slave Office, set up by the British after the end of VOC rule to supervise the registration of slaves in 1816.²² Moreover, some pertinent documents have been lost. For example, the records of the fiscal's office, responsible for the landing and sale of newly arrived slaves, were never transferred to the archives, nor were they sent to the Netherlands. Others are haphazardly preserved, such as the miscellaneous estate papers that seem to have been swept from the desks and drawers of colonists after their death and never sorted since.

The absence of slaves in the archival inventories also reflects the awareness and interests of the archivists that compiled them. Although slaves are omnipresent in the documents, just as they were in VOC Cape society itself, they were not of much interest to either archivists or historians before the 1980s. Those constructing the VOC archive, both at the time of their writing and at the time of their preservation and cataloguing, were primarily concerned with other categories of colonial description, although a notable exception was the interest of Marie Kathleen Jeffreys, a Cape writer and archivist in the 1930s and 1940s, in the early history of Cape Islam and its connections to the Indian Ocean world from which many slaves originated.²³ However, it was overwhelmingly the importance of the VOC records to white settler heritage that ensured they were carefully preserved. A good example of this is the fact that criminal court records, a key source for slave history, were kept from the VOC period because they included snippets of information about the first settler colonists, but were weeded for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when they were thought to be only about uninteresting and unworthy underclasses. Slaves survived in the paper archive by default rather than by design.

20 The project began under the aegis of TANAP (Towards a New Age of Partnership) by transcribing the *Resolusies* of the Council of Policy and was completed in 2004. It was reorganised in 2005 as the 'Transcription of Estate Papers at the Cape' project in association with the Nationaal Archief in The Hague, and initially funded by the Netherlands consulate-general in Cape Town and later by the Dutch embassy in Pretoria. The transcribed materials are available at <http://www.tanap.net/content/activities/documents/index.htm> (accessed 13 September 2013). The project produced a guide to the inventories which stressed their value for the history of women, slaves and other 'hidden lives'. C. Carohn and A. Malan, *Household Inventories at the Cape: A Guidebook for Beginner Researchers* (Cape Town: Historical Studies Department, University of Cape Town, 2005).

21 J. Loos, *Echoes of Slavery: Voices from South Africa's Past* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2004).

22 On the significance of finding aids and inventories to the construction of the archive, see E. Yakel, 'Archival Representation' in Blouin and Rosenberg (eds), *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, 158–61.

23 M. Samuelson, 'Orienting the Cape: A "White" Woman Writing Islam in South Africa', *Social Dynamics* 37, 3, 2011, 363–78. On the role of archivists and the ways in which access categories determine their accessibility, see T. Cook, 'Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory' in Blouin and Rosenberg (eds), *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, 170–1.

As a result some have claimed that slaves left few traces in the VOC's written archive and that we need to search elsewhere to recover their history. While there is indeed much of high significance outside the official archive that can be learnt through approaches such as historical archaeology, collection of oral traditions and examination of privately owned family papers, the VOC paper empire has nonetheless been read by slave historians with considerable insight. It is the purpose of the rest of this paper to explore how this has been done, read both along and against the archival grain.²⁴

Identifying Slaves in the Archive

There are no complete lists of slaves to match those of VOC employees or free burghers. The only relatively complete documentation is contained in the *opgaaf* rolls, collected every year by local officials, which record the names of every male head of household (and sometimes that of his wife) and widow in the colony, together with the numbers of children, *knecht* servants and slaves, livestock, horses, crops and weapons that they possessed (see Figure 1). They do not include people that the VOC considered outsiders, notably the indigenous Khoisan labourers who worked alongside slaves on many farms of the colony.

These records have their advantages. They reveal the level of slave ownership in the colony and its variations over time and region. They give an idea of the unequal gender ratios in the slave population and the number of children. But they do not record individual slave names so we have no idea who the numbers refer to and where they came from, whether the '3' slaves recorded on a specific farm in one year are the same '3' listed in the next or whether one has been sold or died and replaced by another, or whether the children are parented by the adult slaves or not. The *opgaaf* have thus been used to provide valuable serial and comparative demographic and economic data but they are highly impersonal and only useful for broad generalisations.²⁵ Moreover, like all statistics, they are unreliable. The *opgaaf* was not intended to be a census but rather a record of produce to be used for taxation purposes. Slaves were not taxed, and there was therefore no particular reason why owners should under-report their numbers, but neither was there any particular advantage or incentive for them to be accurate. Appearance in the *opgaaf* conferred neither status nor benefit, and particularly not in relation to slave ownership. They were records of enumeration rather than registration and in this the *opgaaf* contrasted with the slave registers collected by the British authorities in the 1820s, which were used to assess owner compensation claims.²⁶

24 There is a parallel here to the experience of recovering slave voices in colonial archives elsewhere. See, for example, L. Dubois, 'Maroons in the Archives' in Blouin and Rosenberg (eds), *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, 291–300.

25 For example, P. van Duin and R. Ross, 'The Economy of the Cape Colony in the Eighteenth Century', *Intercontinenta*, 7, 1987, 1–166; N. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), esp chapters 3 and 5; R. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social history of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press; Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1994), esp appendix 3.

26 For this distinction and the benefits of registration, see S. Szreter and K. Breckenridge, 'Recognition and Registration: The Infrastructure of Personhood in World History' in Szreter and Breckenridge (eds), *Registration and Recognition*, esp 13–21.

Wijzig berlegt

N. V. Leijgenen

Op Voorgelede hoofde Oorveen

1	slavijnges gesl.	Titus	Van de Laak
1	—	Anthony	Mallebaars
1	—	Jochem	—
1	—	Jacob	Madagascar
1	—	Cydon	Boegis
1	—	fortuyn	Bally
1	—	Isak	Boegis
1	—	Cobus	de Laak
1	—	pieter	—
1	—	Cupido	—
1	—	Marten	Timor
1	slavinne	Lena	de Laak
1	—	Anna	—
1	—	fathryn	—
1	—	Mariana	—
1	—	Dina	—

— 2400 —

Op Voorgelede buijtenposten

1	slavijnges gesl.	Isak	van Batavia
1	—	Abraham	Bengalen
1	—	Pedro	Mallebaars
1	—	Arend	Madagascar
1	—	Dam	Damney

Transporteere Op 7235. —

Figure 2: Slaves listed in the estate inventory of Hendrick Willem van der Merwe and his deceased wife, Aletta Keijser, 6 October 1750. WCA, MOOC 8/7.11

1775.²⁸ They could also be known by different names in differing contexts. In 1776, the slave Julij was called Julij van Timor in Stellenbosch, where he lived and worked, but Julij van Boegies by the Council of Justice in Cape Town. Sometimes slave names were changed merely because the writer of the document forgot what they were or was uninterested in remembering them properly.²⁹

The transcription of estate inventories has made available a new resource for those searching for individual slaves in the VOC records. They are usually named, and sometimes with details such as names of their partners and children, or their occupations, but the way in which they are recorded is telling of official attitudes. They are listed as objects to be possessed and itemised, alongside furniture, livestock and clothing (see Figure 2). Moreover the inventories are not complete records of the whole colony: they were only drawn up when estates were left intestate or where legal disputes over inheritance occurred. They can thus be a frustrating source for those wishing to trace ancestors or kinship links. Slave ownership as here recorded has instead been used primarily to assess patterns of wealth distribution among the settler population.³⁰ The inventories once again emphasise how the VOC archive was built around the concerns of the Company and its burgher settlers while the slaves were only by chance itemised as inheritable possessions.

Life Stories

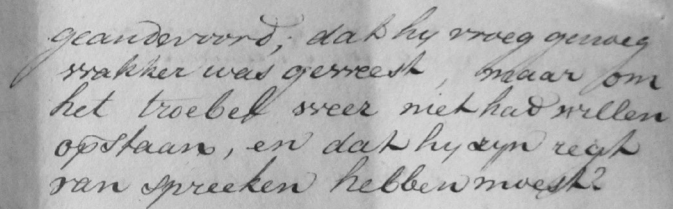
Sources such as the *opgaaf* and estate records can thus reveal the omnipresence of slaves in the VOC Cape but tell us little about their individual lives and experiences, since these were of minimal interest to the authorities. The Cape archive lacks personal accounts such as slave diaries, autobiographies, letters and stories that have so enriched our understanding of the slave experience in other colonial societies. Yet there is an important alternative. The records of the Cape Council of Justice, including testimonies given in thousands of criminal cases, are extensively preserved. These include defences by slaves in cases brought against them, evidence given by them in the trials of others, and frequent reference to their activities in the testimonies of their owners and those who knew or encountered them. As in many other areas of historical scholarship, legal cases of this kind have become a mainstay of a new social and cultural history of Cape slavery, since, in the words of one leading historian, 'virtually nowhere else is such rich documentation, such detailed evidence, to be found'.³¹ Specialist historians have long used such documents, and the publication in 2005 of transcriptions and translations of a small sample made them more widely

28 Record of the sales of a female slave, Western Cape Archives and Records Services (WCA), Miscellaneous (M) 49, Serrurier Papers (n), also translated in Worden et al, *The Chains that Bind Us*, 31. This slip of paper, found by researchers in the 1980s, was missing from the archival file in 2013, another indicator of the changing nature of the paper archive.

29 For this and other examples, see N. Worden and G. Groenewald (eds), *Trials of Slavery: Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from the Criminal Records of the Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1705–1794* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2005), xi, n 5.

30 J. Fourie, 'Slaves as Capital Investment in the Dutch Cape Colony, 1652–1795' in E. Hillbom and P. Svensson (eds), *Agricultural Transformation in a Global History Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2013).

31 N. Penn, 'History from Crime: Criminal Records, Microhistory and Early Cape Society', inaugural lecture, University of Cape Town, 11 September 2013.



gandevord. dat hy vroeg genaeg
makker was gerreest, maar om
het troebel weer niet had willen
opstaan, en dat hy eyn recht
van spreken hebben moest?

Figure 3: Extract from the interrogation of Caesar van Madagascar. WCA, CJ 447, 586

available to other scholars.³² Judicial records have also been the basis of novels, plays and films about Cape slavery, such as *Slaveship Mutiny*, because they enable stories to be told about individuals, a development which Carli Coetzee has characterised as ‘the archival turn’ in creative writing on the period.³³

The judicial records vary in how far they record slave voices. Some are *eijsschen*, or summaries of cases made by the fiscal to present the case for a conviction. But others are the original cross-examinations of the accused and (less frequently) witnesses. Although hardly natural conversations, nonetheless through them the modern reader can feel closer to slave lives, thoughts and experiences. Sometimes this is in striking ways. When Caesar of Madagascar told his owner in 1793 that ‘I was awake early enough, but because the weather was bad I did not want to get up, and I must have my right to speak’, he was not only resisting the demands of early morning work but also asserting his right to be heard as an individual. This angered his owner, who sjambokked him. Caesar retaliated by seizing the whip and breaking it, an action which led to his conviction. Yet it was not only Caesar’s physical actions that concerned the Council of Justice, but also his insistence when being beaten that ‘he would not keep quiet and he would have his right to speak and that his baas should stop hitting him’, alarming words and sentiments at a time of revolutionary atmosphere in the Atlantic world and ones which still resonate with us today.³⁴ (See Figure 3.)

The concern of the judicial authorities at slave subversion means that the criminal records are rich sources of information about forms of resistance such as escape plots and runaways, arson, poisoning or less visible forms of protest such as working

32 Worden and Groenewald (eds), *Trials of Slavery: Selected Documents*. For example, the translated cases from *Trials* are used in M. Lenta, ‘Sentencing Slaves: Verdicts of the Cape Courts, 1705–94’, *English in Africa*, 35, October 2008, 34–51; J. Murray, ‘Gender and Violence in Cape Slave Narratives and Post-Narratives’, *South African Historical Journal*, 62, 3, 2010, 444–62; and F. Vernal, ‘Discourse Networks in South African Slave Society’, *African Historical Review*, 43, 2, 2011, 1–36.

33 Coetzee, ‘In the Archive’, 152. This includes novels such as A. Brink, *Chain of Voices* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) and *On the Contrary* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1993) and Y. Christiansë, *Unconfessed* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2007), films such as *Slavery of Love* (Third World Films and Afrikan Connection Productions in association with the South African Broadcasting Corporation, directed by John Badenhorst, South Africa, 1999) and *Proteus* (Big World Cinema and Pluk, directed by John Greyson and Jack Lewis, South Africa and Canada, 2003) and the dance and drama performance *Cargo* (produced by Mark Fleishman, Magnet Theatre, 2007). Many of these highlighted the instability of slave voices in the judicial evidence. *Cargo* in particular exposed the limitations of a paper archive.

34 WCA, CJ (Council of Justice) 447, Interrogatie van Caesar van Madagascar, 26 July 1793, 586.

slowly or breaking tools. It is these sources that revisionist slave historians of the 1980s used to focus on resistance and violence in VOC Cape slave society.³⁵ But the records are not only about conflict. All of them reveal a wealth of detail about living and working conditions, emotional relationships that slaves forged with one another and with others, and the complexity of relations between slaves and their owners ranging from loyalty and support, love matches and elopement to antagonism and murder. This kind of information is often incidental to the crime that the case ostensibly addresses and is therefore less influenced by the pressures under which the evidence was given.³⁶

Yet judicial records, as social historians have readily recognised, are not unmediated descriptions. They were written to secure convictions. In the inquisitory judicial processes of the VOC the accused had to confess his or her crime before the case was brought to the council for sentencing.³⁷ The interrogations are therefore designed to produce confessions, not to impartially cross-examine. Witness testimonies are recorded to add substance to the guilt of the accused and so rarely cast doubt on the evidence put forward by the fiscal examining the case. In the case of slaves, proceedings were carried out in a language they did not always perfectly understand, although sometimes Malay or Portuguese translators were provided.³⁸

As academic writers, novelists and filmmakers have been acutely aware, these judicial records are constructed stories which reveal as much by their silences as by the details inked on the page. The VOC fiscal presenting the case against the accused and the witnesses whose evidence is presented were involuntary story tellers. Like all narrators they ordered events to create an impression of logic, causation and motivation that would convince their audience.³⁹ For this reason their accounts contained gaps, exaggerations, reshuffling of events and reorganising of time. They were also subject to the vagaries of human memory, either accidental forgetting or deliberate suppression of awkward evidence.

One example may stand for many. In 1749 Jan du Buisson, a farmer in the Franschhoek valley, was told by one of his (unnamed) slave cattle herders that 'there must be deserters maintaining themselves in the vicinity of the river or the mountain' since he had discovered fish nets and animal snares as well as a hut made of shrubs. Together with his brother David, another fellow farmer and several slaves, Du Buisson searched the hut and kept watch through the night but found nothing. It was only the next morning that they spotted a slave

who was at once asked by the burgher David du Buisson if he was Reijnier of Matthijs Krugel, to which the same answered: "Yes!"; adding that he had been supporting himself in the mountains for about seven or eight years

35 Notably R. Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1983) and N. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

36 For examples see the references cited in Worden and Groenewald (eds), *Trials of Slavery*, xvi–xvii.

37 *Ibid.*, xxiii–xxiv.

38 On this issue, for slave testimonies in the VOC records from Ceylon see K. Ekama, 'Slavery in Dutch Colombo' (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Leiden, 2012), 76.

39 Steedman, *Dust*, 56–7 and 147–8.

and that he had maintained himself with trapped dassies and fish from the Berg River, whereupon they took this slave Reijnier prisoner and brought him to the prison in Stellenbosch.⁴⁰

When questioned by the Council of Justice, Reijnier told a remarkable story. He had fled from the farm of his owner ‘fully twenty years ago now’, after stabbing him with a kitchen knife, and had been living for 16 years in the mountains around Franschhoek and then for ‘some years’ in the mountain near Du Buisson’s farm. According to the court record,

The confessant declares finally that during all of this time he had not spoken to a single person, and had maintained himself with dassies and fish, which he had caught with implements he manufactured to this end. Thus confessed in the Dutch language, which the confessant speaks and understands reasonably well.⁴¹

Reijnier also explained the circumstances that had led to the stabbing 20 years earlier. His owner’s wife had incessantly whipped Sabina, Reijnier’s daughter, with a sjambok and on one occasion tied her into a torturous position before doing so. Other slaves on the farm had taunted Reijnier: ‘You are such an old *jongen* and have helped to pay off this farm, you can plough and do all sorts of other work so well, and yet you can endure such maltreatment – if this *meijd* had been our daughter, we would have taught the *baas* differently.’ As a consequence, when his owner later beat Sabina with a broomstick, Reijnier ‘out of dejection and grief’ stabbed him and fled.⁴² By the time he was captured, Reijnier’s owner, his wife and Sabina were all dead. Only his wife, Manika van Bengal, now aged 60, survived and she stated that ‘in all these years did not learn, nor hear, the least thing [about him], not knowing any better whether he had long since died.’⁴³

This case is rich in detail for the historian of slavery. It reveals the existence of a slave family in a society where slave marriage was not legally recognised, with gruesome details of physical punishment and torture, the emotional turmoil of a slave father defenceless against his owner’s maltreatment of his daughter and taunted by fellow slaves for his inaction, and survival as a runaway for 20 years in the mountains around the farm. But it is more than this. Although Reijnier’s account may not have been as self-conscious, in many ways it does resemble the pardon tales of ordinary people in sixteenth-century France as analysed in Natalie Zemon Davis’s renowned *Fiction in the Archives*. Reijnier was also pleading, in this case for his life. He constructed a ‘fiction’, in Davis’s sense of a crafting of a narrative of events rather than a

40 WCA, CJ 357, Testimony of Pieter Reijnertsz, 8 January 1749, translated in Worden and Groenewald (eds), *Trials of Slavery*, 268–9.

41 WCA, CJ 357, Criminele Processtukken, 14 January 1749, ff 7–9, translated in Worden and Groenewald (eds), *Trials of Slavery*, 267–8.

42 *Ibid.*

43 WCA, CJ 357, Testimony of Manika van Bengalen, 9 January 1749, f 12.

feigning of them, set in a particular order and with a particular logic, to explain why he attacked his owner. Events that took place when he was away from the farm are reported through the story told to him by his wife and the other slaves. Although his testimony was written down by a clerk of the Council of Justice and Reijnier was replying to questions posed to him by others, its narrative qualities nonetheless reflect a memory and a self-justification in an account shaped by him.⁴⁴

In this a story is constructed through both the recorded events (capture of a runaway) and the memories of a slave and his wife of an episode that took place 20 years earlier. But in the process much is left unsaid. We do not know why Sabina was punished. There are hints that the farmer's wife had been drinking wine, but none as to why Sabina was the object of her anger. We may speculate reasons such as sexual jealousy but this was probably equally unclear to Reijnier and, as he would realise, of no interest to the council. What did matter to the authorities was how Reijnier had survived in the mountains without detection for so long. Here the record is also ambivalent. Why did he not attempt to run away from the colony altogether, as so many other runaway slaves had done? The imaginative historian might suggest that he could not bring himself to desert the places he knew, where his wife and daughter still remained. Yet Reijnier stressed that he had 'not spoken to a single person', while Manika claimed that she had not heard the 'least thing about him'. Yet Du Buisson asked on sighting him 'if he was Reijnier of Matthijs Krugel', so his story was well known and he was immediately recognised. Was Reijnier protecting slaves on the farms with whom he had indeed maintained contact (as was usually the case with slave runaways) and was Manika denying her knowledge of her husband's whereabouts to avoid her own conviction? For this is not a memoir, but a trial with very real consequences: Reijnier's pardon-style appeal had some effect since he was not executed, as were most slaves found guilty of attacking their owners, but instead he was sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. And after 20 years, how accurate were their memories of the events on that fatal day? What had they forgotten and what did they choose not to tell to the Council of Justice? To add to the complexity, how much Dutch did the Malagasy slave Reijnier know or remember after 20 years on the run, given that the council recorded that he understood the language only *reasonably* well?

It is sometimes claimed that court records can provide a biography of the poor, elements of life stories not revealed in other official sources.⁴⁵ As Reijnier's story shows, this is only partially the case. We have instead descriptions of certain moments – a dramatic day and the discovery of a runaway 20 years later – blurred by the passing of time, memory and the construction of a pardon tale. The record is silent about what led to these events and what happened between them. Reijnier gave some clues, such as his taunting by other slaves, but historians must use their imagination, prompted by hints from the record, to propose the reasons for his actions. This is the classic historiographical technique of the micronarrative, and the nature of the

44 N. Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). esp 3–4, 22 and 111.

45 Steedman, *Dust*, 45.

criminal records explains why such approaches have been used extensively by social and cultural historians of the Cape underclasses in the VOC period.⁴⁶

The reconstruction of slave lives is an elusive task. Since the VOC authorities cared little about the lives of its slaves before their arrival at the Cape, we know next to nothing about their early experiences. Only very occasionally might a chance comment find its way into a judicial record, such as the information given by a burgher jailed in 1706 for plotting against Governor Adriaan van der Stel, that a fellow prisoner 'in various conversations declared to the deponent that during his childhood years [in the area] between Suratte and Persia, when he was playing on the beach, he was carried off by the Dutch and was eventually sold as a slave'.⁴⁷ Slaves usually only appear in the court records in the form of a static snapshot for a brief moment in relation to a specific incident. The format of the VOC paper archive does not easily lend itself to the reconstruction of life stories.

Reconstructing subaltern biographies, as Clare Anderson has shown, requires not only the survival of records but also the meticulous knitting together of disparate pieces of evidence from scattered sources for 'their footprints are usually easy to see, but their footsteps are often extraordinarily difficult to trace'.⁴⁸ A major issue related to slaves is that they were migrants, forcibly transported across the Indian Ocean to the Cape. Often this was only one journey in a series of geographical dislocations. Traces of such transnational lives thus exist, if they exist at all, in archives scattered across the world. The structure of the VOC's paper empire can enable connections to be made between different archive collections, since links between stations were sometimes recorded, although such work is laborious. Kerry Ward is one of the few Cape historians to have succeeded in this regard, by tracing south-east Asian exiles and convicts between Batavia, Java and the Cape Colony.⁴⁹

As yet this has not been possible for slaves. Lack of digitalised and online resources of the kind that exist for VOC sailors, soldiers and officials makes the task particularly difficult. Databases of Cape convicts and of Company-owned slaves exist in CD format, although not yet online, but there are none for the majority of privately owned Cape slaves since no registers of them by name were kept by the VOC.⁵⁰ Funding was obtained from the British Library in 2008 to digitalise the nineteenth-century Cape Slave Registers but permission was refused by the South African archives on the grounds that it would dissipate the national heritage. National control

46 A major collection is N. Penn, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways: Eighteenth-Century Cape Characters* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999) and a special issue (28) of *Kronos* in 2002 included three such microhistories based on Cape criminal records: N. Penn, 'The Wife, the Farmer and the Farmer's Slaves: Adultery and Murder on a Frontier Farm in the Early Eighteenth Century', 1–20; S. Newton-King, 'For the Love of Adam: Two Sodomy Trials at the Cape of Good Hope', 21–42; and N. Worden, 'Forging a Reputation: Artisan Honour and the Cape Town Blacksmith Strike of 1752', 43–65.

47 WCA, CJ 2961, Testimony of Jacobus van der Heijden, 28 May 1706, f 73.

48 C. Anderson, 'Subaltern Lives: History, Identity and Memory in the Indian Ocean World', *History Compass*, 11, 7 2013, 503. The rewards of such perseverance are evident in the life stories contained in C. Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

49 K. Ward, 'Southeast Asian migrants' in N. Worden (ed.), *Cape Town Between East and West: Social Identities in a Dutch Colonial Town* (Johannesburg: Jacana; Hilversum: Verloren, 2012), 84–100; K. Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp chapters 5–6.

50 VOC employees are recorded in the online database of pay ledgers at www.vocopvarenden.nationaalarchief.nl (accessed 15 September 2013). For Cape convicts, see the TEPC (Transcription of the Estate Papers of the Cape) Project, MOOC (Master of the Orphan Chamber) Court of Justice Documents regarding convicts and exiles, CD-rom (Cape Town: Sentrum, 2010) and for the Company slaves, Shell, *From Diaspora to Diorama*.

of access to archives can be as much of an obstacle to such research as disparate sources.⁵¹

A further problem for tracing slave lives in the VOC archive results from the way the Company classified its subjects. Slaves who obtained their freedom were termed '*vrij swarten*' (free blacks) and were listed in the *opgaaf* by name, often at the back of the register. But slave women who obtained freedom and married burgher sons were merged into the burgher lists and over several generations free black descendants who acquired burgher status were no longer separately enumerated. Many freed slaves were thus no longer identified as such. This has made them invisible in the records and has led genealogists and historians to overlook the presence of people of slave origin amongst the Cape burgher population.⁵² Given the racial sensitivities of family history in apartheid South Africa this was not perhaps surprising. Now that such taboos are lifting, the way in which the structure of the archive conceals such links is becoming more evident.

An Alternative Paper Empire?

The VOC archive is thus overwhelmingly the Company's recording of events, organised by its administrative structures, which contain traces of slaves rather than by them. These were usually used to monitor and control slaves, through mechanisms such as inventories of estates, auction sales and judicial records. Opposition by slaves to this paper empire was sometimes overt. In 1808, after the end of VOC rule, one of the first actions of slave rebels who attacked the farms of the Swartland region was to destroy any paper documents they found, in an action which paralleled the destruction of estate records by peasants and workers in the French Revolution.⁵³ Instead the leader, Louis of Mauritius, brandished in his hand a piece of paper that he claimed was an order from the government that slaves should be freed.⁵⁴ Documentation, the slaves realised, had power and possession of it conferred authority.

But there are also intriguing indications within the VOC records of an alternative archive which was produced by slaves themselves. Although the majority of slaves were not literate, there are some who left written tracks that have found their way into the archive. Literacy took many forms. Some slaves, especially those who were owned directly by the Company and schooled in the Slave Lodge, could read and write Dutch. Robert Shell and Archie Dick have analysed 'the earliest known

51 On the slowness of some archives, as well as historians, to adapt to the digital revolution, see Blouin and Rosenberg, *Processing the Past*, esp chapter 10.

52 The first and highly controversial study (in the context of its time of publication during the apartheid era) was H. Heese, *Groep Sonder Grens: Die Rol en Status van die Gemengde Bevolking aan die Kaap, 1652–1795*, Navorsingspublikasies 5 (Bellville: Wes-Kaaplandse Instituut vir Historiese Navorsing, 1984). On the presence of free blacks in the burgher lists, see T. Baartman, 'Fighting for the Spoils: Cape Burgherschap and Faction Disputes in Cape Town in the 1770s' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2011).

53 On such episodes see J. O'Toole, 'Between Veneration and Loathing: Loving and Hating Documents' in F. Blouin and W. Rosenberg (eds), *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, 48–50.

54 N. Worden, 'Armed with Swords and Ostrich Feathers: Militarism and Cultural Revolution in the Cape Slave Uprising of 1808' in R. Bessel, N. Guyatt and J. Rendell (eds), *War, Empire and Slavery, 1770–1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 121–38. For references to the destruction of paper and the authority of Louis's document, WCA, CJ 515, RR evidence of Christiaan Andreas Storm, 7 November 1808, ff 263–9 and WCA, CJ 516, JJJJ, first examination of Isaac van Mozambique, 9 November 1808, ff 24–5; WCA, CJ 515.

writing of a Cape slave', a personal notebook written between 1721 and 1734 by Jan Smiesing, a slave schoolmaster and medical healer who lived at the Lodge.⁵⁵ The book, they remark, 'makes the invisible visible' in revealing to us the complex identity of a Company slave. Smiesing makes no mention of his slave status, not even the momentous event of his own manumission in 1731. The focus of the notebook is rather on the markers of his Company education and his Christian conversion: commercial arithmetic, alphabets and a hymn. Also striking is his recording of medicinal remedies written in Tamil. Shell and Dick argue that this combination of literacy, Siddha medicinal knowledge and Christian belief gave Smiesing particular opportunities to bridge the gap between slavery and freedom.

Other caches of documents written by slaves and freed slaves have been recently found in the VOC archive. Susan Newton-King has analysed a remarkable collection of personal letters of a freed Company slave, Arnoldus Koevoet, and his wife Anna Rebecca of Bengal, who also lived in Cape Town in the late 1720s and early 1730s. As with Smiesing, the letters suggest a more widespread literacy than historians have usually been prepared to recognise for Cape slaves and freed slaves. They also reveal a chain of communications reaching kin in Batavia as well as previous owners now retired in Amsterdam, both of whom corresponded with affection across the world.⁵⁶ Another collection of letters written in the 1720s and 1730s by Nicolas Ondatje, a freed slave exiled to the Cape from Ceylon, has been discovered, written in Tamil and Sinhalese, which await translation.

These materials have survived by chance. The Smiesing notebook is contained within the archive's miscellaneous accessions inventory, where it is cryptically and erroneously listed as 'J. Smuesing, c.1800'.⁵⁷ It was anonymously deposited in the Cape Archives in 1969 and did not originate within the VOC official archive. The other letters did, but are hidden away in a series described in the inventories as 'annexures to liquidation and distribution accounts', diverse materials collected by the authorities at the death of an intestate estate owner but never used or catalogued by them. There is thus no indication in the archive retrieval system that materials written by slaves are contained there. They have only come to light as a result of the recent estate inventory transcription project, when the richness of the annexures was realised for the first time.⁵⁸ These are random survivals but they indicate a much wider network of written communication among Cape slaves than was recognised both by the VOC authorities and by later researchers.

Sometimes slave writings were known to the authorities, causing them alarm. The judicial records contain a few such examples, which were used as evidence against

55 R. Shell and A. Dick, 'Jan Smiesing, Slave Lodge Schoolmaster and Healer, 1697–1734' in Worden (ed.), *Cape Town Between East and West*, 128–52.

56 S. Newton-King, 'Family, Friendship and Survival among Freed Slaves' in Worden (ed.), *Cape Town Between East and West*, 153–75. There is something of a parallel here with the literate Mardijkers of VOC Batavia; see U. Bosma and R. Raben, *Being 'Dutch' in the Indies: A History of Creolisation and Empire, 1500–1920* (Singapore: Singapore University Press; Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 51–3.

57 WCA, Inventory of Non-Public Records (Private Collections), G3, part 1, 161; Shell and Dick, 'Jan Smiesing', 237, n 1.

58 WCA, Inventory 1/3, MOOC, series 14/1. The inventories and annexures contain many other riches. For examples see TEPC Transcription Team, 'The Inventories of the Orphan Chamber of the Cape of Good Hope' in N. Worden (ed), *Contingent Lives: Social Identity and Material Culture in the VOC World* (Cape Town: Historical Studies Department, University of Cape Town, 2007), 3–22.

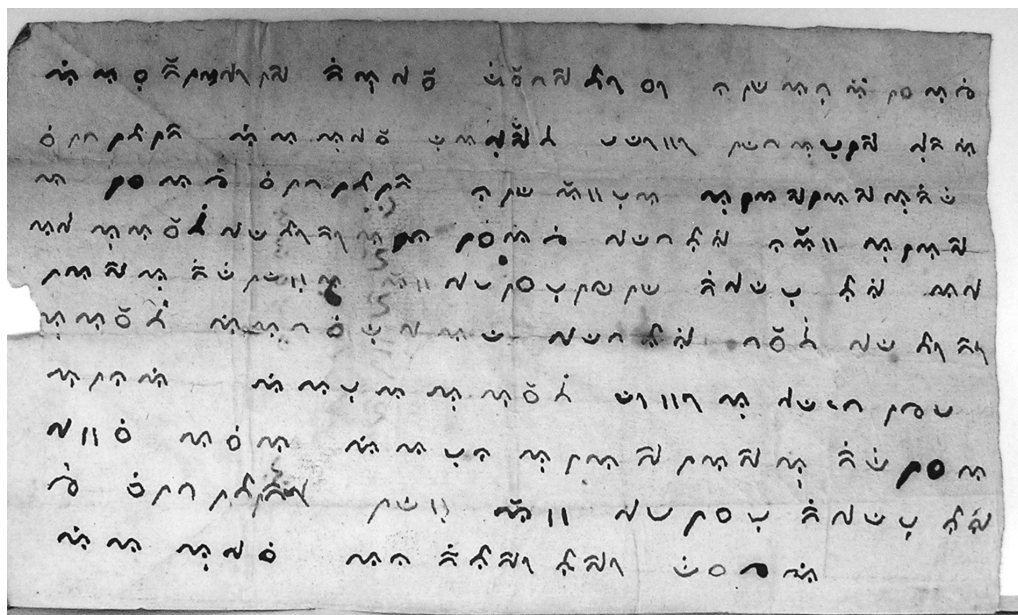


Figure 4: Letter of Upas to September van Boegies. WCA, CJ 373, 141

slaves in securing convictions. These are of two kinds. Some were written in the languages used by slaves, such as Bugis or Arabic, and were intended for other slaves in a communication network within the colony that was hidden from the authorities.⁵⁹ A relatively well-studied example is a letter written in the Bugis language and script which was sent by Upas, a Stellenbosch slave, to September, another slave living on a farm in the Tijgerberg area (see Figure 4). The letter was a key piece of evidence used by the Council of Justice to convict September of plotting an uprising, or at least a mass escape, of Bugis slaves. In fact, as recent research has revealed, the Bugis letter was misinterpreted by the council in the course of its translation from Bugis to Malay and then from Malay to Dutch, and did not implicate September at all. It was a request for medical assistance from September, who was known as a traditional healer, but it was interpreted by the council as a call for joint action against the authorities.⁶⁰

Another example of slave writing preserved in the judicial records was indeed a sign of organised resistance. This was a talisman found in the possession of captured runaways in 1786. Written in Bugis script but containing Arabic, it was obtained from a Moslem spiritual leader and believed to protect the bearers from capture or harm. Again, the Council of Justice did not understand the language or the content, describing it both as ‘an Arabic letter’ and as ‘a kind of charm on a piece of paper, written upon with Malay [sic] characters’.⁶¹

59 F. Vernal, ‘Discourse Networks in South African Slave Society’, *African Historical Review*, 43, 2, 2011, 1–36.

60 R. Ross and S. Koolhof, ‘Upas, September and the Bugis at the Cape’, *Archipel*, 70, 2005, 281–308. The letter and its faulty translations are filed in WCA, CJ 373, f 142.

61 The talisman is preserved in WCA, CJ 424, f 703, and is described in CJ 424, inventory of documents in the case of Augustus van de Caab et al, f 689 and CJ 795, and Sententie van Augustus van de Caab et al, 23 November 1786, f 385.

51968

Handen eerbare mijn juff.
 Arminie jilles.

goet met alle noodigheijde en droefheijde dat
 konen te konen in d juff. andersanige
 slaef jonas van manado tot dat Ey Sijp.
 met kononig tot in d juff. in wijen
 to jaanen golden hofte ghenen dijnse van
 in d juff. hofte godine londen inwans
 te klagen dijn liden zoo wans Ey Sijp.
 nijtse sovelinge tot in d juff. met
 goonden liden en wange liden
 boernodtigh bedroef dat in d juff. geliver
 naar den aangebooren goden liden
 met de oogen van in d juff. liden
 Sijp. aan so liden liden liden dat in d
 juff. geliver tot so jaan liden Sijp.
 boeloff sal ghenen dijnse voor in d juff.
 dijn.

Welk doende R.

Figure 5: Letter of Jonas van Manado to his owner. WCA, CJ 323, 519

These documents were written by and for slaves and were not intended to be seen by the VOC or to end up in their paper archive. There are other intriguing examples of documents written by (or at least for) slaves that intended to turn the Company's system of written administrative control to their own advantage. In 1719 Jonas van Monado presented his owner with a letter requesting his freedom (see Figure 5).⁶²

⁶² WCA, CJ 323, f 519, letter of Jonas van Monado to widow Hermina Herwigh, undated, transcribed and translated in Worden and Groenewald (eds), *Trials of Slavery*, 78 and 82–3.

It is not clear whether he wrote it himself or dictated it to someone else who could write, but the handwriting and style are unusual and suggest features of slave use of Dutch.⁶³ Jonas used the formal written apparatus of the VOC to make his plea, adapting the language of a suppliant:

the suppliant, is finally seeking your honourable *juffrouw*'s aid with hands clasped and knees bent, praying humbly that it would please your honourable *juffrouw* to look upon him, the suppliant, in keeping with her innate mercifulness, with the eyes of compassion, and to please permit him, the suppliant, a letter of freedom.

Clearly Jonas believed that a form of written documentation would formalise his request and give it greater weight. In this he was mistaken. His mistress refused him, a rejection which led Jonas to attempt to stab her and resulted in his conviction and the presence of the letter in the judicial record.

Jonas's transparent attempt to use the power of a written letter to his advantage failed, but other slaves were shrewder in their attempts to subvert the authority of VOC documentation. The slave runaways who obtained a talisman to protect them in 1786 also twice obtained forged *passeerbriefjes*, or 'permission letters,' showing that they had permission to travel. The first was written for them by a freed slave who signed it under the name of a burgher lieutenant. The second was penned (badly and misspelt) by a schoolboy whom they persuaded by telling him that they had lost their original letters and did not dare go back to their owner for replacements (see Figure 6).⁶⁴ Such examples were akin to the forged passports and identity documents that Looijestein and Van Leeuwen have described in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic.⁶⁵ When authorities such as those in the Netherlands and the VOC used paper documentation for monitoring and controlling its population, subversion by forgery was an inevitable result. Survival of such documents in the VOC Cape archive show that on occasion slaves of the Cape could also turn this to their own advantage.

Escaping House Arrest?

It is now widely accepted that the archive is not only a collection of paper documents. It includes other forms of preservation of the past, in particular oral narrations and memory, which challenge the 'unquestionable archival authority' of the written document and may release us from the confining 'house arrest' which Derrida attributes to the archive.⁶⁶ However, these are not necessarily distinct. Several encounters and

63 *Ibid*, nn 14 and 15.

64 CJ 424, *Criminele Processtukken*, 1786, Deel II, ff 699 and 701. The case is documented in Worden and Groenewald (eds), *Trials of Slavery*, 537–56.

65 H. Looijestein and M. van Leeuwen, 'Establishing and Registering Identity in the Dutch Republic' in Breckenridge and Szreter (eds), *Registration and Recognition*, 245–6.

66 The broadening of the scope of the archive from written texts is most fully discussed in Blouin and Rosenberg, *Processing the Past*, esp chapter 8. For the quotations, see Steedman, *Dust*, 83 and C. Hamilton, 'Forged and Continually Refashioned', 21.

Laat deze jongen Passen genaamt
Augustus Augustus salomon Jonas
welkomp Soewies Jilaas De Nottentot
tot nag tot na grootvissers om
schaapen Bees te gaan haale.

Den 20 September
A. 1786

J. van der Poel

Figure 6: Forged pass written for Augustus van de Caab by the schoolboy Fabritius. WCA, CJ 424, 701

interactions have taken place between the VOC archive of Roeland Street and the memories and oral traditions of Cape slavery brought to it by researchers that exist outside these documents. In various ways they have reconfigured the authority of the paper archive.⁶⁷

An important precedent was established by the path-breaking research of Achmat Davids, a respected leader of the Bo-Kaap Moslem community of inner Cape Town. Davids drew on the records preserved by Bo-Kaap families and the oral traditions handed down through generations to trace the history of Islam in the archival records, which he published in a series of books and articles in the 1980s and 1990s. This included a study of the Arabic and Malay linguistic influences on early spoken and written Afrikaans, a topic on which he completed a doctorate.⁶⁸ Slaves featured in his work, but a more directed focus on slave history came in 2001 when six community-based researchers approached the Roeland Street records through their

⁶⁷ On the interconnections between memory and the paper archive, see V. Harris, 'Genres of the Trace: Memory, Archive and Trouble', unpublished paper, Archive and Public Culture seminar, University of Cape Town, 2012.

⁶⁸ Notably A. Davids, *The Mosques of Bo-Kaap* (Athlone: South African Institute of Arabic and Islamic Research, 1980), *The History of Tana Baru* (Cape Town: Committee for the Preservation of the Tana Baru, 1985) and the posthumously published PhD, originally submitted in 1991, *The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims* (Pretoria: Protea, 2011).

knowledge of place, kin and tradition that had been passed down to them through the generations. Instead of combing the records through the indices and inventories produced by the archive, they used their own knowledge to interrogate the sources.⁶⁹ The results were striking. Researchers could identify names in slave registers of ancestors of local families and locate farms in the present landscape where they had lived, interpreting the restricted information of the paper documentation in the light of their local knowledge. One of them, Ebrahim Rhoda, who traced his family to slaves held on De Bos, a Somerset West farm, stated,

I wanted to find out and corroborate the oral history of the Rhoda family – both Christian and Moslem – that they had a slave origin on De Bos ... you'd never believe how exciting it was for me to discover the documentary proof that that my ancestors had lived on the farm, and for me to learn details of their lives.⁷⁰

The excitement of this paper encounter matches Lucy Campbell's on seeing Massavana's signed mark. But the significance of this work was not only that the paper archive confirmed local knowledge and traditions; the latter overcame the limitations of the written records, and opened them up to a new understanding which was disseminated back in the communities and also in more conventional academic formats. Rhoda went on to complete an MA dissertation at the University of the Western Cape and published a popular history of his own Moslem community at the Strand based on both archival and community research.⁷¹

Yet memory and received tradition are not always well connected to the paper archive. Another of the 2001 researchers, Ebrahim Manuel, came to Roeland Street with a specific kind of knowledge about his ancestors, whom he traced back to political prisoners transported to the Cape from Sumbawa in the 1760s. He had discovered a handwritten *kietaab* book in his family which revealed the names of ancestors written in the Sumbawan script. Drawing on a strong Sufi mysticism which included revelations through dreams from his deceased father, he visited Sumbawa in 1999. There he participated in a 'Roots'-style reunion with the inhabitants of Pemangong village, where 'in the village record books and diaries it was written that the Dutch had taken [his ancestors] away and that one day someone would come and look for their origins.'⁷² Believing that he was led there not by chance but by revelation, Ebrahim Manuel sought to establish links between his home in Simonstown and Sumbawa.⁷³

69 The Cape Slavery Community Research Project was funded by the National Research Foundation and run jointly by Susan Newton-King, Andrew Bank, Carohn Cornell and myself of the History Departments of the University of the Western Cape and the University of Cape Town. See 'Going Back to My Slave Roots', *UCT Monday Paper*, 23–9 April 2001, 4–5.

70 Cited in 'Going Back to My Slave Roots', 4–5.

71 E. Rhoda, 'The Founding and Development of the Strand Muslim Community, 1822–1928' (Unpublished MA thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2006) and *From Slavery to Citizenship: A Walk Through the History of a Strand Community* (Gatesville: DPB, 3rd edn, 2012).

72 A. Read, 'Ebrahim Manuel Traces His Roots', *Simon's Town Historical Society Bulletin*, 21, 4 2001, 153.

73 E. Manuel, 'The Slavery and Heritage Project at the Cape Archives on Simon's Town', unpublished papers, June 2002. The family history is also recounted in P. Faber, *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2003), 156–79.

However, the paper archive of the VOC gave no evidence of such claims. Family-owned *kietaabs* and village records in Indonesia thus provided a written source alternative to the VOC's records, although one filled with ambiguities,⁷⁴ whereby Ebrahim Manuel substantiated his claims of descent from Sambuwa by other means, such as the similarities in Simonstown and Pemangong between personal names and the fact that 'family members ... are deeply into spiritualism, tassuwf and Sufism in both countries. Family members experience similar spiritual feelings, dreams, receiving messages, happenings etc. in both countries.'⁷⁵ Archival records have in this case failed to corroborate such transnational received traditions. It was rather that 'some divine light was guiding him.'⁷⁶

Conclusion

Many have commented on the silences in the VOC paper empire in relation to slave lives and histories. However, recently 'the record has been scrutinised not only for what it seems to yield with ease, but also for that which it cannot communicate.'⁷⁷ Reading both along and against the grain of the VOC's paper archive has produced a rich historiography, while personal memories and fictional and literary imaginative reconstructions have filled some of the gaps.⁷⁸ A particular focus of such work has been slave women, even more absent in the paper archive than their male counterparts.⁷⁹ Certainly the VOC paper empire acted as a mechanism of control, both of its slave subjects and of later researchers. Yet, as was the case for slaves at the time, more recent writers have found important ways of resisting and countering that authority.

74 S. Jappie, 'From the Madrasah to the Museum: The Social Life of the "Kietaabs" of Cape Town', *History in Africa*, 38, 2011, 369–99.

75 E. Manuel, 'Authentic proof and genuine evidence to our ancestors (Tuans) in Pemangong-Sumbawa – Indonesia established on 7.9.1999' in his 'The Slavery and Heritage Project at the Cape Archives on Simon's Town' (Unpublished paper, June 2002).

76 A. Read, 'Ebrahim Manuel Traces His Roots', *Simon's Town Historical Society Bulletin*, 21, 4, 2001, 152.

77 Coetzee, 'In the Archive', 140.

78 P. Gqola, *What is Slavery to Me?: Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010); D. Johnson, 'Representing Cape Slavery: Literature, Law and History', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46, 5, 2010, 504–16; G. Baderoon, 'The African Oceans: Tracing the Sea as Memory of Slavery in South African Literature and Culture', *Research in African Literatures*, 40, 4, 2009, 89–107.

79 For example, R. Jacobs, *The Slave Book* (Cape Town: Kwela, 1998); T. Benade, *Kites of Good Fortune* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2004); A. Brink, *Philida* (London: Harvill Secker, 2012). See also P. Gqola, "'Like Having Three Tongues in One Mouth': Tracing the Elusive Lives of Slave Women in (Slavocratic) South Africa' in N. Gasa (ed.), *Basus 'Imbokado, Bawel 'Imilambo/They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers: Women in South African History* (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council, 2007), 21–41.