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EVERYTHING IS ANANA

A lot more attention has been paid to slavery in the last few years, that black page of Dutch history that has been ignored for so long. It's been mostly about how terrible that black page was, rarely about how we can use that past to create a better future. Terror is not the only thing to be found in that dark period, there was also light: an enormous vitality of which people like me are living proof. Somehow or another, despite the horrors, people managed to survive. In my book 'Jaguarman', I tried to find out how they did it. What stories gave them hope?

ANANA KEDUAMAN KADUAPOR ('creator of heaven and earth') is the name of the supreme deity in the Surinamese faith Winti. Just like the Brazilian Candomblé, the Cuban Santería and the Haitian Voodoo, Winti is a faith that arose on the plantations of their European oppressors when the religions of the enslaved Africans mixed with the faiths of the original inhabitants of South America. Where the Christian God of the Europeans only created man in his image, and said to them, 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth', Winti says: everything is Anana. A person is Anana, but a tree is Anana as well. Anana is one huge, harmonious, musical whole in which everything has a role and where no form of life is more important than another.

Slavery has been abolished, but we still live in a system that divides people, animals and plants into winners and losers, a system that means profit for one group and blood and horror for another. We all know about the horrors behind cheap meat, the sea of flames necessary for our palm oil, the human tragedy behind our bargains from Primark. We also know that we can wipe ourselves out if we go on like this. That it's time to change something.

Winternachten's theme this year is 'It's up to us', but if you look at the biggest tragedies in our history, people believing in an 'us' most of the time were exactly the problem. The creation of an 'us' usually went together with the creation of 'another'. And the creation of 'another' was what opened the door towards suppression and destruction. So I'd rather say: it's up to you, to be brave enough to use your own eyes, ears, brain and heart to discover that the one thing that gives you life, is also what connects you with all other life on Earth.

It is possible to love a tree, to understand a cow or to see the world through the eyes of the black or white man opposite you in the tram. There is no such thing as 'us' and the 'other', because everything is Anana! Only with all parts united, Anana is complete. Realizing this and acting accordingly maybe is not the solution to everything, but I do think it would be a good beginning. For yourself, and everything around you.

Written as a contribution to the Winternachten international literature festival The Hague by Raoul de Jong. Translated by Terry Ezra.