

Van Bengalen

Van Bengalen refers to the thousands of women, men and children who were enslaved around the Bay of Bengal (Northeast India). Januarij (January), Amon, Marij, Susanna, Augustus and Baron van Bengalen take centre stage in this story. Together, they convey something of the experience of the hundreds of thousands of people who were trafficked by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and its employees, between 1620 and 1795.

While not related to one another, they were all enslaved under diverse circumstances. They were stripped of their proper names and given new ones, to which was added the toponym Van Bengalen (from Bengal), referring to the place where they were traded. They were forced from villages around the Ganges and taken by fast boats to central slave markets in the region, where they were bought by employees of the VOC. Ships scattered them all over the regions where the VOC was active, via Batavia (Jakarta), to the Banda Islands (Moluccas), to Cape Town and even to the Netherlands.

In 1778 Maart van Bengalen was bought at a public auction in Hooghly, Bengal.

The trading post of the Dutch East India Company in Hooghly, Hendrik van Schuylenburgh, 1665.

In 1750 Abraham van Bengalen worked on a farm outside Cape Town.

Panorama of Cape Town and Environs, attributed to Robert Jacob Gordon, 1778.

In 1788 Augustus van Bengalen was a servant outside Cape Town.

Augustus van Bengalen holding Hendrick Cloete's pipe, anonymous, c. 1788.

In 1729, Amon van Bengalen hanged himself in desperation outside Batavia, Java.

The castle of Batavia, Andries Beeckman, c. 1661.

Around 1780 the enslaved silversmith Januarij van Bengalen made this silver box in Batavia, Java. Betel box, 1769-1780.

In 1697 Marij van Bengalen worked on a nutmeg plantation on one of the Banda Islands (Moluccas).

View of Banda Neira in the Southern Moluccas, attributed to Johannes Vinckboons, c. 1662-1663.

In 1690 Baron van Bengalen ended up with his wife and son in the Netherlands as a servant

Meal with Julius Schelto van Aitzema, Sara van den Broek, guests and servants, Gerard Wigmana, 1697.