Chapter

15.

Commodity, Forced Labor, and Rebellion: On Slavery and Post-Slavery in the Dutch Caribbean Islands

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Slavery was a social and economic system that turned enslaved individuals into commodities, to be used or traded according to their owner's desires. In the Dutch Caribbean islands, Atlantic slavery was introduced in the seventeenth century under the administration of the Dutch West India Company (WIC). The WIC and the Dutch State deliberately established and maintained hierarchical and repressive societal structures through their regulations and religious policies. An important element in this was the land policy, under which initially only company employees could obtain land. This laid the foundation for selective economic development characterized by wide social disparities.

Transatlantic slavery played an important role on all the Antillean islands. African slaves planted the crops on the plantations and built the necessary physical infrastructure; they were a cornerstone of the economy. In Aruba, the land was not properly cultivated until the second half of the eighteenth century, when the colonists were allowed to import slaves.[1] In Bonaire, slaves were employed in salt mining and logging as early as the seventeenth century. On both islands, the Indigenous population mixed with both colonists and enslaved Africans.[2] In addition to geographical segregation, there was a division of labor in which the Indigenous population was also exploited and had to perform corvée labor. In Saint Martin, Africans were put to work, not only in salt mining but also growing sugar cane and tobacco for export. In Saba, the focus had been on small-scale agriculture from the outset, and later, small groups of enslaved individuals were imported to work the land. Just like Curaçao, Saint Eustatius became an important transit and distribution center for goods and slaves during the

eighteenth century. Saint Eustatius also had an export-oriented agricultural sector. Plantation agriculture using African slave labor was most developed in Curaçao, but trade remained central to the island. Enslaved people who were forced to work on the various islands had no choice but to obey under all circumstances, but many did not accept their situation without resistance, flight, or rebellion.

Human Trade and Exploitation

Wherever enslaved people ended up after being traded, they had to undergo a transformation. The first goal was to make them submit absolutely to the authority of the master and to adapt to the structure and culture of daily life on the plantations and in the manor houses. The enslaved had to learn to live in an environment with deviant social norms and values and gradually shape and define their new existence. Although it can be argued that after a few generations, the enslaved found themselves in a more or less recognizable social environment, it must have been a surreal situation that affected their well-being and identity. The realization that once enslaved, they were nothing more than a commodity must have been particularly stinging. When tensions rose and revolts erupted, their deeply ingrained distrust toward the masters came to the surface, but it was also directed toward other enslaved people, due to internal divisions and the severe punishments they underwent.

From 1633, the WIC conquered Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, Saint Eustatius, Saba, and Saint Martin, and soon began to transport enslaved individuals to this area. In 1662, the WIC also signed an *asiento* with the Spanish Crown, granting the WIC the exclusive right to supply the Spanish colonies with enslaved individuals in the Caribbean. During this period, Curaçao, and later for a brief time, Saint Eustatius, became the main distribution centers for enslaved people in the region. When the WIC lost the asiento in 1713, Curaçao immediately lost its position as a trading hub for Africans. However, this did not put a complete stop to the trade in the enslaved; many archived documents mention ships carrying enslaved people in their cargo. Even after the abolition of the slave trade in 1814, when the Netherlands ceased such trade under pressure from Britain, a few slave ships arrived in Willemstad.[3] Curaçao also remained an important trading hub for other products. This trade depended in large part on the labor of enslaved people who grew the crops and worked on the docks and merchant ships. By the

end of the eighteenth century, Saint Eustatius lost its position as a distribution center for the enslaved.

The *shons*—Papiamentu for masters or plantation owners—continued to trade their human goods whenever it suited them. The placards used to check the purchase of so-called "French negroes" after the uprisings in the French colony of Haiti in 1791 and 1793 indicate that they also bought and sold enslaved people from other transatlantic colonies. In the early nineteenth century, the trade in people from Curaçao to other Atlantic colonies spiked because of a general economic downturn in Curaçao, while the plantation economy elsewhere flourished.[4] This regional trade became popular when various European powers abolished the slave trade. Virtually no human merchandise could be brought from Africa, but regional sales were allowed. From 1831 to 1847, no less than 1,883 enslaved individuals were exported from Curaçao. Research into the Santa Martha plantation in Curaçao reveals that one or more members of nearly every family were sold.[5]

A Highly Stratified Society

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the island societies slowly developed a more consistent social structure. After several generations, the enslaved's kinship relations became stronger, and they had developed their own languages (Papiamentu and Creole English), social customs, and cultural expressions. However, these also reflected the internal divisions among the enslaved. Men and women had different roles to play in society and were accorded a different status. Within the communities of the enslaved, mothers and children determined family relations. They were the ones registered in transport deeds and inventories, while fathers were hardly ever mentioned. Nevertheless, it is important to note that some men did act as fathers, but were never recognized by colonial authorities and therefore cannot be traced in the archives of the Dutch colonizers.

Some children were born from relationships between a Black (enslaved) mother and a white father. These "colored" descendants of the shon usually held more prestigious positions, and daughters in particular were often sent to the shon's urban residences. This led to a concentration of such colored people in the city. However, they were not the only people living there. Statistics from the late eighteenth century show that 5,539 enslaved people lived in Willemstad, while 7,445 enslaved people lived in the sur-

rounding areas. Other statistics show that the city also housed many free Black people, Dutch administrators, and traders from various regions who either lived there permanently or periodically. This meant that the unfree people in Willemstad came into contact with a wide variety of people from various backgrounds on a daily basis.

This reveals the complicated stratification of societies on the Antillean islands. Color, gender, and social and economic status not only dictated the type of work that people were allowed to do, but also where they lived. Multiple social layers developed that varied in socioeconomic position, origin, status, and race, with every possible shade of color. As a result, people were constantly preoccupied with their position in society and with ways to preserve or improve it. This preoccupation, that was born from colonialism and slavery, took root in Antillean societies, remained there for many generations and was not exactly conducive to social cohesion.

Living with Shortages

A report from 1791 indicates that "the slaves on this island (Curaçao) are in a much direr condition than the slaves [...] of Guyana, due to the inadequate food supply."[6] In rainy areas, the enslaved could usually produce enough food for their own consumption on their small plots of land. In Curaçao, the crops never thrived, and the plantation's yields were marginal.[7] The island was dependent on imported food, so the food supply was threatened whenever trade dwindled. When this happened in the late eighteenth century, for instance, shortages grew widespread. In 1795, the absence of food imports led to hunger and drove many to despair and rebellion. Materially and socially speaking, the enslaved were extremely marginalized and suffered the most from scarcity. The barren and dry surroundings offered few additional food sources. Fishing at sea was tightly regulated by the plantation owners to minimize the risk of flight.

The Windward Islands were situated in a more favorable climate for growing food crops.[8] However, these very small islands had limited arable acreage and this weakness was exacerbated by frequent hurricanes. The proximity of other islands was a constant temptation for those with an urge to escape; from the early nineteenth century many enslaved individuals fled to islands and areas already liberated from slavery, or where paid work was available, such as Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, and the United States. This mobility was formative for the Windwardian people's character: always on

the lookout for better conditions elsewhere. Another consequence is that the Windwardians have family ties throughout the Caribbean.

In Bonaire, the undiversified economy and the highly unfavorable distribution of land forced the free, Black, and colored residents to seek refuge at sea. General scarcity remained a determining factor on all the Dutch Caribbean islands for a long time and is reflected in lifestyles, tales, and deeply rooted dietary habits. On the arid islands, the basic diet was characterized by corn as a staple food and very few fresh vegetables.

Uprisings and Flight

From historical sources and oral traditions, we can surmise that the enslaved never fully accepted their situation. Attesting to this are various forms of violent resistance, which occurred at Rif St. Marie in 1716, in Hato in 1750, and during the major uprising led by Tula in 1795.

Several thousand people took part in the 1795 revolt, which raged across the entire western side of Curaçao and posed a significant threat to the colonial order. This struggle for freedom was particularly ideological in nature and had the support of some republicans from the upper classes, such as Johanna Lesire, owner of Porto Marie, and the light-skinned Jean de Fourcade.[9] The revolt was premeditated, which is evident from the court documents and the fact that immediately after the work stoppage on August 17, 1795, insurgents from all nearby plantations gathered at the assembly point in Santa Cruz. The revolt was inspired in part by the French Revolution and the 1791 and 1793 uprisings in Haiti.

There are also reports of other disturbances, such as in Santa Catharina (Curaçao) in early 1795, and isolated acts of violence in Aruba. Even after Tula's failed uprising and severe reprisals by the rulers, a desire for freedom persisted, as evidenced by the support given to the French invasion in 1800. Escape attempts continued, with many fleeing to the South American mainland, to Coro (Venezuela) for example, where escaped slaves who converted to Catholicism could live in freedom. On the Windward Islands, especially Saint Martin, escapes by enslaved people surged like never before after the French and English territories were declared free of slavery while the Netherlands had not yet abolished it. Even on the small island of Saba, where land was so scarce that owners and the enslaved lived in close proximity, and which consequently had a less repressive slavery regime, there were confrontations and escapes during this pre-emancipation period.

The restrictions and inferior position that many refused to put up with any longer fueled the desire for freedom.

In two present-day neighborhoods of Willemstad, Punda and Otrobanda, where there was less direct surveillance, combined with a large population of free inhabitants and connections with the outside world, the discontent and anger more readily led to rebellious behavior. Blacks and "coloreds" were regularly flogged as punishment. Tula testified before Pastor Schinck that he was beaten until he bled. Ultimately, this became an important cause for his rebellion.

Outbreaks of violence and escape attempts were not the only expressions of resistance. Far more often, the enslaved in Curaçao temporarily ran away and hid in the dense *mondi* (a wilderness full of thorny bushes and cacti) and caves, or sailed with small vessels to another territory. Due to natural limitations, these escapes were usually short-lived. Other forms of less overt resistance included the deliberate obstruction of overseers, doing shoddy work, and pretending to respect the master but mocking him behind his back in *tambu* songs and stories of *Kompa Nanzi* (called *Anansi Stories* in Saint Martin). Covert or latent resistance also included stories about favors from kings, "flying back" to the country of origin, and the use of *guené* as a secret language—all of which, taken together, displays a tremendous cultural complexity. The colonizers answered the enslaved's latent resistance with repression, by means of harsh punishments meted out by the overseers. Owners and administrators feared not only violence, but also poison and black magic, and hence took even stricter measures to control the Black population.

Freedom in Dependency and Poverty

In the nineteenth century, it became increasingly clear that slavery in the Antilles could not last. After slavery was abolished in the British and French colonies (in 1834 and 1848, respectively), the Dutch government had no choice but to act. After lengthy deliberations over a financial compensation scheme, the Second Chamber passed the Emancipation Act on July 9, 1862. This law stated that the enslaved in all Dutch colonies would be free as of July 1, 1863. To compensate the slave owners in the Antilles for their loss, each owner received 200 guilders per enslaved person. In Saint Martin, where the enslaved had effectively been living as free people for some time, the compensation was only 100 guilders per person.

The social divide between landowners and freed individuals that already existed during slavery was consolidated by the decision to compensate slaveholders but not the formerly enslaved. To make a living, many newly freed people in Curaçao took part in the *paga tera* system. Under the terms of this agreement, they were given a plot of land on the plantation to grow their own food and, in return, were obliged to work for the plantation owner at no pay for a certain number of days a year. They were also required to provide their cornstalks as feed for the plantation owner's cattle, and there were restrictions on the number of goats and sheep they could keep. It is therefore questionable whether the abolition of slavery left them materially better off.[10] Reports of deep poverty, malnutrition, illness, and despair rather suggest the opposite. Moreover, colonialism is responsible for a social structure in which the Black descendants of the enslaved are at the bottom rungs of the ladder. In Aruba, the Indigenous groups occupied a similar position, although many residents considered them "higher" in status due to their lighter skin color and their indigenous Venezuelan descent.[11]

Even after Emancipation, the feeling of subjugation and constant control prevailed on the plantations. Maria Celestijn-Eustatius, born in 1919 in Porto Marie (Curaçao), recounted during an interview that her father "decided to move away from the plantation because he could no longer accept the shon's arbitrariness and humiliations. Father was given a patch of land on the pastor of Willibrordus's property. We were certainly not well off, but at least we retained our dignity. As he put it, 'it's better to be poor than to live in slavery'."[12]

Life was hard on the so-called *sabanas*, grazing lands between the plantations, which were usually not very fertile. Those who lived there were poor and had little prospect of a better life. They remained dependent on the shons for permission to draw water from the plantation wells or access to the coast where they could fish or gather salt.

From oral tradition and interviews, it is evident how powerful the shons remained until the 1950s.[13] For example, one shon had the habit of releasing his cows onto the tenants' fields before they had finished harvesting; another allowed his cows to drink from the water trough first, which left it badly polluted. There were stories of shons who believed that they could take liberties with women, which exemplified their condescension and sense of superiority toward Blacks and coloreds. This attitude toward women was echoed in male–female relationships within the Black

community. Women were subject to the whims of men, even though they played a central role in plantation society. They were important not only as mothers but also in small-scale trade in the city as the sellers of all kinds of products.

To escape the poverty and hopelessness that persisted after Emancipation, many formerly enslaved people, especially on the Windward Islands, found work as seasonal laborers in the cultivation of sugar cane and various other jobs on neighboring islands and in the United States. There, too, they were often poorly paid, marginalized, and discriminated against. The workers felt helpless in the face of existing race relations and often lacked the motivation to put their best foot forward.

The Oil Industry and Autonomy

The year 1918, when Shell opened a large refinery in Curaçao, marks the beginning of significant changes on the island. Although the oil industry was not devoid of new forms of discrimination and prejudice, it did offer the workers—mainly descendants of formerly enslaved people—a chance to finally break free from the constraints of the plantations. In 1924, Esso (later Exxon) built an oil refinery in Aruba. Many people on both islands were employed by the big oil companies, and the lure of jobs attracted people from the other Antillean islands, too. The migration to Curaçao and Aruba even led to a far-reaching depopulation of the Windward Islands.

From the 1950s onward, workers were empowered by the large number of factory laborers and the rise of nationalist politics. They were better able to take a stand and, aided by the labor movement, to demand more rights and a voice in decision making. This had a strong emancipatory effect. Decisive factors in this development were the autonomy movement, widespread education, and the increase in cultural awareness from the 1930s onward. The oil companies strongly encouraged segregation in the workplace and in social life (e.g., in residential neighborhoods, separate sports facilities). The large number of immigrants employed in this period was often seen as a threat by local workers, who felt marginalized. At the same time, better wages promoted self-awareness and pride among these workers, who could finally afford a relatively affluent lifestyle. The strong guilder helped reduce color barriers, but partly due to selective personnel policies in the oil industry, ethnic distinctions and racial differences remained important for a long time. Until the 1960s, Black English speakers from the Caribbean

were (doubly) excluded: "*ta nán ta pretu*" (they are black).[14] Racial and ethnic tensions were also exacerbated by the flat denial (until recently) by certain groups in Aruba that the island had ever known slavery.

In Curaçao, much has changed for the better in terms of racial and ethnic acceptance, particularly since the 1970s. Social relations in Aruba were long characterized by marked racial separation due to the concentration of black oil workers in San Nicolaas, which lasted through the 1970s. Since the 1980s, tourism has had an effect on Aruba and Saint Martin similar to that of the oil industry.

A separate residential neighborhood was built for the Dutch, European, and American employees of the oil refinery in Aruba. Its social center, called the Esso Club, boasted all sorts of facilities, including an ice cream parlor. The photo shows Black employees serving the children of Esso's white employees.

Political, demographic, and sociocultural changes also took place on the Windward Islands. In Saba, due to the absence of large-scale plantation agriculture, the group descending from Africans remained small and, until the 1970s, spatially and socially separate from the white settler population. The colored minority population resided mainly in the capital, The Bottom, while the other locales remained virtually the exclusive domain of the white population, a fact which remained visible for a long time. It was not until Antillean democracy really took hold in the 1970s that this racial segregation in Saba and Saint Martin began to disappear.

In conclusion

In Curaçao, most political positions have gradually—over the course of decades—been taken over by the descendants of Black enslaved people; this change was fueled by political emancipation in the 1940s and 1950s, Antillean autonomy in 1954, and the uprising of May 30, 1969 in Curaçao.

Similar developments have taken place on the other islands. Islanders' quest to find their own identity and the "rediscovery of creole cultural expressions" has ultimately led to greater acceptance of their African roots and culture. Much valuable research has been conducted, partly thanks to the increased availability of (digital) sources and to academic and public debate. Greater national consciousness has also produced more local researchers. These researchers should explore, among other things, the role of the enslaved in the seventeenth century and try to find missing documents that expose the relationships between the local elite and the freedom fighters in 1795. Another topic that deserves further exploration is the position of women and family formation in slavery.

Notes

1 Adi Martis, *De geschiedenis van Aruba tot 1816* (Volendam: LM Publishers, 2018); Luc Alofs, *Slaven zonder plantage: Slavernij en emancipatie op Aruba 1750–1863,* Educion educativo no. 2 (Oranjestad: *Charuba,* 1996).

2 Jay Haviser, *The First Bonaireans*, Reports of the Archaeological-Anthropological Institute of the Netherlands Antilles, no. 10, (Curaçao: Archaelogical-Anthropological Institute of the Netherlands Antilles, 1991).

3 Els Langenfeld, *Verhalen uit het verleden dl.2.* (Willemstad: Curaçaosche Courant, 2010).

4 F. Moya Pons, *History of the Caribbean* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2007), 220–28.

5 Eddy Baetens and Charles do Rego, *Santa Martha Grandi: Het verhaal van een plantage* (Willemstad: Fundashon Tayer Soshal Santa Martha, 2009).

6 W.A. Sirtema van Grovestins and W. Boey, *Rapport betreffende het Eiland Curaçao,* February 11, 1791, NA, Verspreide West-Indische stukken, 1.05.06, Inv. no. 972.

7 W.E. Renkema, *Het Curaçaose plantagebedrijf in de negentiende eeuw.* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1981).

8 In this chapter, the term Windward Islands refers to the Dutch Antilles' collective name for Saba, Saint Martin, and Saint Eustatius (Statia). The Dutch Antilles' collective name of Leeward Islands refers to Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. This distinction does not coincide with the English-language distinction between the Windward and Leeward Islands.

9 Charles do Rego, "Niets anders dan (onze) vrijheid," supplement to *Archiefvriend* [quarterly published by Stichting Vrienden van het Nationaal Archief, Curaçao] 13, no. 3 (2020).

10 Henri van Kol, *Een noodlijdende kolonie* (Amsterdam: Masereeuw & Bouten, 1901).

11 Alofs, *Slaven zonder plantage.*

12 Respondent, interviewed by the author. See also the schoolbook *Mayra, het meisje van Seru Fortuna,* (Curacao: Fundashon Material pa Skol, 1996).

13 Baetens and Do Rego, *Santa Martha Grandi*;Paul Brenneker, *Sambumbu: Volkskunde van Curaçao, Aruba en Bonaire* (Curaçao: n.p., 1971).

14 Charles do Rego, "Konmemorashon Lucha pa Libertad komo parti di historia nashonal," supplement to *Archiefvriend* 15, no.2 (2022).

Abstract

For nearly four centuries, Suriname was part of a European economic system that brought more than 300,000 people from various parts of Africa and forced them to do physical labor, robbing them of their humanity and dignity. Slavery severed the Africans' vital links to their Creator, ancestors, natural environment, family and tribal traditions, children, and themselves. However, they continued to yearn for freedom and strive for independence, establishing communities after successful marronages and the purchase of plantations. Many factors still impede the descendants of enslaved Africans from pursuing well-being and prosperity.

Keywords: Wild Coast; envelopment; freedom; continued impact/afterlives; community development; sustainable development