THE ORAL HISTORY OF SLAVERY, AFRO-CURAÇAOAN MEMORY, AND SELF-DEFINITION: A CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE 300TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE TREATY OF UTRECHT*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to intervene in the discourse surrounding the events planned for the Celebrations of 300th Anniversary of the Treaty of Utrecht by the Netherlands. It does so by surveying the collective memory of African descendants of its Dutch-Caribbean colony of Curaçao, as safeguarded in selected works of their oral tradition (stories, songs, sayings and myths). The paper projects the Afro-Curaçaoan experience onto the broader canvas of Caribbean oral history and presents the available oral material as a key source for gaining access to the ‘hidden,’ ‘offstage’ daily life experiences of people who experienced enslavement.

Keywords: Treaty of Utrecht, 300th anniversary; oral traditions in Curaçao; slavery in Netherland Antilles; Afro-Caribbean cultural memory

Resumen

Este artículo busca intervenir en el discurso sobre los eventos programados por los Países Bajos para conmemorar el 300.° aniversario del Tratado de Utrecht. Lo hace valiéndose del estudio de la memoria colectiva salvaguardada en la tradición oral (cuentos, canciones, refranes y mitos) de los descendientes africanos de Curazao, colonia neerlandesa-caribeña de los Países Bajos.

Aquí se proyecta la experiencia afrocuraziola sobre el lienzo de la historia oral caribeña, que es mucho más amplio, y se presenta el material oral disponible como fuente clave para acceder a las experiencias cotidianas “escondidas” y “entre bastidores” de las personas que experimentaron la esclavitud.

Palabras clave: Tratado de Utrecht, 300 aniversario, tradiciones orales en Curazao, esclavitud en las Antillas Neerlandesas, memoria cultural afrocaribeña

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Preparations have been underway since 2012 in the Province of Utrecht, the Netherlands, to celebrate in grand form the 300th anniversary of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713). Celebrations started in 2013 and will last until 2018. From a Caribbean perspective, the most relevant element of the Treaty of Utrecht was the fact that it passed the so-called asiento into British hands, meaning that Britain received the right to trade in enslaved peoples with the Spanish colonies in the Americas at that time (Carmona, Donoso, and Walker). Significantly, in the Treaty, people of African heritage are nearly invisible and appear only as powerless objects: as traded merchandise, as enslaved. Africans and African descendants were obviously not party to the much-lauded dialogue of diplomacy or the festive cultural expressions in Utrecht surrounding the signing of the Treaty in 1713. In the eurocentric perspective of the treaty’s signatories, the lofty ideals of peace and respect for cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity within Europe were clearly not meant to apply to those colonized, subjugated, traded, and enslaved by Europe.

Whereas written historical documents such as the Treaty of Utrecht typically trivialize, ignore, or silence the experiences of Africans and African descendants in the transatlantic world, the oral traditions and histories of these peoples fortunately do provide a window—their own window—to examine the ways in which they defined and valued themselves as subjects and agents, as owners of their own identity, and as shapers of historical events within the violent and oppressive context of slavery and colonialism. Oral history literally and figuratively gives a voice to people of African heritage—a voice that has been sorely missing in the dominant historiography of the world.

For the case of the Dutch-Caribbean colony of Curaçao, this paper surveys the collective memory of its population of African descent as safeguarded in selected works of their oral tradition (e.g., stories, songs, sayings, and myths). The analysis suggests how enslaved people in the past articulated their personal and communal sorrow, frustration, criticism, pride, and awe, while seeking to maintain their dignity and define their identity as a people. The paper projects the Afro-Curaçaoan experience onto the broader canvas of Caribbean oral history and presents the available oral material as a key source for gaining access to the ‘hidden,’ ‘offstage’ daily life experiences of people who experienced enslavement.

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1 In Dutch: “groots vieren”; see the website: <http://www.vredevanutrecht.nl>.
The Oral History of Slavery, Afro-Curaçaoan Memory, and Self-Definition

If the Treaty of Utrecht’s professed principles of respect for cultural diversity, tolerance, dialogue, social cohesion, and renewal are to be meaningfully re-engaged today, then the treaty’s implications for the slave trade, for slavery, and for traded and enslaved peoples ought to be duly re-examined. Also, the disregard for peoples of African heritage in the worldview of the treaty’s signatories should not to be repeated. The current initiative of the University of Utrecht to draw attention to slavery and to the Caribbean experience in relation to the Treaty of Utrecht and its commemoration is therefore not only opportune, but logical, necessary, and welcome.

Written and Oral Sources for the History and Experience of Slavery

Slavery has been called “social death” by Orlando Patterson in his seminal Slavery and Social Death (1982). Patterson used the metaphor of “social death” to describe the institution of slavery as a “relation of domination” whereby slaveholders destroyed the enslaved socially. First, by cutting off the meaningful relationships that defined their personhood and identity, collective memory, and aspirations, and second, by incorporating these “socially dead” persons into the slaveholders’ world. In reaction to Patterson, historian Vincent Brown states that the concept of “social death” constitutes “a theoretical abstract of an ideal-type enslaved person, culturally isolated from his/her ancestors, unable to claim the past” (“Social Death and Political Life” 1248). It does not illuminate the social and political experience of enslaved people or the daily struggles which transformed their lives collectively (1233).

Following Vincent Brown’s useful statement that slavery is an institution that can tell us much about how people react in subjugated situations (1234), I suggest that slavery in Curaçao, with its own particularities, can contribute to this knowledge. Significantly, Curaçao does not fit the dominant definition of a Caribbean slave society. The economy was not mono-agricultural and the island did not consist of large slave plantations. The proportion of free(d) people on the island was relatively large. More so than plantation agriculture, commerce was the distinguishing feature of the economy. However, Harry Hoeftink’s concept of “mild slavery,” which has often been utilized to describe the situation of enslavement on the island, also does not explain the life conditions of the enslaved, such as their lack of freedom.

Subjugated people resist oppressive external social forces, but do much more than that. They also (re)make social life through integration, social cohe-
sion, solidarity, and cooperation. Enslaved people negotiated their life circumstances, both within and outside of their social groups, as they struggled to survive within the constraints of prevailing asymmetric power relations. The cultural dynamics and identities that evolved in and from these social interactions were complex, multidimensional, and fluid.

Written sources often provide only one view of the history of enslaved peoples. They tend to provide inadequate insight into the manner in which these peoples navigated through life and formed their cultural identities. Written historical sources are produced over time as an “artifact of power” (Brown “History Attends” 219). According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot in Silencing the Past, the making of archives, the retrieval of events as moments of importance, and the interpretation of retrospective significance result in a process of partial silencing. In the Treaty of Utrecht, for example, the person of African heritage is almost invisible and appears only as a powerless object of the asiento: as traded merchandise, as enslaved. Considerable difficulty is involved in getting “blacks perceived as agents, as people with cognitive capacities and even with an intellectual history,” as Paul Gilroy observes in The Black Atlantic (6). Basically then, it was up to Africans and African descendants in the transatlantic world to define and value themselves as subjects and agents, as owners of their own identity and shapers of historical events.

JoAnne Banks-Wallace states in her article “Talk That Talk: Storytelling and Analysis Rooted in African-American Oral Tradition” that African-American oral traditions are highly influenced by cultural contexts and history (410). Before her, scholars such as P. Sterling Stuckey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Sterling Brown, John Lovell, Howard Thurman, James Cone, and Eileen Southern used ‘Negro’ spirituals as important sources for the study of the social life of enslaved African-Americans (Wright 2). James Scott calls such oral sources “hidden transcripts;” they encompass the various ways in which people behave and think when they are out of reach of those in authority (4–5). They include the “offstage” behavior and intentions adopted to help people (re)gain some degree of power. Sometimes such ‘hidden transcripts’ are conspiratorial in nature, as they are also a way in which a subjugated group openly expresses its discontent with the behavior of the dominant class.

Afro-American oral discourses are reminiscent of African oral traditions and include stories, songs, proverbs, myths, and other information passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Hilary Beckles states
that music and dance, above all, constituted the “bridge over troubled waters” that connected African-born persons and their Creole progeny in the Americas. These cultural expressions represented much more than the passionate pursuit of pleasure; they were encoded with the sounds of spiritual liberation and invoked the voices of cosmological redemption. Beckles reminds us that dance, as these musical parties were called, embraced persons other than those gathered for a fun-filled time, and also provided masks for enslaved people to share opinions on the issues of the day.

Beside supplying information on important historical events and on people’s understanding and explanation of their past, ‘hidden transcripts’ also provide insight into the ideas and values behind people’s actions—both when the dominant institutions allow them space to express their culture and when they are in the privacy of their own group. As Trouillot explains, both “what happened” and “that which is said to have happened” matter. The first concept emphasizes the socio-historical process; the second accentuates our knowledge of that process (2, 3).

In Curaçao, Paul Brenneker and Elis Juliana were the pioneers of the systematic collection and documentation of information that had been transferred orally from generation to generation.\(^2\) Their work started in 1958 and includes data from people who were born during the final years of slavery. Their oldest informant was born around 1853, which was ten years before the abolition of slavery in the Dutch colonies. For this paper, I draw from their collection as well as from the research that I carried out between 1980 and 1995, when I was working at the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of the Netherlands Antilles (AAINA).

By using oral histories and interviews, I try to draw out long-forgotten, hidden, or repressed information about the Afro-Curaçaoan group. The speakers expose, through songs and stories in their own words, how diverse and complex their social reality and that of their ancestors was. Through the oral

\(^2\) The songs and short stories collected by Juliana and Brenneker are stored in what is called the Zikinzá collection which belongs to the Zikinzá Foundation, founded in 1973. It contains a corpus of approximately 1410 songs recorded from the mouths of 266 persons. The lyrics of songs are available in books called *Lekete Minaaca, Bentá, and Sambumbu*, a series on Curaçaoan and Bonairean folk customs. The *Sambumbu* series also contains texts of other songs that were collected by Brenneker and Juliana but that are not stored in the Zikinzá collection.
tradition of enslaved people, in which they articulated their personal and communal sorrow, frustration, criticism, pride, and awe, I seek to analyze how they maintained their dignity and self-worth and shaped their identities.

CURAÇAOAN SLAVE SOCIETY

With the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713, the asiento passed into British hands, meaning that Britain received the right to trade in enslaved people with the Spanish colonies in the Americas. Before that period, Curaçao had been an important colonial center and regional hub in a Dutch commercial system that linked supply and demand markets throughout the Americas, Africa, Europe, and beyond (Klooster 283). The island was a major transit port for the trade in enslaved persons and other merchandise in which the Dutch West Indian Company (WIC) and some independent Dutch and Jewish merchants were very much involved. Based on the asiento contract between the Dutch Republic and Spain, the Dutch supplied towns in Spanish America such as Cartagena (Colombia), Portobello (Panama), and Vera Cruz (Mexico) with enslaved people out of Curaçao (Kunst 125; Postma 34). The Dutch also traded with British-American colonies, northern Europe, and southern Africa, based on the success of the maritime sector of Curaçao (Rupert).

Even though little data is available on the number of enslaved people that were in transit and the number that actually remained on the island, one can assume that when Curaçao functioned as a transit harbor for enslaved people, little slave labor was required on the island itself. The few indicators of the number of enslaved people present on the island during certain periods support this assumption (Hoetink 68; Hamelberg 74, 83). Those remaining on the island fulfilled the labor needs on the plantations of the WIC. These plantations were essentially centers for food production for both resident enslaved people and enslaved people in transit, the local population as well as for the crews of commercial ships. The number of slaves settling on the island tended to fluctuate, as they were sold when the WIC was faced with economic adversity (Hoetink 68). With the ending of the Spanish Succession War in 1714, the importance of the island as a depot began to decrease. This contributed to the breakdown of the WIC’s previous monopoly on the slave trade with Africa. The trade would continue as a private enterprise from the 1730s. Faced with various difficulties, the WIC began to rent plantations on the island out
to private persons, and by the end of the eighteenth century most plantations and slaves were privately owned (Renkema 7). It is likely that the last ship with new enslaved people entered the Curaçaoan harbor in 1778 (Hoetink 70). Soon, African-born slaves were outnumbered by the Creole (locally-born) group.

Environmental conditions also deeply affected the Curaçaoan society. Insufficient rainfall rendered the island unviable for large-scale plantation agriculture. Except for a few plantations on the western part of the island, most Curaçaoan plantations were small in size. Subsistence farming was of main concern to all members of the society. These factors had a direct impact on the economic viability of the plantations, the type of labor demands, the form of enslavement, and the nature of social relationships.

On most plantations the enslaved combined different types of work. A notable characteristic resulting from the economic fragility of the plantations was that slaveowners often allowed their enslaved workers significant geographical mobility. Men were hired out to work in town as artisans, women as domestic servants. A large number of enslaved people thus worked and lived in an urban setting, with a culture markedly different from that in the countryside. Craftsmen in particular could improve their economic conditions and further develop their skills. Enslaved males would also be hired out to work as seamen in order to provide monetary income for their owners.

One of the distinguishing features of slavery on Curaçao was the fact that the number of free people of color, both Black and of mixed ancestry, grew considerably due to frequent manumissions. Some of these were formerly enslaved people who themselves or whose families had been able to buy their freedom. Others were old or disabled people whose owners simply disposed of them as economic liabilities. Also, with some frequency, White masters manumitted their children. Reproduction between European, Africans, and other ethnic groups led to a substantial number of people of mixed ancestry in Curaçaoan society. All in all, the social structure was characterized by considerable complexity, both within and outside the sphere of the plantation. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Curaçaoan population had achieved significant diversity in terms of skin color, occupation, religion, and culture.
ORAL HISTORY AS A WINDOW FOR AFRO-CURAÇAOAN SELF-DEFINITION

There seems to be a resurgence in the study of slavery as it relates to issues of identity. There has been a longstanding debate about creolization versus African retentions in the Americas, focusing on how the process of African acculturation has unfolded in a dynamic and pluralistic Atlantic world (Sweet 259). On the one hand, creativity within the context of uprootedness and enslavement is emphasized by scholars who argue that most Africans, when arriving in the Americas, had only their enslavement in common and that (nearly) everything else had to be created by them. On the other hand, there are scholars who argue for more sustained connections between Africa and the Americas: “African culture was not surviving; it was arriving” (Sweet 259). Here, the emphasis is on continuities of language, religion, music, and on the aesthetics in the forging of new identities.

In Curaçao, the sociologist René A. Römer is one of the few scholars who has published on cultural retention and creolization. For him, creolization in Curaçao emerged from the admixture of the West-European culture of the Dutch White Protestants, the Iberian (or Latin) culture of the Sephardic Jews, and the African culture of the “colored population, and developed its own particular character over the course of time.” Curaçao’s distinctive culture manifested itself most prominently in the Creole language Papiamentu, but also in music, dance, cuisine, and architecture. For Römer, creolization in Curaçao entailed the “westernization of the Africans and at the same time a less-desired Africanization of the White elite group” (20).

I agree with David Northrup that this debate has “reached the limits of its usefulness.” The key issue is not to judge whether the heritage that the enslaved brought with them from Africa was more or less important than the customs that they acquired and created in their new surroundings. It is more useful to look at the relationship between these two aspects in specific historical contexts and to examine the variety of resources that the people drew upon to fashion communities for themselves. The cultural dynamics and identities emanating from this interplay were always complex, multidimensional in scope, and fluid.

As mentioned, until the beginning of the eighteenth century a significant part of the enslaved population was comprised of people only temporarily living on the island, those waiting to be deported to the mainland Spanish colo-
ties. As an important regional slave depot, Curaçao played a key role in what Gilroy (1999) calls “the routing of black cultures” within the Americas. It has been established that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, most enslaved Africans destined for Curaçao came from the Gold Coast (now Ghana), the Slave Coast (Elmina, Fida, Ardra, Accra, Bencou), Angola, and Luango (the region north of the mouth of the Congo river (Postma 106; Jordaan 475; Römer 13). Blacks enslaved would recover their strength on the island after the transatlantic voyage before being transported to Spanish America (Kunst 125; Welie 176). The way in which their short layover in Curaçao affected local culture requires further exploration. The continuous influx of enslaved Africans may have shaped a certain dynamic diasporic culture among the resident enslaved Afro-Curaçaoans.

The role that seafaring played in transmitting culture in the African diaspora also merits further study. In times of economic adversity, Curaçaoan slaveowners would often hire out their enslaved males to work as seamen in order to acquire some revenue. Those who did not make use of this opportunity to escape presumably returned to the island because of family ties (Price 1371). The seafores probably became exposed to slave cultures in the wider Caribbean where the importation of enslaved people from different parts of Africa continued well into the nineteenth century. It is not unlikely that maritime maroons facilitated crossovers in African-derived culture and identity-building in the Atlantic world.

The factors that influenced the deportation of some slaves to the mainland and the retention of others on the island have not yet been satisfactorily studied. Slave-owners from the Spanish colonies and the island’s commercial elite expressed preferences for African captives from specific ethnic groups and areas, which must have influenced the ethnic constellation of the group remaining on the island. Some researchers have suggested that there was a local preference for keeping people from Luango (Angola), as they could act as interpreters between the Europeans and the newly imported enslaved people. This suggests that Luango slaves may have functioned as early “creolizers.”

In Papiamentu, terms such as “Luango,” “Bobo,” and “Guene,” which originally referred to particular African ethnic groups, survived for a long time in diverse expressions, songs, stories, and place-names and bear witness to these diverse ethnic backgrounds. The term “Luango,” for example, recurs
in the memories of Afro-Curaçaoans through stories, songs, and proverbs. In the course of slavery, “Luango” became a mark of distinction between the African-born and the Creole people. Early studies have erroneously concluded that in Curaçao “Luango” and “Guene” only have negative connotations (Van Meeteren; Hoetink 69-70). According to Van Meeteren (233), people from these areas were considered foolish as they spoke a language incomprehensible to others. Yet in the beginning of the eighteenth century, the WIC used seasoned Luangos as caretakers of newly arrived slaves (Jordaan 479). As mentioned, the primary reason was probably that these assistants could communicate with both the slave-traffickers and the new arrivals. Their communication with the new arrivals would presumably have some effect on these arrivals.

Some Papiamentu sayings and proverbs still use the term “Luango” in a negative sense. For example, the expression “Puñá pa luangú, bakobá pa makakú” (“A stab for the Luango is a banana for the monkey”) identifies Luangos as people who allow others to make a fool of them (Hendrikse-Rigaudié 293). The priest Putman states in a letter to his parents, dated 14 March 1838, that he had heard “two negroes quarreling, while one of them said: ‘Bestia quisco bo ta carda [pensa], fer [for?] di unda bo a vini ladron, Luango!’” (“Stupid, what do you think, where do you come from, thief, Luango?”). The other answered angrily: “Si bo no ta tapa bo boca un bez, lo mi dal bo un fostaa [bofta?], ku bo ta weita culu [kul?] pa un pompoena” (“If you don’t shut up immediately, I will give you a slap, such that you will see a backside for a pumpkin”).

But there are other assigned meanings: in some stories the Luangos and Guenes are portrayed as a supernatural people. They were believed to be small people with wings who could fly back to Africa provided they did not eat salt. The flying ability would be lost once salt was consumed. This theme can be

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3 This rather close collaboration with European slav-owners is at odds with the way Luango’s are often represented in oral history. Luango (Angola) was an important state in Africa during the time of the slave trade. Geographically it was large and included a number of tributary states that exercised considerable internal control and that were bound by payments of tribute outside any administrative decree (Thornton xxvi).

4 Putman 1937-1941. Putman lived in the eastern part of the island.

found in the music and oral literature of the wider Caribbean and the southern United States. Yusef Komunyakaa, in the article “Sorrow Songs and Flying Away,” states that these songs and stories reflect the desire of the enslaved to escape and throw off the bonds of slavery by defying physics and logic (281). The myth of flying came to imply freedom—either by escaping from the plantation or via the ultimate act of suicide (McDaniel 29, 38).

Due to their supposed ability to fly, the Luangos and Guenes enjoyed a certain prestige; one of my informants referred to them as “sabí di e tempunan ayá” (“wise people of those days”).

The following quotation comes from a man born in 1898; this information had been passed on to him by his elders.

R.A.: Di kon a yama nan ‘Luangu’?

R.A.: Why were they called Luangos?
C.E.: Because they were not people from here. They came from a part of Africa. In those days, the shous [the slavers] would go and buy people there to work for them. The Luangos used to fly back and forth. I grew up hearing that, and I heard that the shous had great trouble with them because they had wings [emphasis on wings]. They flew back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, until one time they flew away, never to come back again. Yes, that is what I grew up hearing. That is the way I heard it when I was growing up.

In this part of the oral history emphasis is placed on the fact that these enslaved people could not be controlled by the slave-owners and that their minds were not enslaved. Similar powers were attributed to the Guenes:

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6 According to McDaniel this differs from the West African myths, where only witches and spirits fly. This ability could nevertheless also end once salt was eaten.

7 Interview C.M. Elizabeth (born 1897), Allen, 15-6-1989. (NatAr).
C.E.: M’a lanta konosé un senora ku tabata biba na Montañá. E tabata kajes di e labaderanan di Newport. E tabata yu di un gueni. Su tata tabata un gueni. E tabata un mubé chikitu asina. Ami a tende ku e gueniran tin ala, pero esaki no tabatin ala. Tur esan ku tin ala a bula bai. El a ked’atras i el a trava na Santa Bárbara. El a ked’atras, pasó el a kome salu. P’esi el a ked’atras.\textsuperscript{8}

C.E.: I grew up knowing a lady who lived in Montañá. She was the head of the washer women in Newport. She was the child of a Guene. Her father was a Guene. She was a rather small woman. I heard that the Guenes had wings, but this lady did not have wings. All those who had wings flew away. She stayed behind and she worked in Santa Barbara. She stayed behind as she had eaten salt. That’s why she stayed.

This informant made a distinction between the Guenes who had not been born on the island and those who had been born on the island.

The term “Guene” also refers to a language, as the following quotation indicates. The informant sang several songs in Guene, taught to him by his elders, called the kantika di guene or kantika di makamba—songs mostly sung during work.

\begin{quote}
E lenga, nos ta bisa, nos tawela ta bisa, nos tata ta bisa ta lenga di gueni. Wél niun di nos no konosé e bendenan ku a papia e lenga ei. Nos a tende solamente ku nan tabatu biba den e mundu akt promé ku nos a bin biba akt. Nos ta nan rasa. Tá ese bendenan a kenta nos. Tabatin algun di nan ku por a bula. Esun ku a kome salu no por a bula bai. Espan ku a kome salu, a ked’atras. Nos ta nan rasa. Eseí mi tawela a bisami. Awoor akti nos ta kanta e kantikanan na gueni, pero e tempunan ei, nan no tabata kanta e kantikanan se, nan tabata papia gueni manera nos ta papia papiamentu awor.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

The language, we say, our grandfather said, our father would say, is the Guene language. Well, none of us knows the people who spoke that language. We only heard that they lived in this part of the world before we lived here. We belong to their race. That is what people have told us. There were some of them who could fly. Those who had eaten salt could not fly away. The ones who had eaten salt stayed behind. We belong to their race. That is what my grandfather told me. We now sing songs in Guene, but in those days, they did not only sing, they spoke Guene just like we speak Papiamento now.

Not only is the notion of ethnic origin present in the name given to this group of songs, the informant also addresses his (family) ancestry and the ethnic heritage of the Curaçaoan people, defining Curaçaoans as being of the Guene “race.”

\textsuperscript{8} Idem.

\textsuperscript{9} Interview Eduardo Tokaai (born 1899), Allen, 12-9-1984 (NatAr).
The enslaved sang in Guene to mislead their master. It was used as a secret language in which they could talk about their master. Later, some plantation owners became aware of this activity and prohibited singing in Guene. But it was still used in the period after Abolition to express feelings in a concealed manner. I was told by an informant born in 1905 that when they sang songs in Guene during work at the phosphate company, and the supervisor asked them about the meaning of the songs, they would lie about it. He enjoyed the fact that they could fool the supervisor in his face. This use of Guene complies with what Michael De Certeau sees as a reaction of the powerless against the action of the powerful. He states that power is bound by its very visibility and that the powerless need to resort to trickery (De Certeau 35). The use of Guene can be compared to the function of the kuenta di Nanzi (Anancy stories). In these stories, the main trickster figure Nanzi cunningly outsmares those higher in the socioeconomic hierarchy. The Guene language and the kuenta di Nanzi are clear examples of the “offstage” behavior of enslaved persons and the functioning of oral traditions as “hidden transcripts” discussed above.

Under conditions of slavery, the enslaved in Curacao used songs to tell their stories and record their experiences. Songs therefore also provide insight into beliefs about the world which they inhabited. In their cosmology, the figure of God played a dominant role with respect to food, social relationships, and destiny. In answering the question “Where did enslaved perceive themselves to stand in relation to this orientation to the world?” I would like to discuss the concept of pekadó (sinner). It appears in many songs and proverbs and seems to indicate the way in which Afro-Curaçaoans positioned themselves in the world. An example is the following song, Di ki manera. Different versions of this song have been collected from different informants across the island. Juliana and Brincker collected six. Rosalia (17) and I collected other variants from people born after Emancipation, which suggests that the song continued to be transmitted and survived among the younger generations, perhaps because it helped them to comprehend their own situation of subjugation.

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10 This I deduced from an interview with someone knowledgeable about Guene. He stated that on some plantations the inhabitants were prohibited from singing in Guene, as the owners suspected that they were singing about them.

11 Song by Mariti Pieters (born 1900), Banda Bou, T 11 and T 13; Martiti Pieters in Guene (T 14); Francisco Conquet (born 1882), Veeris, T 654; Janjhi Doran (born 1886), Wacawa, T 813; Damasiox Hooi (born 1887), Dokkerstuijn, T 1409). Zikinzi—collection, NatAr.

Di ki manera
 Di ki manera
 nos ta biba n’emundu aki,
 ora mi basi bon,
 pekadé di mi’ basi malu,
 ora mi basi malu,
 pekadé ta marmorá mi.

Tell me how
Tell me how
we are to live in this world,
when I behave well,
sinners say that I misbehaved,
when I behave badly,
sinners talk scandal of me.

In the song, one’s well-being is perceived as determined by others with more power. The lyrics “If I behave well, the sinner says that I misbehaved; if I behave badly, the sinner talks scandal of me” portray a feeling of hopelessness, because in whatever way one behaves, one is judged negatively. As this was said to be a slave song, the underlying feeling of domination is evident. On the other hand, the song vents anger, protest, and criticism at the institution of slavery and articulates aspirations of justice.

My version of the song resembles one collected by Brenneker and Juliana. It was sung to me by an informant born on the eastern part of the island. Rosalía’s variant specifies in which areas of life injustice was felt more profoundly. It shows the difficulties regarding land ownership and farming on the part of Afro-Curaçaoans. The following stanza describes the feelings of farmers when plantation owners would allow cattle to roam on their land—as part of the pagetera arrangement—and eat the maize stalks.

Di ki manera
Di ki manera
 nos ta biba n’emundu aki,
 ora mi basi bon,
 pekadé di mi’ basi malu,
 ora mi basi malu,
 pekadé ta marmorá mi.

Tell me how
Tell me how
we are to live in this world,
when I behave well,
sinners say that I misbehaved,
when I behave badly,
sinners talk scandal of me.

Di ki manera
Di ki manera
 nos ta biba n’emundu aki,

M’a sali kas
Ta kunuku mi ta bai
Yege port’e kunuku
ata baka den kunuku.13

Tell me how
Tell me how
we are to live in this world,
I left home
On the way to my farm
When I reached the gate
I saw cows grazing on my land.

On a different level the song also affirms equality: those with power sing just as those without power do.

The same notion of equality appears in the following narrative, which reflects on death and stresses that there is no distinction between rich and poor, Black and White, as far as mortality is concerned. In this sense, death is life's equalizer. Erquiles Martes, 77 years of age in 1976, stated in an interview with Brenneker and Juliana: “Lamuërtè no konosé riku, e no konosé pober. Bo por takon riku ku bo ta, dia yega bo tempu bo mester bai” (“Death does not distinguish between rich and poor. You can be quite rich, but when your time comes, you have to go”). It was through their mortality that White plantation owners were revealed to be human beings equal to Blacks. This philosophy of death as a leveler is also expressed in the following song:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Di mulena toto na uze} & \\
\text{Ai pober} & \\
\text{di mulena toto na uze} & \\
\text{Pober mi ta anto} & \\
\text{mi mana a nenga mi} & \\
\text{Ai, pober ta muri, blaniku tambe} & \\
\text{Ai, di mulena pober na uze}. & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Di mulena toto na uze} & \\
\text{Oh, poor man} & \\
\text{di mulena toto na uze} & \\
\text{I am poor and} & \\
\text{my mother has rejected me} & \\
\text{Oh, poor people die, but so do whites} & \\
\text{Oh, di mulena pober na uze}. & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Several narratives reveal how people had misused their powers to reach their goal. They reflect, for example, on how plantation owners could become poor before they died or experience an agonizing death. This also illustrates the belief that everything happens for a reason: “Nada to pasa pornada” (“Nothing happens without a reason”) and “Kada pakiko tin su pasombra” (“Everything has a reason”).

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15 Interview Joos Marta (born 1885, Wacawa), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinza-collection, T 815, NatAr).
16 Unable to translate.
17 Unable to translate.
18 Compare the Akan proverbs ‘Biribiara nsi kwa’ (Nothing just happens) and ‘Biribiara won e se nti’ (Everything has its ‘because of’) (Gyekye 1987:82).
CONCLUSION

The process of remembering through oral traditions is important in Afro-Caribbean social history. A large segment of the Curaçaoan population has transmitted and safeguarded its knowledge of the past orally. The values and ideas of those whom historiography has rendered almost silent are recovered through the social act of remembering and remain embedded in stories, songs, proverbs, myths, and rites. This intangible heritage re-enacts and gives voice to a persistent struggle for survival, coupled with a creative drive of self-definition and self-valuation. Afro-Curaçaoans have historically developed a spirit of social protest combined with values of equality, social justice and solidarity.

If the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713 is to be commemorated in a meaningful, balanced, and respectful way, then due attention must be paid to its consequences for enslaved Africans and African descendants from the perspective of the memories and experiences of these peoples. I therefore call upon the University of Utrecht to expand and deepen the dialogue that they have initiated in preparation of the commemoration of the Treaty of Utrecht on the slave trade and enslavement as experienced by enslaved peoples in the Caribbean and wider Atlantic world.
Oral Documents


Works Cited


