

CHAPTER X

Conclusion: Survival and Cultural Complexity

This study concerns the dynamics of Afro-Curaçaoan social life from 1863 until 1917. It explores especially material, family and religious life in the post-emancipation period. The historiography of Curaçao in the period between the formal abolition of slavery and the start of the industrialization process at the beginning of the twentieth century is meagre. In addressing this period and these themes, this study is in line with the tendency in Caribbean historiography to look at the ways in which the formerly enslaved developed their culture and gave meaning to their lives within the limited socio-economic possibilities available to them in the post-emancipation period.

In order to give an in-depth view of Afro-Curaçaoan life, the use of oral history has been central in this study. The written historical sources provide only one side of the past. These sources give little insight into how Afro-Curaçaoans used their culture to navigate their lives through continual forms of control. By using oral histories and interviews, I have tried to draw out long forgotten or hidden information about this group. The speakers themselves expose, in their own words, how diverse and complex their social reality was. The combination of different types of written and oral data enables us to better understand the complexity of the cultural dynamics among the Afro-Curaçaoan population.

In addition these data from oral history and tradition provide a particular insight into the lives of women, who have been doubly silenced in Curaçaoan historiography. Principally in proverbs, but in songs and stories as well, women displayed a consciousness of their lives, and expressed an awareness of the complexities imposed by race, class and gender-specific barriers. Their concerns included their partnerships with men, their feelings of happiness and disappointment with their children, their attitudes towards their parents and the nature of their relationships with other women.

When using oral data, one has to overcome the fact that oral sources are distinct from other types of historical primary material because of their continued reliance on memory. Oral testimonies are not contemporary with the events and issues related, and their recordings are mostly carried out long after the events have occurred. These data were therefore used with much caution as indicators of how Afro-Curaçaoans continually reassessed and valorized events and issues that occurred in their daily lives or in those of their ancestors. Mostly such information was encoded and conveyed values and principles specific to their culture.

Oral histories make quite clear the role of cultural meanings in shaping post-emancipation Afro-Curaçaoan cultural identities. This emic approach offers an alternative

perspective for examining the history of Afro-Curaçaoans by looking at the ways people symbolized and structured their understanding of life. Written sources on the daily life of people were used for cross-checking the oral sources. Sometimes as little as a sentence in the written documents gave a further lead to what people had related in their narratives. The combination of different types of written and oral data enabled me to better understand the complexity of the cultural dynamics among the Afro-Curaçaoan group taking place after emancipation.

This study deals with the close relationship between culture and power - especially the way in which this becomes manifest in the daily lives of subjugated people. The significance of the link between power and culture resounds in the particular social, political and racial matrix that shaped Afro-Curaçaoan life both in the pre- and post-emancipation periods. Even though my study explores power relations and how these were experienced by marginalized people, I have tried to go beyond the bipolarity of resistance and domination prevalent in older resistance theories. Instead, I attempt to demonstrate that subjugated people in their daily lives do much more than merely resist and oppose external social forces.

I suggest that post-emancipation daily life for Afro-Curaçaoans was not one of continuous tension and conflict. Social life also encompassed integration, social cohesion, solidarity and cooperation, as the former enslaved people negotiated within and outside of their social groups, struggling to survive within the constraints of the existing asymmetric power relations. The cultural dynamics and identities that evolved in and from these social interactions were complex, multidimensional in scope, and fluid.

The seeds for the cultural complexity which characterized post-emancipation social life were sown during slavery. The way Afro-Curaçaoans created and developed their social life after freedom in 1863 was rooted in the previous period of enslavement. The formal abolition of slavery did not mean an entirely new life for those who had received their freedom. While they faced new challenges, their economic and social lives continued to be marked by the legacies of the past.

Curaçao did not correspond with the conventional definition of a slave society where slavery was ubiquitous and central to the functioning of the economy. The island was not a monoculture of large-scale slave plantations determining the social life of an overwhelming majority of enslaved people. The proportion of freedpeople was relatively large and always growing. Rather than plantation agriculture, commerce was a distinguishing feature of the insular economy.

During the early phases of the transatlantic slave trade, Curaçao was a major transit port for enslaved Africans brought in Dutch ships destined to be sold again to mainland Spanish colonies. In that sense Curaçao holds a unique position in Caribbean slave societies. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, a significant part of the enslaved population was comprised of people only temporarily living on the island, waiting to be deported to the Spanish Main. The continuous influx of enslaved Africans may have shaped a diasporic culture among the enslaved Afro-Curaçaoans who remained informed of the African dynamics of the transatlantic trafficking in human beings.

The factors which influenced the deportation of some slaves to the mainland and the retention of others have not yet been satisfactorily studied. Slave-owners from the Spanish

Main 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 suggest a local preference for keeping people from Luango (Angola) on the island, as many of these could act as interpreters between the Europeans and the newly imported enslaved people. This implicates that specifically these Luango slaves were early creolizers. The term 'Luango' is recurring in the memories of Afro-Curaçaoan descendants through stories, songs and proverbs as an example of African origin as well. In the course of slavery, 'Luango' became a common mark of distinction between the African-born and creole enslaved people.

Environmental conditions deeply affected Curaçaoan society. Insufficient rainfall rendered it almost unviable for plantation agriculture. Subsistence farming was dominant and of concern for all members of society. This had a direct impact on the form of enslavement, the economic viability of the plantations, the type of labour demands and the nature of social relationships. On most plantations the enslaved combined different types of work.

Except for a few plantations in the western part of the island, most Curaçaoan plantations were small in size. This impacted on the nature of relationships both within and outside the social group. A noticeable characteristic resulting from the economic fragility of most plantations was that slave-owners often allowed their enslaved workers significant geographical mobility. Men were hired out to work in town as artisans, women as domestic servants. A high 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 were able to improve their economic conditions and to further develop their skills. They formed a group much sought after both on the island and abroad. Enslaved males would also be hired out to work as seamen in order to provide a monetary income for their owners. Even though there was significant maritime marronage, most of these enslaved sailors kept returning to the island, perhaps, as Price states, because of family ties.

One of the distinguishing features of slavery on Curaçao was the fact that the number of manumitted people, both black and of mixed race, grew considerably due to frequent manumissions. Some of these were formerly enslaved people who themselves or their families had been able to buy their freedom. Others were old and handicapped people whose owners simply disposed of them as economic liabilities: they gained their freedom when their owners could or would no longer continue feeding them. This unhappy group did not enjoy a smooth transformation from enslavement to freedom and was left to fend for itself. By entering freedom under the worst social conditions, these disadvantaged former slaves continued to be socially marginalized.

Frequent miscegenation led to a significant number of people of mixed race in society. Their roots lay with the children from unions between white slave-owners and black enslaved women. With some frequency, the white fathers gave their children their freedom. The relationship between these masters and their coloured mistresses and offspring was marked by social ties that seemed less racially polarized and to a certain extent even harmonious. Certainly, in this multiracial society, the group of mixed origins enjoyed a privileged status above the black population.

The social structure was therefore characterized by increasing complexity, both within and outside the sphere of the plantation. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Afro-

Curaçaoan population had steadily grown and had achieved significant diversity in terms of skin colour, class, and probably culture.

After emancipation, the Roman Catholic Church reinforced its involvement with the Afro-Curaçaoan population, leaving a strong mark on its cultural identity. The Church introduced educational activities, such as instruction in reading and writing, and tried to transform Afro-Curaçaoan culture by instilling its moral views on right and wrong in beliefs and everyday practices. The Church attempted to eradicate cultural conventions and practices it considered heathenish remnants of an African past.

At emancipation, society was heavily segmented along socio-economic and corresponding racial and colour lines. Afro-Curaçaoans who during the pre-emancipation period had been able to acquire their freedom as well as material resources, primarily land, could continue to live in fairly reasonable conditions. The majority instead - both those who had only become free on 1 July 1863 and those already freed before that date but without many resources - remained socially marginalized.

Basically as a rule, there were insufficient employment opportunities. The worrying question posited at the time of emancipation was not so much whether the freed would be willing to work, but rather whether there would be sufficient work for them to do in the first place. At the same time, the remaining plantation owners demanded a disciplined labour force ready to perform disciplined work when occasionally their labour was needed. This request went against the freedpeople's increasing desire for more mobility and autonomy. Many overcame their dependency and insecurity by looking for work outside of the plantations, either as urban workers or as independent peasants in the countryside. Clearly the former masters and their former slaves did not see eye to eye as to the meaning of freedom. This led to recurring clashes.

In the first decades after emancipation, the plantation owners continued their mechanisms of control. They successfully imposed the 'paga tera system' on those former slaves who continued to live on their plantations. This system was already developing in the pre-emancipation period as a means of controlling manumitted slaves. The paga tera system created a group of men and women living in a situation of semi-serfdom, being dependent for work and living space on their former slave-owners.

These people living under the paga tera system had very few rights. Their dependency was exposed in accusatory oral histories. Many considered the paga tera as a brutal continuation of the planters' domination of their lives. Adults, and their children and even their grandchildren, were trapped in the spiral of domination, so memory tells.

One way of becoming autonomous and to evade the power of the plantation owners was to acquire a piece of land of one's own through the government. In the first decades after abolition this was not easy, as the amount of government land was limited and as in addition the government tended to side with the plantation owners against the petitioners. In each case, the individual petitioner's personality had to be assessed. Government officials made their decision based on a character reference usually given by the owner of the plantation on which the applicant had lived. This reference was more than likely to meet his self-interest.

Often the only remaining option was to squat on the meagre sabana, pieces of land over which plantation owners assumed the privilege of grazing their animals. The squatting of the sabana led to clashes between plantation owners and inhabitants over its tenure. This ranged from direct opposition to the rules and regulations laid down to favour those in power to more covert ways of resistance.

Resistance had a cultural dimension, as in the celebrating of tambú dancing and singing on this squatted land, much to the disgust of the plantation owners. In doing so, these Afro-Curaçaoan squatters also dragged along those who lived nearby under the paga tera system, who were explicitly forbidden to engage in such expressions. Tambú was believed to have a demoralizing effect.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the land policy of the government started to give out more land to the poor. Even though it still sought advice regarding the personal characters of the petitioners from the plantation owners, the government now also relied on advice given by its own district masters. From this same period we have indications that some petitioners at least would not accept a negative decision and would continue to challenge this through legal procedures.

Once these peasants gained access to land, they used it for mixed-farming. Millet was the prime subsistence produce for local consumption. Previously, during slavery, they had cultivated millet on the small pieces of land on the plantation grounds - kunuku - allotted to them for subsistence farming. Millet was a domesticated agricultural product originating from Africa. The mainstay of subsistence agriculture was thus based on a traditional knowledge system transferred from Africa and adapted to the new conditions. This expertise became part of the indigenous practice of survival applied on the plantations as well as in their own gardens. In addition, peasants kept animals such as goats, domesticated pigs and chickens. The more successful ones would be able to use a donkey for transporting goods from the countryside to town and vice versa.

Increasingly Afro-Curaçaoans attempted to leave the poverty of the countryside to settle in the town of Willemstad, hoping to find better opportunities. This trend was opposed by the plantation owners who feared a shortage of labour. The new arrivals were soon met with the harsh realities of town life. There was some demand for labour in trade, the harbour and in craftwork. Nevertheless, in times of little demand for such labour, having a piece of land in the countryside could be crucial.

Divergent perceptions of life style developed: urban life came to be identified with cunningness, bravery and civilized behaviour, while rural identity was associated with docility, submissiveness and stupidity as well as uncivilized behaviour. Urban values were more associated with an increasingly sought alternative among Afro-Curaçaoans, this being labour migration. As elsewhere in the Caribbean, migration became a coping strategy and indeed a way of life of many men. Hundreds of Afro-Curaçaoan males emigrated to several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in the later nineteenth century.

In 1917 the largest labour migration took place, to the sugar fields of Cuba. Curaçao then stood at the threshold of a transition from a pre industrial society to an industrial one. For some migration was successful, in the sense that they returned with funds and were able to buy land and other properties. The largest group, however, returned as socially destitute as they had left.

These migrations, both within the island and outside of it, played an important role in the further development of Afro-Curaçaoan culture. Particularly intra-regional migration led to a cross-fertilization of local cultures with other Caribbean cultures. This manifested itself in the areas of religion, music and dance. For example, returnees from Cuba took with them musical instruments such as the guitar, *bongos*, *tres* and the *marimbula*. These returnees would transmit their cultural experiences to their home culture. Some formed musical groups, known as *banda di bongo* (bongo bands), which became very popular on Curaçao and contributed to the spread of the large variety of Cuban music on the island, such as the *son*, *guanguanco*, *rumba* and *mambo*. Many of these songs and rhythms were subsequently sung and composed in the local language, Papiamentu.

The Roman Catholic Church retained its position as a major cultural institution in the life of Afro-Curaçaoans. For the Church, the abolition of slavery meant less interference by former slave-owners and therefore more room for what it believed to be the moral uplifting of the lower classes. The clergy focused on 'civilizing' their values, beliefs and norms in all areas of life.

This civilizing mission focused on social aspects of life neglected by the other institutions of power, the colonial State and the socio-economic elites. The clergy would denounce the poor living conditions of the Afro-Curaçaoans and where necessary and possible provided relief help. The Church maintained a firm line in what it considered correct and moral behaviour, both through preaching and formal education among the younger generation. It tried to redefine every stage of the life cycle, from the day someone was born until he died. The clergy imposed their authority in rituals after birth, in initiation into manhood and womanhood, in marriage, last rites and burials.

Of course, the Church rejected all traces of religious belief which deviated from Catholicism. Life styles identified as heathenish were strongly condemned. The Church tried to penetrate more deeply than the colonial State into the private, domestic and social lives of its flock. Afro-Curaçaoans responded to this civilizing drive in sometimes paradoxical ways. Apart from the specific spiritual meanings, abiding by the value system of the Church provided advantages both in an economical and a social sense.

For example, some poor people who were close to the priests would be able to acquire a piece of land through the mediation of the Church. Others were able to ascend hierarchically through Catholic education and subsequently in work. In their daily lives they obeyed the norms set by the Church. Their behaviour conformed to the codes of 'respectability'. At the same time, Afro-Curaçaoan culture developed through the creative re-appropriation of Catholic values, norms and practices and their reinterpretation according to local traditional practices and values.

A graphic example of this paradoxical appropriation was the idealization of the ideal of *biba un bida drechi* (living a respectable life). This concept was introduced by the Church to encourage couples of opposite sex to institutionalize their relationship in a monogamous and stable marriage. While this became an accepted norm of respectability, at the same time there remained wide acceptance of male relationships outside of this idealized code.

The codes imposed by the Church were at once formally accepted but in actual practice challenged. Another striking example is the *seú* ceremony celebrated after the millet harvest in March and April. The *seú* was accepted by the Roman Catholic Church and the elites, who considered it a harmless expression of gratitude to God for having received a good harvest. But these celebrations also contained elements of opposition and negotiation. Thus the *seú* celebrations started with indeed seemingly harmless work songs, but ended with the 'vulgar' and 'heathenish' *tambú*, a dance abhorred by both Church and the colonial State.

In this *seú*, several contradictory values were acted out. Thus the acts of *toro manzinga* and *toro mansebo* performed during this celebration expressed male identity and masculinity. Yet another example of this reinterpretation of cultural elements is the custom of *wak èzè* practiced during the eight days before a baby was baptized in Church. Other examples refer to the rituals surrounding death and burial, in which Roman Catholic rituals were combined with African derived ones. Catholic Saints such as *San Antoni*, *San Juan* and *San Pedro* were venerated in quite different ways from those dictated by the Catholic faith. Afro-Curaçaoan veneration included drumming, dancing and non-Catholic symbolisms.

As I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding Chapters, the life of most Afro-Curaçaoans was characterized by a continuous struggle for survival. Struggles for land, for economic survival and for security were coupled to a drive to achieve dignity and to combine values imposed by the 'white' institutions with cultural practices, some of which originated in Africa and others developed in a long period of slavery. In all of this, the internal differentiation among the Afro-Curaçaoan majority increased along the dimensions of class, ethnicity, gender, generation and area of domicile.

Cultural complexity characterizes the lives of Afro-Curaçaoans. While they built surviving mechanisms in all spheres of life, they also developed values relating to mutual help, social assistance and reciprocity. This spirit of interdependence and solidarity manifested itself in many areas of life, such as in shared labour, during harvest time, at child birth, on the building of a home, during illness and on death, but also in a range of recreational activities. However, there is little reason to assume that a spirit of solidarity always reigned supreme. Equally there is no ground to make up an idealized image of a valiant people constantly defying the institutions of power. Alongside and perhaps more clearly than resistance, accommodation held sway.

The leading question of this thesis was '*What role did the State, the former slave-owners and the Roman Catholic Church play in the lives of Afro-Curaçaoans in the post-emancipation era, in what ways did Afro-Curaçaoans shape their own material, social and spiritual lives, either within, outside or in opposition to the constraints of these institutions?*'

I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this thesis that an immense asymmetry in power relations characterized Curaçaoan society. The vast African-origins majority of the population had only limited access to the island's natural resources monopolized by the white elites both during and after slavery. Even after emancipation, it took the colonial State decades to develop a land policy which at least started to take the interests of the

Afro-Curaçaoan population seriously. The same can be observed of the provision and regulation of work.

The Roman Catholic Church had its own agenda of 'civilization'. The imbuing of the former slave population with Catholicism was envisioned as a package including the enforcing (sometimes by means of corporal punishment) of a 'western' work ethic, law obedience, disciplined kinship patterns characterized by the nuclear family, and the extinction of what was considered African 'heathenish' culture.

While the great majority of the formerly enslaved population eventually became Catholic, the wider 'package' became anything but universal. The popular culture which evolved in the post-emancipation period was marked by a mixture of resistance to the pressures of the 'white world' as well as the adoption of local variations of the models imposed by the State and particularly the Church. In the process, the Afro-Curaçaoan population became gradually more diverse within itself, along the lines of class, colour, gender and generation.

Note

- 1 Bongos: two small drums joined by a piece of wood, held on the lap. One plays with the finger and the palm of the hand. Tres: three-stringed guitar, typical of Cuba, mainly used in *son* and *punto guajiro*. *Marimbula*: instrument used by *son* groups.