

## CHAPTER IV

# Celebrating Freedom: The Abolition of Slavery on Curaçao

## *Introduction*

On 8 August 1862 the so-called Emancipation law was passed. The enslaved in the Dutch colonies would become free on 1 July 1863. Accordingly, the 67 government- slaves and 6,958 private slaves on Curaçao gained their freedom on this date (*Lantèrnu* 2003:17). The proclamation was read out in Papiamentu in every Roman Catholic Church on the island. Events were held to celebrate freedom; people played music and danced; there were processions in the streets. These activities had already begun on 30 June 1863 and would continue for some days (*Lantèrnu* 2003:21). In his report on the celebration of Emancipation day on the island, governor Johannes D. Crol stated that ‘everything remained within the bounds of decency. The recently freed behaved orderly and quietly and in that way their behaviour left nothing to be desired’ (quoted in van Dissel 1868:512). In emphasizing ‘decency, order and good conduct’ among the recently freed, the governor attempted to correct some of the apprehensions existing about Afro-Curaçaoans.

Why did Crol need to concern himself with denying any kind of bad behaviour on the part of the freedpeople? What was the reality surrounding this event? Was emancipation an exuberant celebration of freedom or merely a calendar event? What exactly did freedom represent and how would this affect the former slave-owners?

The enslaved on Curaçao became free 29 years after emancipation in the British colonies and 15 years later than those in the French colonies. As a consequence of the abolition of slavery in neighbouring societies, slaves both in Suriname and on the Antillean islands had become increasingly restless and had begun to voice their dissatisfaction. Escaping slaves from the three Windward Islands could make for the nearby British islands, where they became free citizens. When the slaves in the French part of St. Martin received their freedom in 1848, their Dutch counterparts on the island strongly protested against their continued enslavement. The already impoverished slave-masters, along with the colonial government, had little option but to relent and also give slaves in the Dutch section their *de facto* freedom, albeit with the proviso that they remained in the employment of their former masters, being paid a small salary (Römer 1990:48).

These regional events would provoke increasing uneasiness amongst the enslaved, which necessarily affected the situation on Curaçao. Such occurrences finally led the colonial government to realize that emancipation could no longer be postponed. At the same time, members of the ruling class began to consider the ramifications of this large group

being introduced to free society. What would this entail for those already freed at an earlier stage, for the former slave-owners and for the newly freed themselves?

There was less debate on the islands than in Suriname, where there was fervent lobbying by the sugar planters in particular (Oostindie 1995b:153). Most of the discussions on the islands focused on financial matters, particularly the amount of compensation slave-owners would receive from the government once freedom was granted (Oostindie 1997:56-77). Besides these economic factors, concern focused on the social conduct of the soon to be freed slaves.

These debates fall under what Eudell (2002) has labelled 'political language'. Human beings understand their social realities and legitimize their ways of life by means of their language, which is never neutral, as it invokes values, summarizes information and suppresses the inconvenient. 'Political language then, is one in the sense of idioms, rhetoric, specialized vocabularies and grammars, modes of discourse and ways of talking about politics, created, diffused and employed in specific circumstances by former slaves, former slave-masters and government officials' (2002:10).

In the context of slavery, political language was used to legitimize enslavement in an intellectual manner. Therefore it was not solely a system of social inequality, but one upheld by a cultural system with its specific conceptions of activities, its concepts and language (Eudell 2002:8-9). Freedom also carries its own conception; the political language employed in the context of freedom – as opposed to enslavement – embodies certain norms and values. In understanding post-emancipation life this cultural dimension to the issue of freedom should be taken into account.

In these debates and discussions on the abolition of slavery on Curaçao, the concept of freedom is circumscribed by paradigms of values and ideas by which the ruling class claimed and reasserted its authority, based on how society was instituted during slavery. These ideas mapped the social position former slaves would occupy in society. Indirectly, they reflected the perception of what direction Curaçaoan society should take after emancipation. Former slave-owners and government officials used their weight within formal institutions to express their political views on freedom.

Yet, former slaves also possessed a whole complex of attitudes, values, self-images and notions of their rights, which they brought to the fore. Naturally, the experience of slavery influenced their interpretation of what freedom meant. In that way they countered the perception of freedom of those of the dominant class. In this Chapter I will describe how Emancipation day on Curaçao was celebrated. I will use a selection of songs which give insight into the ways in which former slaves and owners viewed freedom.

### *Gradual versus Immediate Freedom*

Oostindie (1995a) contains a series of articles which try to explain that the emancipation of slaves in the Dutch territories was not primarily driven by economics. Essentially the book argues against the link between capitalism and the anti-slavery movement made by Eric Williams (1944). This link falls short, certainly when applied to the Dutch model. At the time of abolition in the Dutch territories, the Netherlands were experiencing strong

financial growth within a capitalistic free market system. Drescher (1995:25-67) compares the diverse ways in which the anti-slavery movements evolved in the various European metropolises. He concludes that these were not only induced by economic factors, but increasingly by a growing social awareness regarding new forms of social conduct and roles, individual rights and citizenship regardless of race.

The relatively late timing of emancipation is not due to economic factors in the Dutch West Indies, argues Oostindie. He states that on the one hand, the Dutch public simply did not care for or knew much about these colonies considered insignificant in comparison to the Dutch East Indies. Both the West Indies and slavery itself were hardly a matter of public debate. The major economic factor in delaying abolition was the Dutch treasury's lack of available funds to pay for indemnification of the slave-owners. In the end, the funds were derived from the booming Javanese economy. Exploited East Indian labourers paid for the emancipation of enslaved West Indians.

Wide cultural distances characterized the Dutch colonial empire. This certainly applied to the Caribbean islands, where the tongue of their colonizers was marginal, unlike in other Caribbean societies. In Curaçao, Papiamentu was the lingua franca. Dutch hardly mattered. What little Dutch influence there was on the island stemmed principally from the Church, as colonial government tended to be a regime very much in the background (Oostindie 1995b:161-7). Oostindie goes on to demonstrate how the various discussions taking place in anticipation of freedom placed emphasis on the requirement that the Afro-population demonstrate decent and orderly conduct.

An important document which allows us to gain access to political language at that time is the report by the State Commission installed in 1853 by the Dutch government in order to prepare for emancipation. This report (Staatscommissie 1856) contains letters from citizens who were concerned with the plight of the enslaved following emancipation. Furthermore, it contains interviews with people considered knowledgeable on island issues, having held important positions within society and having lived on the islands for a long period. On Curaçao interviews were held with three persons: a former governor, a priest and a businessman. The interviewees were told about the social and economic conditions of the enslaved and freed before emancipation. The report also reveals ideas held by the dominant class regarding Afro-Curaçaoans, both the freed and the enslaved.

There was some doubt as to whether the enslaved were ready for freedom. When asked by the Commission whether this was the case, the answers diverged. The former governor I.J. Rammelman Elsevier considered them ready; he was of the opinion that any postponement would have adverse effects (Staatscommissie 1856:241). The businessman van der Meulen, however, did not think they were ready for immediate emancipation. He doubted whether they were capable of fending for themselves and painted a bleak picture of possible starvation (Staatscommissie 1856:264).

The fact that the members of the Commission asked the Catholic priest Putman the same question shows that they themselves were convinced that emancipation was inevitable – slaves were being freed throughout the region – and that soon society would consist of solely free citizens. The priest was asked how one should go about granting freedom to the Afro-Curaçaoans. Putman was adamantly advocating an immediate rather than

gradual introduction to freedom, as the latter option would involve years of transition in the form of apprenticeships or probation (Staatscommissie 1856:241).

If freedom was inevitable, a central question then became: what would this imply for Afro-Curaçaoans? Or, more specifically, would they be able to deal with their newly found freedom? Slave-owners expressed their fear that former slaves would be resentful. Insurrections against whites in other Caribbean societies demonstrated that this fear was not unfounded.<sup>1</sup> However, the overall belief at the time, which was constantly reiterated in reports, was that when compared to other slaves in the Americas, those on Curaçao were calmer, and hence would not act upon any resentment held against their former slave-owners. In 1857, six years before emancipation, van Dissel accentuated this aspect of the enslaved: 'The character of the enslaved is not so evil. In general they are quiet, submissive and peace loving' (1857:116-7).

Yet the ruling class was not optimistic about the way Afro-Curaçaoans would deal with freedom. This pessimism was also grounded on perceptions they held of the free coloured population. Indeed, in a report by the governor after emancipation, he observes a kind of behaviour pattern among the recently freed which he felt had always existed among the freed black population, namely the lack of responsibility in fulfilling their obligations (van Dissel 1868:513).

As we have seen, the number of blacks on Curaçao already free before the end of slavery was greater than the number still enslaved. This was at odds with the rest of the Caribbean. The dominant class, thus, was already accustomed to a large group of freed blacks in society. As was the case elsewhere, the legacies of slavery continued to burden this group as it struggled to integrate (Berlin and Morgan 1993:61). In the eyes of the dominant class, the freedpeople were less disciplined than the enslaved, whose behaviour was largely controlled by their owners. For some former slaves, the association between slavery and labour was so intimate that freedom literally meant idleness. They worked only when necessary and occasionally enriched their diet by stealing food. The vision of theft haunted the plantation owners, who used this as an argument against impending emancipation. For example, one plantation owner cited the theft of his animals by manumitted former slaves as a reason for requesting to fence his plantation. The government granted this request.<sup>2</sup>

The immediate question then became: how was it possible to regulate the social behaviour of an enlarged community of free citizens, as slave-owners would no longer have legal authority to exercise power over the activities and lives of these individuals? Two concepts dominated the discourse on this matter: 'morality' and 'civilization'. In the aforementioned report these words appeared in reflections on the character of the black popular class. Following emancipation, such statements would become even more outspoken. 'Blacks' should be civilized and be taught moral standards. They often were defined as immoral and anti-social, a population whose behaviour needed to be monitored and regulated. This raises the question as to what the ruling class deemed 'moral and civilized behaviour'. After all this would be the bench mark by which the behaviour of Afro-Curaçaoans would be judged.

Some were more specific about what they thought to be immoral and uncivilized conduct. They cited shortcomings such as lack of labour discipline, lack of work ethic, lack of a nuclear family life, and dishonest and disorderly behaviour (Oostindie 1995b:158-67).

The 'cultural agenda of reconstruction', as Eudell calls this phenomenon, entailed setting up a more detailed programme to teach the former slaves proper behaviour and new values, in doing so dispelling the old ones, connected to their African backgrounds and their culture of slavery (2002:17).

### *The Roman Catholic Church's Perception of Freedom*

The letter written by vicar apostolic J.F.A. Kistemaker which was read out on Emancipation day, began by declaring that the day of freedom had arrived and that everyone would now be part of society as a free person. 'The sun that rises for you on the first of July, rises for the first time for the free.' Kistemaker underlined certain issues in his letter, such as work discipline, which he also affirmed as a religious activity. He associated laziness with sinful behaviour, punishable by the State, but above all by God.

*Our government has also instituted a law aimed at people who do not want to work. Idleness is thus also an omission against the law. Consider work as an obligation imposed by God on the people. If you do not abide by the law, you will experience the consequences of free society, because poverty and misery will be your fate.<sup>3</sup>*

Some behaviour patterns of the previously manumitted were held up as examples to be avoided by the newly freed. This principally concerned the custom of some freedpeople to work on Sundays and Christian holidays, making it impossible to attend mass. Often slaves had used the fact that they had to work on Sundays and holidays in order not to go to Church on Sundays. Kistemaker reminded them that this could no longer be the case. He paid particular attention to the issue of sexual morality and monogamy. Whilst summing up the characteristics of slavery, Kistemaker also mentioned that there was now no longer a law prohibiting marriage. He expanded on this issue and stated:

*We expect that (...) as there is no longer a restriction on marriage, that you will end your promiscuous behaviour. We expect that with God's help, freedom will be a way to end this awful custom existing among a Christian population. We also trust that the government will facilitate the process of marriage.<sup>4</sup>*

Clearly, this was a hint to the government to actively start promoting a change in behaviour.

Catholic missionaries also had a say in the way in which freedom was expressed. The following poem is one of the few preserved in written form from that time. It was part of Father Euwens' collection. The lyrics reveal the influence of the Roman Catholic Church; the poem was most probably ghost-written by a priest.<sup>5</sup>

## Cancion di libertat

Roeman nan gradici ku Noos  
 Pa cielo soe bondad  
 Foor di toer bofoon noos tie é koos  
 Noos tien noos libertat  
 Awé na bolontad die Rey  
 Y pa boos di noos nasjoon  
 Pa ..... noos tin dilanti die Ley  
 Liber die toer sjoon  
 Bam pidie Doos rodiá baauw  
 Koe santoe debosjoon  
 Su bindisjoon pe és bon trabaauw  
 Hasi pa noos nasjoon  
 Noos tata grandie goestoe y boon  
 Y maas sabi koe noos  
 Manda awe bo bindisjoon  
 Pa toer boon jieuw die Dioos  
 Den bida largo i salud  
 Kontentoe motjoe koos  
 Pa Rey, La Reyna i su jieuw  
 Nos toer ta pidie Dioos  
 Reconicido noos lo ta  
 Pa doechi libertat  
 Ma Dioos bo man so lo paga  
 Y obra die bondad  
 Sjoon nan adioos, na Dioos soe  
 manoe  
 Lo tien in (Noos ta sigoe)  
 Amoor pa noos y bosonan  
 Hoestichie pa noos toer  
 Niengoen koe noos lo ta rabiá  
 Oen pober poor ta boon  
 Pa sabi keen ta fortoena  
 Noos tien noos koerason  
 Noos tien noos koerason  
 Awe no tien kegamiento mas  
 Ni manoe riba noos  
 Noes toer ta jieuw stima di oen kaas  
 Katiboe die Dioos  
 Salud Dioos doechi pa trabaauw  
 Contentoe koe noos Ley  
 Y biba semper Corsouw  
 Hoelanda y noos Rey  
 Hulanda y noos Rey

Corsouw, 1 July 1863

## Song of freedom

Brothers and sisters say thanks together with us  
 For heaven's goodness  
 Out of every mockery, we have the thing  
 We have our freedom  
 Today in willingness of the King  
 and the voice of our nation  
 We are ..... in the eyes of the law  
 Free from all owners  
 Let us ask God on our knees  
 With holy devotion  
 His blessing for this good work  
 Done to our nation  
 Our great father just and good  
 More knowledgeable than us  
 Send today your blessing  
 To all good children of God  
 In long life and in health  
 very glad  
 For the King, Queen and her child  
 We ask God  
 Grateful we will be  
 For the sweet freedom  
 But only God will pay  
 For this work of goodness  
 Owners goodbye and from  
 God's hand  
 There will be (we are sure)  
 Love for us and for you  
 Justice for all of us  
 None of us will be angry  
 A poor person can be good  
 To know who is fortunate  
 We have our heart  
 We have our heart  
 Today there will be no complaint anymore  
 No hands over us  
 We are all children from one home  
 Slaves of God  
 Here is to sweet God for work  
 Happy with our law  
 And long live in Curaçao  
 Holland and our King  
 Holland and our King

Curaçao, 1 July 1863

The following song also conveys the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church in the expression of freedom (*Lanternu* 2003:24). The author is unknown and the song was dedicated to governor Crol, who signed the proclamation of freedom in Dutch, English and Papiamentu. To a greater extent than the former song, it expresses a firm belief in labour, distinguishing sharply between free and forced labour. It also expresses that the newly freed should not harbour any ill-feeling towards their former owners.

*Awe ta dia di nos salvasjon  
E dia tan sperá  
Ban gradicie e grandie Sjon  
Koe awoor ta goberna  
Si! Nos ta mashaar gradicie  
Na Rey di nos nasjon  
Gradicie na Sjon Willem drie,  
Jamaar Willem Bon!  
Awoor si. Nos ta wyta klaa  
Koe e ta Willem bon!  
Na ..... e a haya  
E nombre di soe nasjon  
I awoor tambe ta guierta koe nan  
Nos toer, joe di akie,  
Koe'n glas di likoor na kada man:  
Biba, Biba Willem drie  
Pa Willem, lo nos hasi orasjon  
I pa soe joe nan toer  
Lo nos pidi koe devosjon  
Oen bida si saloer  
I Reina lo nos no loebida  
Ma pidi di nos korason  
Koe Djoos done prosperidá  
I oen bida di bendisjon  
Tambe e estimaar nasjon,  
E nashon di libertat,  
Bendishone koe toer koos bon  
O! Djoos di bondad!  
I toer e sjon nan koe ta goberna  
Na tera di Hoelanda,  
Rekonosie na nan lo nos tá  
Pe koos koe nan a mandá  
Sjon grandi di Corasaauw  
Djoos dona bo saloer  
Na kompania di Mevraauw  
I di bo joe nan toer  
Ai, papja danki na nos Rey  
Pe grandisimo bondad,  
Di manda nos e dushi ley  
E ley di libertat*

*Today is the day of our salvation  
The most expected day  
Let us thank the important shon  
Who is ruling now  
Yes! We are very grateful  
To the King of our nation  
Grateful to Mr William the Third,  
Named William Good!  
Now we clearly see  
That he is William Good!  
At the ..... he got  
The name of his nation  
And now, he will shout with them  
All of us, children of this place,  
With a glass of liquor in each hand:  
Long live William the Third  
We will pray for William  
And for all his children  
We will ask with devotion  
A healthy life  
And we will not forget the Queen  
But we ask with all our heart  
That God give her prosperity  
And a blessed life  
Also for beloved nation,  
The nation of freedom,  
Bless it with all that is good  
O! God of goodness!  
And every ruler who governs  
In the country of Holland,  
We will be grateful to them  
For the thing that they have sent  
The governor of Curaçao  
God bless you with health  
In the company of mistress  
And all your children  
Oh, convey our thanks to the King  
For the largest goodness,  
For sending us the sweet law  
The law of freedom*



*Ai, papja danki pa nos toer  
 Ne grandie i bon Nashon;  
 Ma, bo por hacie mehor, segoer  
 Si ta hasier di korason.  
 Ai, papja danki tambe pa nos,  
 Na Sjon Ministernan.  
 E sjon nan k'a kita e koos  
 E marga di nos pan.  
 Adios Sjon nan, Sjon nan Adjoos  
 Adjoos di nos korason  
 Nos ta kontentoe koe e koos  
 Ma no a loebida nos Sjon  
 Ai, tene nos na nos trabaauw  
 Koe goesto lo nos trahá  
 Traha pa toer Sjon di Corasaauw,  
 Ma traha,... trabaauw hoestá  
 Awe nos ta baljá i divertí  
 Maajá tambe podisé  
 Ma na semaan koe ta bini  
 Trabaauw lo nos mesté  
 Ma no trabaauw, trabaauw forsá  
 Esai lo nos no tien  
 Trabaauw di katibu a kabá  
 I Esklabitoed tien fin  
 Ban gradicie na Djoos awoor  
 Koe kantieka di gratitoed  
 El a kita di nos e dolor,  
 E kadena d'esklabitoed  
 Moestra tambe nos bienhetsjoor  
 Koe nos mer'ce e bondad  
 Koe nos mer'ce e grandie faboor  
 Di haya nos libertat!  
 I Roga tambe na nos Santoe Djoos  
 Pe dona nos bon trabaauw  
 I forsá pa pidi koe nos voos  
 Saloer pa nos Corasaauw!  
 Biba sjon Wimpie! Biba Hoelanda!  
 Semper lo noos guierta  
 M'awé guierta k'oen glas di bibida  
 Biba Sjon Crol, Bibá!*

*Oh, express our gratitude  
 To the great and good Nation;  
 But, you can do it better, surely  
 If you do it from the heart.  
 Oh, convey our thanks also,  
 To the masters ministers.  
 The ones who had taken away the thing  
 The bitterness of our bread.  
 Goodbye owners, owners goodbye  
 Goodbye from our heart  
 We are happy with the thing  
 But did not forget our owner  
 Oh, keep us at our work  
 We will gladly work  
 Work for all the owners of Curaçao  
 But work,... contract work  
 Today we will dance and enjoy ourselves  
 Maybe tomorrow also  
 But the coming week  
 We will need to work  
 But not work, forced work  
 That we will not have  
 Slave-work has ended  
 And slavery has an end  
 Let us thank God now  
 With songs of gratitude  
 He has taken from us the pain,  
 The chain of slavery  
 Let's also show our benefactor  
 That we deserve his goodness  
 That we deserve his big favour  
 Of getting our freedom!  
 And beg also our Holy God  
 To give all of us good work  
 And strength to ask with our voice  
 Health for our Curaçao!  
 Long live shon Wimpie! Long live Holland!  
 We will always shout  
 But today we'll cheer with a glass of wine  
 Long live governor Crol, long live!*

The following speech made by a man named Gerardus Vos on behalf of the recently freed also displays evidence of Roman Catholic influence (*Lantèrnu* 2003:25). In this speech slavery is equated with misery and adversity, while freedom is likened to prosperity and happiness. It thus tried to voice more than the previous poems, in the way that it triumphed freedom.



*What a happy day we experience today, as we see for the first time, the governor participating in our insignificant midst, in celebration of this party for the people. Every African must be proud and record this day of freedom in his memory. It is the immortal William III, who delivered us from our state of misery and adversity to prosperity and happiness. Our ancestors went to their graves with laments, plunged into horrible darkness of melancholy, without hope, fatigued by tiredness and suffering as a result of slavery.*

Once again King William III is credited with playing an important role in the abolition of slavery; thus the enslaved were called upon to be thankful to him. This was reiterated in the second part of the speech.

*Should we not show a thousand times our thanks and our benediction to the honorable King, who took us from the disastrous state of slavery and elevated our status to honorable citizens? Don't we now live in a more glorious era than the one experienced by our ancestors? Who should we give tribute to and show our gratitude? To William, the greatest! To the friend of humanity, who equals God with his deeds.*

### ***The Freedpeople's Perception of Freedom***

How did the enslaved people perceive their newly gained freedom? When interviewed in 1853, the former governor Rammelman Elsevier talked about the need to form villages for the black population after emancipation. According to him, as a governor he did his utmost to persuade the freed population to go and live in the areas around churches, in order to establish villages, in which one could easily exercise police authority. He lamented that it was not possible to inspire the free black population to become active and attributed this to their ideas of freedom. He maintained that freedom meant for them the right to live where they wanted (Staatscommissie 1856:231-2). It is evident that the elite did not perceive freedom in the same way as the freed.

Even in the final days of slavery, some enslaved did not wait for emancipation. The large number of escapes during the last years of slavery demonstrates an ardent desire for freedom. These numbers were even higher than the official figures stated, as slave-owners did not always inform the authorities of slaves having escaped, fearing that they would receive less or even no compensation at the end of slavery.<sup>6</sup> A population census for the control of finance conducted on 5 January 1857 on Curaçao indicates a disparity of 280 slaves, which was attributed to the fact that slave-owners had not registered the death or escapes of their slaves.<sup>7</sup>

Boats were commonly used to escape. During my research I met a woman born in 1886, whose enslaved grandmother and sister had fled to Carthage, Columbia in a boat transporting *dividivi*;<sup>8</sup> they were aided in their escape by the captain.<sup>9</sup> The escape from the island as a manifestation of the general desire for freedom is also supported in information the governor received regarding slaves who had fled to Venezuela and St. Thomas. They had informed their masters that they had done so, not because they were treated

badly, but out of an urge to be free. But as they found themselves treated harshly in the places they had fled to, they would have liked to return to Curaçao, but feared punishment, so would rather go back at the time of emancipation – in doing so, making it possible for their masters to receive the compensation payable for each slave freed.<sup>10</sup>

As early as the 1850s rumours were circulating regarding the approach of freedom. The editor of the *Kerkelijke Courant* stated in 1862 that the enslaved had already been promised freedom circa ten years previously.<sup>11</sup> It is evident that slaves anticipated freedom well before 1863 and gradually became more and more anxious about the prospect. In a letter dated 31 October 1862, the Attorney General informed the district masters that some slaves from town were planning to thank the governor on the coming Sunday for the expected emancipation. The Attorney General feared that the plantation slaves would follow this example and therefore requested the district masters to tell them that emancipation would be due on the first of July the following year and they could thank them then.<sup>12</sup>

The question arises as to whether they sang the following song due to their discontent with waiting endlessly. A woman born in 1916, whose father's mother sang this song while doing her daily chores, remembered it. She explained that the enslaved felt taken advantage of by King William III, who presumably had promised them freedom, which again and again failed to materialize. In this song the role of William III in the abolition of slavery is not taken for granted. It expresses a feeling of anxiety due to the concern that freedom was being withheld.

*Biba biba biba biba Wilmu Dèrdu  
Biba biba biba biba Wilmu Dèrdu  
Ma parse Wilmu Dèrdu  
Bo tin idea di frega nos  
Ma pa bo frega nos  
Bo bai frega bo mama.*<sup>13</sup>

*Long live, long live William the Third  
Long live, long live William the Third  
But it seems William the Third  
You are thinking of making a fool of us  
But instead of making a fool of us  
Go and fool your mother*

The following variant of a similar song was collected by Juliana and Brenneker in the 1960s from Ma Djini, living in Otrobanda, who was born in 1869, six years after emancipation.

*Ta ki ora Rei ta bini  
Ki ora rei ta manda libertat  
Rei ta pompa  
Rei ta pompa  
Rei bai pompa rei su mama.*<sup>14</sup>

*When is the King coming  
When is the King sending freedom  
The King is fooling  
The King is fooling  
The King should go fool his mother*

The following song expressed a similar feeling and is intended as a demand:

*Libertat, galité  
La reina Viktoria  
Manda e kos pa nos!  
Libertat, galité  
La reina Viktoria*

*Freedom, equality  
Queen Victoria  
Send the thing for us!  
Freedom, equality  
Queen Victoria*

*Manda e kos pa nos!  
Libertat, galité  
Willem de derde  
Manda e kos pa nos!<sup>15</sup>*

*Send the thing for us!  
Freedom, equality  
William the Third  
Send the thing for us!*

And finally:

*Barku a bai, barku a bin  
Ta ki nobo Rei a manda?  
Ken k'a bini  
Nan a laga rei na soño.<sup>16</sup>*

*Ships come and ships go  
Is there any news from the King?  
Everyone who arrives  
(says) they left the King asleep*

This correlates with the following account, in which someone is accused of withholding emancipation. It reveals restlessness amongst the slaves as they await freedom. It also shows how the people in Banda Bou mythologized the previously mentioned bomba Ba Balentin, who was considered wicked. They attributed to him an important role in the delay of freedom.

*Ba Balentin fitó, mester a pasa Sabaneta, Seiro-  
ma, Lagun i Kenepa. El a pasa Sabaneta sin  
duna libertat, pasó e tabata mal kontentu ku  
Lareina a kumpra tur kabes di katibu pa kuen-  
ta di 50 florin pa kabes. La reina<sup>17</sup> a bisa ku e no  
ta kasa bou di bandera manchá pa krímen di  
sklabitut. Ba Balentin a duna libertat na Seiro-  
ma ku Lagun ku Kenepa. Seiroma ku Lagun ku  
Kenepa.<sup>18</sup>*

*Ba Balentin, the slave overseer, had to visit the  
plantations Sabaneta, Seiroma, Lagun and  
Kenepa. He called at Sabaneta without giving  
the slaves their freedom, because he was not sat-  
isfied that the Queen had bought the slaves for  
fifty guilders each. The Queen refused to marry  
under a flag blemished by the crime of slavery.  
Ba Balentin gave freedom to the slaves on the  
plantations Seiroma, Lagun and Kenepa.*

Here it is not a royal figure responsible for the delay, but a wicked bomba, someone belonging to their own group presumably holding a grudge against the enslaved on a certain plantation. Indirectly, the bomba is recognized as having overall power.

In one of the above songs the name of Queen Victoria appears. Former slaves in the British colonies considered Queen Victoria as the person responsible for their freedom. In Jamaica this led her to be called 'Queen Free' (Lewin 1984:18). The informant could not give any explanation as to why Queen Victoria was mentioned.

She is mentioned once again in the lyrics of the following song. Martina Felipe, whom I interviewed in 1983, was born in 1893 and remembered her grandmother singing it.<sup>19</sup> According to Martina Felipe, freedom was given to Curaçaoan slaves after people had denounced the atrocities of slavery to the authorities in Holland. This shows recognition of a power above that of the local colonial government. For some reason she assumed Queen Victoria to be the wife of William III.<sup>20</sup> Naming Queen Victoria in songs relating to freedom may be an indication that slaves on Curaçao were aware that their counterparts in the British colonies had long since gained freedom under the reign of Queen Victoria. It could be interpreted as a request to the Queen to free the slaves in the Dutch colonies in the same way. Hence the notion of a demand is manifested in the following song sung by

Martina Felipe:

*Libertat, egalité*  
*La reina Viktoria*  
*A manda e kos*  
*La reina Viktoria*  
*A manda e ko'*  
*Libertat, galité*

*Freedom, equality*  
*Queen Victoria*  
*Send the thing*  
*Queen Victoria*  
*Send the thing*  
*Freedom, equality*

The words 'libertat' and 'galité', derived from the French word 'égalité', a legacy of the French Revolution, were rekindled by the former slaves to express their joy of their newly found freedom. In a sense it reflects their understanding that freedom is an important condition for equality (Brenneker 1970:1770).<sup>21</sup>

*Awo' n'tin shon Henri,*  
*n'tin shon de Palm*  
*N'tin nada mas*  
*Awo' nos tur ta un*  
*Awo' nos tur ta un*  
*Awo' djaka lo laba tayó*  
*Awo' djaka lo frega kuchu*  
*Awo' djaka lo bari fogon*  
*kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman*<sup>22</sup>

*Now there is no Master Henry anymore*  
*Neither Master de Palm*  
*There is nothing more*  
*We are all one*  
*We are all one*  
*Now rats will do the dishes*  
*Now rats will clean the knives*  
*Now rats will sweep the oven*  
*No more submission, submission no more*

The embodiment of equality is clearly expressed in the last sentence 'kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman'. Martinus (1997), who analysed the Guene in relation to Caboverdian language, states that this sentence is equivalent to the Portuguese 'No mais yugo, yugo no mais', meaning no more submission.<sup>23</sup>

In one of the songs on freedom sang by Ma Djini, this fact was again stressed.<sup>24</sup>

*Awor ku katibu a kaba, n'tin katibu mas. Awor*  
*ku libertat a bini, awor mi no ta laba tayó.*  
*Awor ta djaka ta laba tayó (laughter).*

*Now that slavery has ended, there is no slavery*  
*anymore. Now that freedom has come, I won't*  
*wash any dishes anymore. Now rats will wash*  
*the dishes.*

'No more punishment' is a recurrent theme in traditional songs relating to freedom, as the following song demonstrates. Furthermore, it reveals what the slaves experienced as traumatic: it purveys the physical reality of being put in irons and being beaten. The notion of what freedom entailed, was also clearly expressed. It vents anger at what occurred during slavery and shows the slaves' aspirations regarding their new lives once free. The notion of being dependent during slavery is contrasted with independence after slavery. Several variants of this song have been collected over the years. The last verse of most of these songs ends with the conviction that with freedom one of the most humiliating tasks, washing someone else's chamber pot, would also end. The following is the oldest recorded

variant and was sung by a woman called Ma Chichi, who was interviewed by Brenneker in 1958 at the age of 106.<sup>25</sup> She was ten years old when the enslaved gained their freedom.

<i>Kaiman djuku</i>	<i>No more submission</i>
<i>Djuku kaiman</i>	<i>Submission no more</i>
<i>Mi n'ta laba tayó</i>	<i>I am not doing dishes</i>
<i>Mi n' ta laba kònchi mas</i>	<i>I am not washing the bowls anymore</i>
<i>Mi n' ta bari kas mas</i>	<i>I am not sweeping the house anymore</i>
<i>Mi no ta katibu di shon mas.</i> <sup>26</sup>	<i>I am not his master's slave anymore</i>

A second variant also emphasizes the treatment slaves had received:

<i>Libertat galité</i>	<i>Freedom, equality</i>
<i>Mi shon n' por bistimi heru mas</i>	<i>My master won't put iron-bars on me anymore</i>
<i>Libertat galité</i>	<i>Freedom, equality</i>
<i>Mi shon n' por bistimi heru mas</i>	<i>My master won't put iron-bars on me anymore</i>
<i>Libertat galité</i>	<i>Freedom, equality</i>
<i>Shon n'por suta katibu mas</i>	<i>The master cannot beat slaves anymore</i>
<i>Libertat galité</i>	<i>Freedom, equality</i>
<i>Shon n'por suta katibu mas</i>	<i>The master cannot beat slaves anymore</i>
<i>Libertat galité</i>	<i>Freedom, equality</i>
<i>Shon muhé mes lo laba tayó</i>	<i>The mistress herself will do her dishes</i>
<i>Libertat galité</i>	<i>Freedom, equality</i>
<i>Shon hòmber mes lo laba koprá.</i> <sup>27</sup>	<i>The master himself will wash his chamber pot</i>

And yet a third variant:

<i>Libertat galité</i>	<i>Freedom, equality</i>
<i>Shon muhé mes lo laba tayó</i>	<i>The mistress herself will do her dishes</i>
<i>Libertat galité</i>	<i>Freedom, equality</i>
<i>Pushi mes lo laba tayó</i>	<i>The cat will wash the dishes</i>
<i>Libertat galité</i>	<i>Freedom, equality</i>
<i>Shon hòmber mes lo laba koprá.</i> <sup>28</sup>	<i>The master himself will wash his chamber pot</i>

The two stanzas in these variants seem to sustain the common masters' question at the time of emancipation: will the manumitted former slaves work? The idea of 'lazy blacks' was a recurring theme in nineteenth-century literature. The above songs, of course, can also be read as a clear expression of people's desire to make choices in their lives, this only being possible once free.

The next informant was born in 1900 and learned about slavery from his grandfather. He displayed the awareness that slave-owners had received compensation for their slaves. His grandfather was a slave on one of the plantations near town and had related to him the atrocities of slavery.

R.F.: *Tempu di sklabitut tabata un tempu horibel. Hopi di nan a drenta boto di kanoa bai Coro. Hopi di nan a yega Coro i hopi a hoga tambe ora nan kanoa a bòltu. Ora klòk di libertat a bati, kos a kambia. Libertat a yega na yùli. Libertat a yega ku hopi barí di plaka.*

P.B.: *Barí di plaka?*

R.F.: *Sí, barí di plaka pa libra esnan sklabisá. Rei a manda nan.*

P.B.: *Rei a manda nan?*

E.J.: *Rei a manda plaka na barí?*<sup>29</sup>

R.F.: *Slavery was a horrible time. Many took the canoe to Coro. Many reached Coro and many also drowned when their canoes turned over. When freedom came, things changed. Freedom came in July. Freedom came with a lot of barrels of money.*

P.B.: *Barrels of money?*

R.F.: *Yes, barrels of money to liberate the enslaved. The King sent them.*

P.B.: *The King sent them?*

E.J.: *The King sent money in barrels?*

To Lai the end of enslavement was equated to payment for work. He considered this the reason why the slave-owners had received compensation. He continued:

R.F.: *Sí, barí ku hopi plaka pa libra hendenan na Bándabou i na Bándariba. Hopi katibu: mucha, adulto, tur e katibunan. Si bo tabata ke pa nan traha pa bo, e ora ei lo bo mester a paga nan. Sí.*

P.B.: *Rei a manda un barí di plaka?*

R.F.: *Katibunan a fiesta tres dia largu. Tres dia largu na Kòrsou. Tur hende tabata liber na Kòrsou. No tabatin kuenta di bati hende mas. Sí.*<sup>30</sup>

R.F.: *Yes, barrels with a lot of money to free people in Bandabou and Bandariba. Lots of slaves: children, adults, all the slaves. If you wanted them to work for you, then you would have to pay them. Yes.*

P.B.: *The King sent a barrel of money?*

R.F.: *The slaves feasted for three long days. Three long days in Curaçao. Everybody was free in Curaçao. Nobody would be beaten anymore. Yes.*

A similar story is being told as follows:

*E kueba di Chichi ta di den tempu di katibu. Chichi a hui na estado bai ku su kompañ'è. Nan ta katibu. Nan ta kobarde pa sali. Un biaha ku e hòmber a bai Gato, bai buska kuminda, nan a must'r'é ku na Kòrsou tin libertat i el a disidí di bai bèk serka su doño.*

*E shon yama Carlo Aster di Malpais. Kontentu shon a risibí e ku Chichi ku e tres yunan, pasobra pa kada katibu ku bira liber shon ta risibí plaka. Asina shon a haña 5 biaha 200 florin. Pa kada katibu rei a paga 200. Willem de derde a kumpra kada katibu pa 200.*<sup>31</sup>

*Chichi's cave (Chichi is the name of a female slave) existed during slavery. Chichi fled together with her partner while she was pregnant. They were enslaved. They were afraid to come out. Once when the man went to Gato, people explained to him that there was freedom now and he decided to go back to his master.*

*The shon's name was Carlo Aster from Malpais. The shon was happy to welcome him and Chichi and their three children because he would receive money for each slave that became free. So the shon received 5 times 200 guilders. William the Third bought each slave for 200 guilders.*

These notions were also expressed in traditional songs, such as the one collected by Brenneker and Juliana in 1960 from a male informant born in 1875.<sup>32</sup>

*Muchu danki shon Wilmu di derdu,  
ku awe nos ta ruman,  
pero awó nos tur a bira katibu di shon Dios.  
Laga nos gradisi ma na bon Dios  
pa sielu i su bondat.<sup>33</sup>*

*Thank you very much King William the Third  
That today we are brothers and sisters  
But now we are the slaves of Master God  
Let us say grace, but to the good Lord for heav-  
en and its goodness.*

The influence of the Catholic Church is also evident in the following song:

*Ban pidi Dios na rudia abou  
ku su santu deboshon  
awor nos ta liber di tur shon  
liber di tur nashon  
katibu di rei.<sup>34</sup>*

*Let us ask God on our bare knees  
with our holy devotion  
now that we are free from all masters  
free of all nation  
slaves of the King*

The first of July was indelibly printed in the Afro-Curaçaoans' memory. Up until the twentieth century this date served as a reference point from which people deduced their birthday. The vicar Krugers wrote about how people at the first census in 1933, who did not remember their date of birth, would come to him for information and refer to the date of emancipation in order to calculate their age (Krugers 1934:59).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, both those with power and those without had their own perceptions of what emancipation would entail. Slave-owners, through formal institutions, voiced their concerns. To them, abolition implied giving the slaves personal autonomy and independence, thus placing them beyond their control. Even though they could not guarantee sufficient work for the freed, the former owners wanted a work force available as and when needed.

It is also clear that the Roman Catholic Church played an intermediate role in the way freedom was perceived by the slaves. The Church acknowledged the atrocities of slavery and portrayed freedom as the complete opposite. Freedom represented happiness, a lack of coerced labour. Yet the Church underlined the need to install an intrinsic work ethic alongside other virtues, such as abiding by the law and maintaining an orderly family life. It was also stressed to the manumitted former slaves that hatred and revenge should not be harboured or enacted on those who had ill-treated them. This influenced the way former slaves perceived freedom. To the Church freedom would bring the possibilities for a greater involvement in the moral uplifting of the former enslaved. They nevertheless had their own conceptions of what freedom offered, as is recorded in oral history.

For those emancipated, freedom had yet another, deep-rooted meaning. This was manifested in their songs sung on Emancipation day, some of which were tambú songs. The choice for tambú was a manifestation of their autonomy as they brought to the fore their own expression of freedom, in a form which was previously prohibited by State and Church. These songs show what freedom meant to them, with the lyrics expressing joy



regarding the end of physical punishments for the slightest transgression. Above all it meant for them the hope of being able to choose the work, and indeed the life, they desired.

### Notes

- 1 Discussions among slave-owners on Curaçao centered on the belief that black slaves, once free, would not hold a realistic view on what freedom would entail. According to Mintz and Price this feeling among slave-owners throughout the Americas was based on the assumption that with freedom the 'enslaved would relapse into their natural state' (1992:250).
- 2 NA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1850-1900, inv. no. 6734, 31-12-1862/906. Slave-owners saw this type of conduct as a confirmation of their belief that blacks were naturally indolent and would work only under the firm direction of whites (Berlin and Morgan 1993:61).
- 3 *Kerkelijke Courant*, no. 368, vol. 30, 16-1-1864; *Amigoe*, 1-7-1863.
- 4 Idem.
- 5 Apparently Euwens presented this document to the library. In the accompanying letter the priest made assurances that this poem was made by a man emancipated on 1 July 1863. This poem is in the original orthography of 1863. The full title is 'Cantica pa celebrasjoon di e gran dia di libertat' (Song of the celebration of the great day of freedom) Bibliotheek Universiteit van de Nederlandse Antillen.
- 6 *Koloniaal Verslag* 1855, zitting 1857-1858.
- 7 *Koloniaal Verslag* 1856, zitting 1858-1859.
- 8 *Dividivi* (*Caesalpinia coriaria*); tannin is extracted from the pods.
- 9 Interview Amanda Manuela Fabian (born 1889), Allen, 9-4-1989 (NatAr).
- 10 KITLV, Koloniale Verslagen 1855, zitting 1857-1858.
- 11 *Kerkelijke Courant*, no. 291, vol. 28, 26-7-1862.
- 12 NatAr, Inventaris van het archief van het Gouvernementssecretarie, Ingekomen stukken, Buitendistricten Curaçao 1862, inv. no. 3686, 31-10-1862/238.
- 13 Interview with a woman born in 1916 (she did not want her name stated), Allen, March 2001 (NatAr).
- 14 Interview Virginia Meulens (born 1869 in Otrobanda), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 440, NatAr).
- 15 Interview Mervelita Comenencia (born 1903), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 611, NatAr).
- 16 Rosalia 1997:99.
- 17 It is unclear what the informant meant with the term 'queen', as there was a king reigning in the Netherlands at that moment.
- 18 Interview Shon Pa di Zegu (born 1899), Brenneker/Juliana, 1972 (T 24, Fundashon Biblioteka Públiko Kòrsou).
- 19 Interview Martina Felipe (born 1893), Allen, 13-1-1983 (NatAr).
- 20 See also interview Henriqueta Garcia (born 1898), Brenneker/Juliana, June 1980 (Zikinzá-collection, T 75, NatAr), in which the woman relates how emancipation is due to the intermediation of Queen Victoria, the mother of Wilhelmina.
- 21 Interview Lucia Hato (born 1886), 1959 (T 881); Cai Maduro (date of birth not registered), 1958 (T 705); Herman Peloso (born 1882), 1959 (Brenneker/Juliana, T 721, Zikinzá-collection, NatAr).
- 22 Martinus 1997:258.
- 23 'Ka' in Caboverdian means a negation of something, while 'mais' means more. 'Djuku', compara-

- ble to 'jugo' in Portuguese, means submission. 'Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman' then translates as 'no more submission, submission no more' (Martinus 1997:258).
- 24 On the day of freedom, Virginia Meulens' (Ma Djini) mother was not a slave and was living in town. Ma Djini strongly emphasized the free status of her mother during the interview, thus showing that she wanted to disassociate herself from slavery. The fact, however, that her mother could remember two of these songs may indicate some ties with recently freed people. Interview Virginia Meulens (born 1869 in Otrobanda), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 440, NatAr).
  - 25 Interview Ma Chichi (born 1853), Brenneker/Juliana, 1958 (Zikinzá-collection, T 607, NatAr).
  - 26 Idem.
  - 27 Interview Pa Allee (born 1899), Brenneker/Juliana, 1958 (T 606); Marvelita Comenencia (born 1903), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 611, NatAr). See also Robertico (Lai) Felicia (born 1900), Brenneker/Juliana, 6-11-1986 (T 120, Fundashon Biblioteka Públiko Kòrsou). See also Rosalia 1997:101.
  - 28 Interview Cola Susana (born 1915), project Etnomusicologie/Allen and Gansemans, 15-5-1983, NatAr.
  - 29 Interview Robertico (Lai) Felicia (born 1900), Brenneker/Juliana, 6-11-1986 (T 120, Fundashon Biblioteka Públiko Kòrsou).
  - 30 Idem.
  - 31 Interview Francisco Conquet (born 1882), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 656, NatAr).
  - 32 Interview Wawa Willems (born 1875), Brenneker/Juliana, 1960 (Zikinzá-collection, T 435, NatAr).
  - 33 Interview Eligio Maduro (born 1886), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 730, NatAr).
  - 34 Interview Wawa Willems (born 1875), Brenneker/Juliana, 1960 (Zikinzá-collection, T 435, NatAr).

