Slave resistance, colour lines, and the impact of the French and Haitian revolutions in Curaçao

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On 17 August 1795 a slave revolt erupted in Curaçao. Inspired by the Haitian Revolution, the uprising on the Dutch Caribbean island would be brutally suppressed within a few weeks. As had happened on previous occasions, colonial authorities called upon the local militias recruited among the free coloured and black population as well as upon loyal slaves to fight and arrest the rebels. The leaders of the revolt were brutally executed, a horrendous warning to slave rebels, let alone aspiring revolutionaries. Today, the 1795 slave revolt is commemorated as a seminal event in the island's history, a courageous if doomed rejection of slavery and colonial rule. Curaçaoans prefer 17 August as the day to remember slavery and slave resistance over 1 July, Emancipation Day as proclaimed in 1863 from the metropolis. In 1984, 17 August was officially designated 'Dia di lucha pa liberat', the annual day to commemorate the struggle for freedom. The revolt's main leader Tula was proclaimed a national hero in 2009.¹

The background, process, and outcome of the 1795 revolt are fairly well-known, although much of the literature consists of rehashing the descriptions and conclusions of a few older texts based on limited archival sources. At its height the revolt comprised 2,000 slaves out of a total slave population of some 12,000. The sheer number of insurgents and their proportion of the total population make this revolt of significance in the wider historiography of slave revolts inspired by the French and particularly Haitian revolutions. So far, however, the Curaçao revolt has been brushed over in most of the pertinent historiography, even if its

1 Allen 1996:7. Fundashon Rehabilitashon Tula, <http://tulalives.org/>.

scale was remarkable by regional standards.² It is time, therefore, to set the record straight.

But there is more. The 1795 revolt was not the first one in Curaçaoan history. We now know of minor ones in 1716, 1750, and 1774, and further research might disclose other upheavals. More interestingly, there is hard evidence of continued unrest among both the slave population and free coloured and black population in the years after the crushing of the 1795 revolt. In 1796, a coup d'état involved the participation of free coloureds. The influence of the Haitian Revolution and ideas of racial equality and antislavery were to surface again in another little-known series of upheavals in 1799-1800. Dutch Patriots, mainly black troops from French Guadeloupe, and hundreds of local blacks, both enslaved and free, were part of this turmoil. In the end, British and American military intervention restored order, secured that slavery would persist, and paradoxically guaranteed the long-term survival of the Dutch colonial order by returning the island to the Dutch after the Napoleonic Wars.

There are several ways to explain slave resistance and general unrest in *fin de siècle* Curaçao. We may focus on the island's social structure and demography. We should take into account the peculiar political situation of a colony whose metropolis was occupied by one European competitor (revolutionary France) while its local elite were heavily divided over issues of loyalty to the old or the new order and over their preferences for competing European states. Finally, we need to be aware of the island's embedding in wider regional networks. The contributions to the present volume indeed identify both local and international factors underlying the remarkable turbulence of late-eighteenth-century Curaçao. This introductory chapter aims to review some salient characteristics of society and politics, slavery and slave resistance in Curaçao, as well as the place of the island in a wider regional and Atlantic framework.

A FREE TRADE ZONE

After the loss of Dutch Brazil (1630-1654) to the Portuguese and of New Netherland (1624-1664) to the English, the Dutch Atlan-

2 Geggus (1997:7, 11-5, 46, 48) briefly includes the 1795 and 1800 Curaçao revolts in his discussion of slave revolts between 1789 and 1815. Curaçao is not discussed in the recent reader *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Geggus and Fiering 2007). See, however, the contribution of Geggus to the present volume.

tic empire would shrink to Elmina and a few minor trading posts in West Africa, four plantation colonies in the Guianas – Berbice, Demerara, Essequibo, and the most important one, Suriname – and six tiny islands in the Caribbean sea. Similar to the Dutch island of St. Eustatius in the north-eastern Caribbean, Curaçao functioned as a hub for people (Europeans of many nationalities and enslaved Africans), goods (seldom produced on the island itself), and ideas. The quest for deepening our understanding of the turmoil between 1795 and 1800 is at the same time an attempt to establish more fully the truly global character of this tiny island off the coast of Tierra Firme, where people of many nationalities and political convictions, whites, blacks, and ‘coloureds’, free and enslaved, confronted one another on a daily basis, often remarkably peacefully, sometimes in heated disputes, and on rare occasions in bloody confrontations.

Curaçao had been a Dutch colony since 1634. As no precious metals were found, the Spanish had categorized Curaçao and the neighbouring islands Aruba and Bonaire as *islas inútiles*. Neither did plantation agriculture seem rewarding, as the ecology did not match the requisites. The Dutch West India Company had colonized Curaçao for strategic reasons – its location and the exceptionally good natural harbour. Over the next centuries, the island’s development was mainly based on trade, both legal and illegal, with the Spanish Main, North America, and the rest of the Caribbean. The manifold maritime connections soon gave the island an economic significance well beyond its size.

Trade was in commodities as well as enslaved Africans. The great majority of the slaves disembarked on the island were subsequently re-exported to the Spanish Main or to plantation colonies in the Eastern Caribbean. The minority retained on the island was employed on *hacienda*-style plantations catering mainly to local consumption or in and around the port. The proportion of urban slaves was relatively high. So was the number of manumissions and, as a result, the proportion of free coloureds and blacks, some of them slave owners themselves, in the total population. As early as the 1730s, there were separate local armed units of free coloureds and blacks in addition to the white militia dating from the seventeenth century.

Clearly then, non-whites had more room for upward social mobility in Curaçao than in typical Caribbean plantation colonies. This need not reflect a humanitarian regime. Some contemporaries suggested that the high rate of manumission was inspired by cold calculation: in times of economic hardship,

drought and hence food crisis, setting unproductive slaves free to fend for themselves was a better deal for the owners than having to feed and shelter them. Yet most likely a good proportion of those manumitted were slaves who had managed to make money of their own in the urban labour market to buy their own freedom.

The island's white citizenry, presided over by the West India Company's governor, was divided by religion and class. A 1789 census subdivided the 4,420 whites into 2,469 Protestants, 1,095 Sephardic Jews, and 846 servants of unspecified religion (table 1). The free population of (part) African origins was mainly Catholic and segmented by colour and class. The slave population creolized as the eighteenth century progressed. The total of slave imports in Curaçao during the Dutch period was roughly 100,000, mainly arriving between 1667 and 1730; the last imports of enslaved Africans date from the 1770s (Jordaan 2003:219-20; Van Welie 2008:179). It is therefore likely that long before the end of the century the majority of slaves was born locally.

The first reliable population figures date from 1789, when the total population was calculated at nearly 21,000 (table 1). Shortly after the Napoleonic Wars, this figure was down to 14,000. Since the first census, the number and proportion of slaves declined. The share of the free population of (partly) African origins in contrast increased considerably right up to Emancipation in 1863, when the total population was just over 19,000.

By the early nineteenth century, then, slave labour in Curaçao was of decreasing importance and certainly not of the same significance as elsewhere in the Caribbean, including in the Dutch colony of Suriname. In the debates preceding the (late) abolition of slavery in the Dutch West Indies in 1863, the main concern regarding Suriname was an immediate shortage of labour for the plantations, as land was freely available in abundance; a solution was sought in a ten-year period of apprenticeship. The major apprehension for Curaçao, in contrast, was the rise of the number of unemployed who were at risk of becoming vagabonds. There was stark hypocrisy here, as the problem of land shortage was augmented by the monopolisation of agrarian land and wells by the former slaveholders. On the eve of Emancipation, local experts and Dutch politicians discussed emigration as the best way to solve the alleged problem of landlessness and oversupply of labour (Renkema 1981a:144-59; Oostindie 1996:167).

Table 1. Population figures, Curaçao 1789-1863

	1789	1816	1840	1863
Whites	4,410	2,780	2,734	*
Free citizens 'of colour'	3,714	4,549	6,432	*
Slaves	12,864	6,741	5,750	5,498
Total	20,988	14,070	14,916	19,127

*In 1863, the number of free inhabitants was 13,629 in total; colour distinctions have not been listed since 1841.

Sources: Klooster 1994:331 (1789), Renkema 1981a:336-7 (1816, 1840, 1863).

Its small scale, the absence of a plantation sector producing tropical export staples, its function as a free trade zone, and its large non-white free population combined to make Curaçao an atypical Caribbean colony. Contemporaries often observed what they thought to be one of the pernicious features of this colony: the 'insolence' of the slaves and free non-white population. While the maintenance of slave labour as such might have been less of a priority here than in genuine plantation colonies, the concern for public order was equally strong. Overt slave resistance therefore was repressed on Curaçao no less brutally than elsewhere in plantation America, and white concerns about the free coloureds were hardly less acute.³

The island's commercial character made for a remarkably open society. This applies not only to its resident population, but also to the fact that a significant proportion of the urban male population consisted of sailors with direct access to the neighbouring colonies and of free and enslaved townsmen working in the harbour and therefore having regular contacts with sailors from foreign places. By definition the openness also extended to the many sailors disembarking in the Willemstad port. Curaçao was a vital hub in transatlantic, but even more so in regional trade carried out with both the Spanish Main and the islands to the North.

Figures for trade connections in the late eighteenth century underline the island's regional connectedness in no uncertain terms. Roughly half of all ships entering or clearing the port at Willemstad were Spanish, followed by ships from a wide variety of other nations. After 1795, contacts with the British Isles were temporarily cut off because the French occupation of the Netherlands

3 For example, just a few years before the 1795 revolt, the Dutch commissioners Grovestins and Boey (1791, reprint 1998). Cf. Jordaan 2010, Klooster 1994.

had automatically turned the British into enemies. The share of French ships was modest, yet the few dozen ships visiting Curaçao annually originated predominantly from Les Cayes and Jacmel in southern Saint-Domingue and therefore their crews must have carried the news from the emerging Haitian Revolution with them.⁴ Seen from this perspective, the frequent allusions of the leaders of the 1795 slave revolt to ‘French liberty’ come as no surprise.

SLAVE REVOLTS UP TO 1795

Dutch slavery in the Caribbean, and particularly in Suriname, has often been depicted as exceptionally harsh. The historical validity of the reputation of exceptionality is dubious, at least in a comparative perspective – it is difficult to think of slavery, wherever in the Atlantic, as anything but dehumanising and cruel (Oostindie 1993). But certainly we have many indications of slave resistance in the Dutch colonies. Faced with continuous marronage and the creation of powerful maroon communities, colonial authorities in Suriname had no choice but to conclude peace treaties. Berbice had a major slave revolt in 1763. No doubt less conspicuous acts of resistance took place with great frequency throughout the Dutch Caribbean. Curaçao was no exception to this rule. While much of the early history of slavery of the island remains to be written, we may well assume that slave resistance ran the usual gamut from covert to full-fledged armed rebellion. As for the latter, revolts have

4 Identified ships entering and clearing Willemstad, Curaçao, 20 September 1796-16 May 1798

Flag	entered	%	cleared	%
Spanish	265	45.6	292	49.0
Danish*	122	21.0	128	21.5
French	31	5.3	26	4.4
American	129	22.2	117	19.6
Curaçaoan	24	4.1	26	4.4
Swedish	3	0.5	7	1.2
British	7	1.2	–	–
Total	581	100	596	100

Source: Nationaal Archief, West-Indisch Comité 1795-1800, Curaçao, 141. Figures compiled by Pham Van Thuy.

*The Danish ships were officially from St. Thomas, a free harbor like Curaçao. Most likely, the majority of these ‘Danish’ ships were Dutch and used the Danish flag only because Denmark had remained neutral in the war.

been recorded for 1716, 1750, and 1774, culminating in the 1795 uprising and its aftermath up to 1800.⁵ While the type and significance of slavery may have been atypical by regional standards, slave resistance was as engrained in Curaçaoan slavery as it was elsewhere.

Both the 1716 and 1750 revolts were led by first-generation enslaved Africans, most likely recent arrivals. The one in 1716 involved only a dozen insurgents. As far as the documents suggest, there was no master plan, no encompassing strategy, but certainly a longing for freedom. In the subsequent interrogations, one of the slaves who had revolted spoke explicitly of a link to Elmina where reportedly the Africans had set the good example of killing all whites in and around the Dutch fort, while another had urged the killing of all the whites in Curaçao and next moving on to another land 'where we will be happier'.⁶

In 1750 one hundred slaves revolted. The insurgency was crushed the same day after the rebels killed 59 slaves of the West India Company's plantation; only one white was killed. Some of the rebels committed suicide; of the 52 captured, 13 were sold off the island and no less than 39 executed. Contemporaries blamed newly arrived Africans for the bloody revolt, which seemed directed more against other (seasoned or creole?) slaves than against the whites.⁷

Presumably, since the earliest years of the colony, enslaved Africans attempted to escape the system of slavery. While maroons in the major Dutch Caribbean colony of Suriname escaped to freedom in the tropical rain forest in the interior, internal marronage was virtually impossible on the small and mainly arid island. Most runaway slaves therefore opted to canoe or sail to Tierra Firme, a risky but navigable forty miles away. Archives mention the presence of marooned Africans from Curaçao in Coro, present-day Venezuela, at least by the end of the seventeenth century. Reliable figures are hard to come by, but between 1759 and 1766 alone, 380 slaves were recorded as having escaped to the Spanish Main.⁸ Wim Klooster, in this book, mentions 140 slaves escaping to the Spanish Main in 1774 alone, a year in which Curaçao faced a severe food crisis. And in her contribution, Linda Rupert demonstrates how this migratory tradition drew the Coro region and Curaçao close to each other throughout the eighteenth century.

5 Klooster 1999:507 mentions three aborted conspiracies in the 1760s. There was also a minor slave revolt in January 1795 (De Rego and Janga 2009:43).

6 See Jordaan 1999:490-8 on the 1716 revolt; citation from p. 493.

7 On the 1750 revolt, see Hartog 1973:20-57, De Hoog 1983:38-44, 61-3, Goslinga 1985:546.

8 Goslinga 1985:248. Another source has a number of 585 marooned slaves for the entire period 1729-74, but this is most likely an underestimate as this list was drawn up in retrospect in 1775 (Rupert 2006:43-5, 2009).

The third recorded revolt, in 1774, indeed started as a mass marronage. All 72 slaves of plantation De Fuijk attempted to board a large canoe heading for Coro. The escape failed and only five slaves managed to cross in a smaller canoe. The others withdrew in the *kunuku* (countryside), but eventually surrendered or were captured by free blacks. This time, there were no mass executions, but the plantation's owner sold off some twenty-five slaves to Saint-Domingue. Commercial connections with this booming French colony were intense. Two decades later, it transpired that these connections were not only about the transfer of peoples and goods, but equally of revolutionary ideas (Dalhuisen et al. 2009:60).

The 1795 revolt started on 17 August as some fifty slaves of plantation De Knip, in apparent protest against a specific infringement on the usual daily routines, refused to work and marched off to neighbouring plantations.⁹ This strike soon became an attempt to launch an island-wide revolution inspired by the ideals and example of the Haitian revolt. Perhaps the fact that a treaty between the Dutch and Spanish had effectively sealed off the opportunity for slaves to take refuge in the Coro area added to a general ferment among the island's slave population.¹⁰ Perhaps the island experienced another period of drought and food shortage. We simply cannot be sure. Neither do the available archival sources allow us to establish whether the eventual slave revolt resulted from a revolutionary conspiracy from the start or developed in a more spontaneous manner.

Either way, within two days some 2,000 of the island's 12,000 slaves were in revolt. The slaves won the first fights against the white, coloured, and black militias, but then the tide started to turn. Negotiations in late August failed, one of the leaders, aptly named Toussaint, affirming in French, 'We are here to win or die'.¹¹ The next day the colonial troops prevailed and dozens of slaves were executed on the spot. Thereafter the majority of the rebellious slaves capitulated, discouraged by military defeat and the spectre of more mass executions and lured by the promise that they would not be punished. In the next week the remaining rebels

9 First documented, without references to archival or other sources, by Senior and Schinck 1795, and Poel in 1825 (reproduced in Rutgers 2001:111-25), next Bosch 1829, I:321-34. First publications of relevant archival sources in Paula 1974. Hartog 1973 is the first monograph, Goslinga 1990:1-20 and De Rego and Janga 2009 provide useful summaries in English. There are many subsequent publications in Dutch on the 1795 revolt that do not use new sources and therefore have little to offer but repetitions based on the Dutch-language archival sources published in extenso by Paula almost four decades ago.

10 The treaty was concluded in 1790; see the chapter by Rupert in this volume.

11 'Nous sommes ici pour vaincre ou mourir'.

and their leadership were caught, both by the militia and by fellow slaves. Some thirty slaves were executed, the leaders in an extraordinarily cruel manner.

Contemporary accounts of the revolt have left dramatic testimonies of the revolt's foremost leader, a slave called Tula, who may have been born outside of Curaçao and most likely had spent time in the French Caribbean; he was also known as 'Rigaud'. In conversations with the Catholic priest Jacobus Schinck, who had been commissioned to convince the slaves to capitulate, Tula reportedly made several statements demonstrating his knowledge of the French and Haitian revolutions. 'We have been badly treated for too long, we do not want to do anybody harm, but we seek our freedom, the French [Caribbean] blacks have been given their freedom, Holland has been taken over by the French, hence we too must be free'. Drawing on Christian rhetoric as well, Tula told the priest that all people share the same parents, Adam and Eve. Talking about the abuse intrinsic to slavery, Tula added that animals were treated better than slaves – hence the right to revolt.

The 1795 revolt was inspired not simply by the abstract ideals of the Haitian Revolution, but most likely by individuals with an intimate acquaintance with developments both in Europe and in the Caribbean. In the French Caribbean, the metropolitan revolution had fueled hopes for change of the status quo and had exacerbated social tensions, eventually leading to the start of the revolution in Saint-Domingue in 1791. Other French Caribbean colonies seemed on the verge of following this example – between 1789 and 1794, there was a series of revolts in Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Lucia, and Dominica. From 1795 onwards, the circle widened with revolts and conspiracies in the Spanish Caribbean and Tierra Firme, in particular the Coro region, as well as in the British colonies and in Dutch Demerara and, indeed, Curaçao (Geggus 1997:46-50). In Europe, revolutionary France had proclaimed a law for the Emancipation of slavery in 1794. Moreover, in 1795 French troops had invaded the Republic of the United Provinces and turned it into a vassal state, the Batavian Republic. This news was officially published in Curaçao in May 1795. There was no mention of a French takeover, but rather of the signing of a pact of friendship and alliance between France and the new Batavian Republic (Schiltkamp and De Smidt 1978:508).

As the chapter by Wim Klooster attests, revolutionary ideas circulated widely in the Caribbean, no matter what measures authorities took to stop the flow of information and rumours. In his contribution Han Jordaen indeed demonstrates that the Curaçao government was worried about slaves from Saint-

Domingue being sold on the island under the pretence that they were directly imported from Africa. Certainly because of these direct links with Saint-Domingue and the island's intensive connections to nearby colonies, the Curaçaoan insurgents were well aware of what was going on in the French Caribbean. Priest Schinck heard them singing French revolutionary songs, and one of Tula's main men, a slave named Mercier, had chosen the nickname Toussaint. The insurgents repeatedly claimed that support from revolutionary Saint-Domingue would be forthcoming – either a strategic boasting or a tragic miscalculation (Do Rego and Janga 2009:66).

By late September, the 1795 revolt was brutally suppressed. At the end of the day, two whites had been killed, as opposed to 100 slaves. The proceedings of the hearings and the subsequent executions of the revolt's leaders testify to nauseatingly cruel retributions, in stark contrast to the courteous way Tula and his fellow insurgents treated men such as the priest Jacobus Schinck. The 'exemplary' brutal punishments tell us much about the agony of the colonial elites in these revolutionary times. The public prosecutor's justifications are well worth quoting. After having proclaimed himself 'an enemy, yes, a mortal enemy of the horrendous monstrosity called the rack', an instrument of torture 'abolished in all civilised states' including the Netherlands, and professing himself 'opposed to anything akin to cruelty [and] maiming', he proceeded by advocating precisely such uncivilized punishments to the leaders of the revolt.¹² And indeed the rebellious slaves were broken on the rack, burnt in the face, dismembered, and so on, in an unprecedented orgy of state violence, which failed to provoke any subsequent protest in the metropolis – the news possibly reached only a few there in the first place.

THE 1796-1800 TURBULENCE

One may well wonder whether the outrageous public executions in 1795 really served to pacify the slave population, and even more if the justice meted out convinced the free population of the legitimacy of colonial rule. The following years were certainly not characterized by an absence of attempts to subvert the extant order. The picture, however, becomes blurred with many objectives and

12 Prosecutor Pieter van Teylingen quoted in Paula 1974:175 (my translation); see Paula 1974:166-7 for the verdicts.

rivalries surfacing at the same time beyond the issue of slavery – Dutch colonial Orangists against the local pro-French Patriot party, increasing tensions within this Patriot party, the strategic interests of both France, Britain, and the United States in Curaçao, perhaps a Haitian drive to export revolution, and Venezuelan revolutionaries taking refuge in Curaçao. The way all these elements converged in Curaçao only underlines how much the island was embedded in a wider Atlantic network, precisely because of its long-standing status as a free trade zone and the ties its inhabitants had developed around the region.

Metropolitan developments mattered too, as they had in Saint-Domingue before. The Netherlands, a republic since its inception in sixteenth century, had oscillated between periods of genuine republicanism and periods in which Stadholders of the House of Orange enjoyed near-royal powers. In the 1780s, liberal protest against Stadholder Willem V ushered in deep conflicts between Orangists and liberal ‘Patriots’. When a liberal revolution was aborted in 1787, several protagonists were forced to go into exile to France and other countries. The smouldering divisions came to the fore again after the French Revolution and particularly the French occupation of the Netherlands and the establishment of the Batavian Republic in 1795, making the tides turn in favour of the Patriots. In colonial affairs, the Patriots did not demonstrate much revolutionary fervour. In the debates on colonial matters in 1796-1797, the National Convention discussed the legitimacy of the slave trade and slavery, but the assembly did not support the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, and the ending of slavery as such was explicitly rejected.¹³

Between 1795 and the British take-over in 1800, therefore, Curaçao was governed by a Dutch governor representing a French puppet state, a Batavian Republic with no revolutionary intentions in the Caribbean. Its local representative since 1796, Governor Johann Rudolf Lauffer, had even fewer such inclinations. The local elites were divided among themselves as to their loyalty towards France or the exiled House of Orange. This was the case in 1795 and even more so in the following years, a division which continuously undermined colonial rule. Indeed, the absence of harsh retribution to Patriots after the 1800 British take-over might reflect an awareness that more internal rivalry within elite circles might elicit another round of unrest among the free coloureds and slaves. Possibly the ranks simply closed again to establish order and guarantee

13 Schutte 1974:147-9. Schutte mentions that the specter of the Haitian Revolution was invoked, but makes no reference to the revolt in Curaçao.

the continued existence of slavery. One of the leading Patriots in the 1795-1800 years, the Dutch naval officer Albert Kikkert – who would be appointed the first governor of Curaçao after Dutch rule was reinstalled in 1816 – now found himself serving Willem I, the first Dutch monarch of the newly-established Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The turbulence of 1796-1800 was therefore more complicated than the slave revolt of 1795. At first, there was the 1796 coup d'état analysed by Karwan Fatah-Black in this volume. News of the French take-over of the Dutch Republic and the creation of the Batavian Republic had been part of the arguments used by Tula and his fellow insurgents. First *ancien regime* Governor Johannes de Veer retreated and was replaced by a politically non-descript local bureaucrat, Jan Jacob Beaujon, who was substituted by a seemingly more outspoken pro-French, 'Patriot' governor, Johann Rudolf Lauffer – all in the same year of 1796. As Karwan Fatah-Black argues in this volume, Lauffer's appointment reflected complex dynamics within the white elites, not just between Orangists and Patriots, but equally within Patriot circles, over issues that ultimately centred on trade and economic interest.

It is evident that sectors of the free coloured population had their own stakes in the 1796 power games, mainly with a view to improving their own representation in local politics. Both Jordaan and Fatah-Black provide ample evidence of white concern that political instability would lead to another round of social unrest and ultimately revolutionary upheaval and, therefore, anxiety about free black and coloured agency. As it turned out, free coloureds did indeed engage in manifestations of open and sometimes violent protest. But there is no indication whatsoever of organized cross-class and cross-colour activity in 1796 aiming at radical political change, let alone the abolition of slavery. Free coloured and black militias had not demonstrated any revolutionary zeal to this end during the 1795 slave revolt, helping to crush the revolt instead. One year later, antislavery was not an issue.

So what about the turbulence in 1799-1800?¹⁴ In December 1799, three Frenchmen were ousted from the colony, suspected of a revolutionary conspiracy directed from Saint-Domingue and aimed at starting a massive revolt that would eradicate slavery throughout the Caribbean, beginning with Curaçao. The story does not end here. From July through September 1800, Curaçao

14 First documented, without references to archival or other sources, by Bosch 1829, I:334-53, next by others including Palacios 1983 and Goslinga 1990:21-32.

was first visited then partly occupied by predominantly black troops from revolutionary France's colony Guadeloupe. There was apparently widespread local support among the slaves, but not from the free black and coloured population. The participation of several French, Haitian, and Guadeloupean military leaders, including the revolutionary French commander Bresseau and future Haitian President Alexandre Pétion, is well-documented. So is the participation of members of the local *criollo* elite, including the future admiral serving under Simón Bolívar, Luis Brión. At the height of the affair, early September 1800, some 1,200 French Caribbean troops were beleaguering Willemstad, while apparently many rural slaves had joined the cause, having been promised *liberté* and *égalité*. In Willemstad the slaves refused to work, adding to the panic of the governor and his entourage.

Governor Lauffer desperately tried to keep the self-proclaimed protectors out, in particular the majority of black troops. Unable to defeat his adversaries, Lauffer decided to request British assistance, a request readily honoured by the nearby frigate *Nereide*. A few days later, two North American frigates joined the British, for the same cause. On 23 September the colonial French troops evacuated hastily, leaving many prisoners behind. It remains a puzzle why the French 'revolutionaries' backed down so easily against what was not an overwhelming British majority. In any case, most foreigners were quickly banished from the island, local white participants were forgiven, and there was apparently no strong repression of either the black and coloured free population or of the slave population. In stark contrast to the aftermath of the 1795 revolt, there were few executions and not the type of exemplary state terrorism displayed five years earlier.

The British would continue to occupy Curaçao throughout most of the Napoleonic Wars (1800-1803, 1807-1816), returning the island to the Dutch only in 1816. Trade with the turbulent French colonies came to an immediate halt.¹⁵ In the subsequent period Curaçao experienced no more slave revolts or international conspiracies linked to either the Haitian Revolution or to the independence wars of Spanish America. Slavery was only abolished in 1863, by metropolitan legislation.

The 1799-1800 events have been glorified as a worthy sequel of both the Haitian Revolution and the 1795 revolt on Curaçao,

15 From November 1800 to mid-August 1802, 669 ships entered and 708 cleared the Curaçao harbour. This included only one ship under French flag and no Dutch ships at all. Over half were Spanish ships, over a quarter British, and some fifteen per cent American (Hughes 1998:145).

as an inspiring story of local cross-class and cross-colour solidarity supported by the revolutionary zeal of Jacobin France and Saint-Domingue. Thus, Venezuelan historian Roberto Palacios honoured the alleged protagonist in Curaçao, Frenchman Jean Baptiste Tierce Cadet, for his Jacobin ideals and his firm belief in the ultimate consequences of the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity: the instalment of a 'genuine revolutionary government' in Curaçao, which would legislate 'absolute racial equality' and the abolition of slavery (Palacios 1983:22).

Archival research does not support this heroic reading of the *fin de siècle* turmoil. Earlier on, David Geggus and Anne Pérotin-Dumon had questioned the idea that Toussaint Louverture was seriously working on a pan-Caribbean revolution: even if he had the will and the means to do so, it would have run against his own domestic interests and priorities and his strategy to appease the British (Geggus 1987:287-8; Pérotin-Dumon 1988). On the basis of fresh archival research, Jordaan in this volume demonstrates that the very idea of a region-wide revolutionary conspiracy starting in Curaçao was most likely fabricated by Curaçaoan Governor Lauffer for reasons of personal and political interest.

This is not to say that there was no revolutionary conspiracy at all. Tierce Cadet, a representative of the French government who had lived on the island since 1784, had indeed been at the centre of a revolutionary circle on Curaçao, entertaining direct contacts with Venezuelan revolutionaries as well as French agitators. And indeed attempts may have been made to attract Governor Lauffer to this camp. Lauffer, however, had no interest whatsoever in either becoming involved in Haitian rivalries or in jeopardising his relations with Britain – much less was he interested in slave emancipation. His pro-French leanings, which had helped him stage a coup against his Orangist predecessor in 1796, had clearly withered after his appointment (Schutte 1974:207-9).

The central issue, however, is that whatever hopes the free blacks and coloureds and, even more, the slaves in Curaçao may have nurtured in this period, there was no real concerted French and/or Haitian effort to bring about a social revolution on the island. As Jordaan concludes, France was the significant player, not Haiti. And revolutionary France was still primarily a colonial power interested in maximising its regional role. Hence, the 1800 invasion was not so much a question of spreading the ideals of the revolution, but rather simple (and, as it would turn out, failing) geopolitics: a pre-emptive take-over of the island before the British or even the Americans would attempt to do so.

IMPERFECT SOLIDARITY

If 1796 was not much more than a coup d'état, and if the debunking of the 1799-1800 turbulence is indeed justified, then we are back to the 1795 slave revolt as the most dramatic landmark of slave agency on Curaçao. This uprising seems a textbook example of the thesis forwarded by Eugene D. Genovese in his classic *From rebellion to revolution* (1979). The French and hence Haitian revolutions, Genovese affirmed, were turning points in the history of slavery and slave revolts in the Americas. Before, mainly first-generation African slaves rebelled, without a clear political strategy in mind; afterwards, there was an increasing number of slave revolts dominated by Creole slaves throughout the Americas, all aiming at ending slavery and using the rhetoric of universal human rights.

In various publications and again in this volume, David Geggus has convincingly questioned the validity of Genovese's thesis. Ironically it seems that precisely Curaçao, not mentioned at all in *From rebellion to revolution*, would have provided a strong supporting argument for an otherwise untenable thesis.¹⁶ First-generation Africans revolted in 1716 and 1750 with, it appears, no determined strategy or links to revolts elsewhere. Most likely Creole slaves formed a majority in the aborted massive slave marronage in 1774, but again there is no evidence of explicit ideological underpinnings.

The context of the series of conspiracies and revolts in the period 1795-1800 is dramatically different. The most likely mainly Creole leadership of the 1795 revolt was explicitly inspired by the ideals of the French and Haitian revolutions, and within days a wider enslaved constituency was built up to this end. There are some indications that support was not entirely limited to the slave population. On the other hand, the suppression of the revolt was partly the work of the black and coloured militias and even slaves – though of course the great majority of the island's slaves were no party at all in either the revolt or its repression.

The 1799-1800 events involved a remarkable ensemble of 'revolutionary' actors: enslaved and free residents of the island; whites, blacks and coloureds; French and French Caribbean agents, some members of the local *criollo* elites, a few Dutch military men. Inspiration may have come not only from Haiti and Guadeloupe, but equally from Tierra Firme, where similar revolts had occurred or were in the making as Ramón Aizpurua demon-

16 The influence of the preceding American Revolution may have been considerable for the Americas as such, but had no direct impact on Curaçao (Klooster 2009:11-44).

strates in his contribution to this book – and to some extent it may also have worked the other way around, with ideas being transmitted from Curaçao to Coro on the Spanish Main to neighbouring Aruba. This was a world of strong interconnections indeed. There is ample archival evidence for revolutionary interaction between Coro and Curaçao in the late eighteenth century, and of slave leaders who had spent time in Coro, Curaçao, and even Haiti.¹⁷ One objective, however, never surfaced in Curaçao, not during the times of the Haitian and subsequent Spanish American independence wars nor, for that matter, in the following two centuries: a struggle for sovereignty. The island was, and is, simply too small and without (post)colonial tutelage too much at the mercy of Venezuela to nurture such ambitions (Oostindie and Klinkers 2003:57-63, 217-33).

The evidence of any long-term impact of the 1795-1800 revolutionary upheaval is mixed. We may assume that the spirit of 1795 continued to live among the enslaved population and possibly sections of the free coloured citizens for the next five years, particularly into the 1799-1800 rising. But at the same time we should account for the absence of any slave revolts in the nineteenth century. There are some possible explanations. Shortly after the 1795 revolt, colonial authorities proclaimed the first encompassing set of decrees stipulating ‘reasonable’ treatment of slaves (Schiltkamp and De Smidt 1978:514-6). This was not enough to keep slaves from again demanding full freedom a few years later. But perhaps the absence of a new round of extraordinarily cruel retribution in 1800 as well as these new laws may have kept the enslaved from fighting their bondage once more.

Other factors may have served to pacify the enslaved Curaçaoans. While the hope for freedom raised in 1799-1800 may not have waned, the cold truth was that the revolutionary auxiliaries from Haiti and Guadeloupe did not stand up to fight the British, but hastily evacuated the island. Under the British occupation, links with Haiti and the remaining French colonies were probably severed. We have no indications of any new outside interest in igniting slave resistance in Curaçao. Moreover, as Geggus indicates, throughout the region revolutionary fervour faded as Napoleonic France re-instated slavery in its remaining colonies, while Haiti became increasingly isolated.

17 Paula 1976, Rupert 2007:46-7, Phaf-Rheinberger 2008. In May 1795, Aruba witnessed a small and aborted Indian revolt. There was no indication of Haitian inspiration here, but later that year another small revolt of thirty slaves was defended in words reminiscent of Tula’s (Alofs 2009:44 and Alofs 1996:38).

Next, the number of slaves on Curaçao itself shrank by almost fifty per cent between 1789 and 1816, making the enslaved population a minority of the insular population for the first time since early colonisation. Perhaps large numbers of slaves were sold off in the region. This, too, may have limited the slaves' confidence to succeed in any type of revolt.¹⁸ Afterwards, there was the sale of over 4,000 slaves to other Caribbean colonies in the 1819-1847 period. There is a correlation between years of poor harvests and high numbers of slaves sold, and this must have been the most important factor. Yet one may speculate that owners were particularly interested in selling off precisely those slaves they suspected of rebelliousness. Indeed, prior to 1819, only the export of 'bad, stubborn, thievish and for the Colony extremely dangerous slaves' had been admitted by the local authorities and was indeed practiced.¹⁹

As for colonial rule, the relatively low frequency of slave resistance after 1816 both in Suriname and in the Dutch Caribbean islands may have helped the king and his entourage and, after the establishment of an elite liberal democracy in 1848, Dutch Parliament to continue to neglect Caribbean slavery. Tula's revolt and its aftermath, in spite of its eloquently expressed humanitarian claims, most likely passed virtually unnoticed in the metropolis.²⁰ Pieter Emmer (2010:107-8) suggests that the Curaçao revolt, or whatever other slave resistance in the Dutch Caribbean, did not contribute to the abolition of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean at all. On the contrary, the absence of dramatic slave revolts seemed to suggest that there was no urgency in abolishing slavery at all. One may argue with this bold thesis. But certainly there is no indication of after-the-fact glorification of the 1795 revolt encouraging the Dutch to think of the Caribbean slaves as humans worthy of freedom, much less of being treated as equals. Perhaps the link with the abhorred Haitian Revolution (would) even (have) had an adverse effect. It would take until 1863 before the Dutch abolished slavery, and another century before Tula's revolt became the central topos in Curaçaoan nationalist discourse.

18 Manumission does not provide a satisfactory explanation here, as the number of manumissions actually went down after 1804 (Van der Lee 1998:14). Slave mortality and emigration may have been of more significance.

19 Renkema 1981b:189-91, 202 (citation from 191); most slaves were sold to Puerto Rico. Cf. Dalhuisen 2009:60.

20 I came across one mention of the revolt, in the *Leeuwarder Courant*, 25-11-1795: an article based on a letter written by an eye witness dated 13-9-1795, including this observation ascribed to the priest Schinck: 'The Negroes remained stubborn and demanded their liberty or otherwise Death'.

The contemporary canonical version of 1795 tends to underline the rightfulness of the slave revolt, the crucial influence of the Haitian Revolution, and the brutality of colonial suppression.²¹ The 1796-1800 sequels seem largely unknown. Hence, the prevailing idea of the *fin de siècle* revolts provides a simple picture of enslaved but revolutionary blacks against repressive *ancien régime* whites. This rendering not only brushes aside the support of at least some free blacks and coloureds and even slaves in the crushing of the slave revolt, but equally the vital, though in the end fruitless, role of whites and free blacks and coloureds in the events of 1799-1800. The reality was one of imperfect solidarity within the slave population as well as within the various 'colour communities'. Far more nuance is appropriate – and need not deconstruct the 1795 revolt as a central topos in Curaçaoan nationalism.

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21 For example, Domacassé 1975, do Rego 1983, De Palm 1995, do Rego and Janga 2009, and Cain 2010, published by the Dutch national slavery institute (NiNsee).

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