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Subordinate but proud: Curaçao's free blacks and mulattoes in the eighteenth century

Focuses on the socio-economic position of free non-whites in 18th-c. Curaçao. The manumission rate was relatively high and consequently a large group of free non-whites was created. Blacks and mulattoes enjoyed religious freedom as well as considerable economic freedom. Their growing numbers and social and economic assertiveness alarmed the whites, who gradually admitted the most successful mulattoes in their circles.

In: *New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 68 (1994), no: 3/4, Leiden, 283-300

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SUBORDINATE BUT PROUD: CURAÇAO'S FREE BLACKS AND MULATTOES IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY*

In his seminal work on Curaçao, published in 1958, Harmannus Hoetink described the island's social structure and the interrelations of social groups in the period before 1870. Since this book, Curaçao's social history during slavery has been little studied. Recent Caribbean history has devoted more attention to society in the plantation era by studying slaves as well as free men and women of African descent.¹ This article focuses on the free blacks and mulattoes in Curaçao in the eighteenth century. Two general questions are addressed here: what was the position of the free non-whites in Curaçaoan society, and how were they viewed by the white elite?

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Curaçao, a Dutch colony since 1634, was largely dependent on commerce. Most transactions took place along the nearby "coast of Caracas," the central littoral of present-day Venezuela, which supplied a vast array of products. Trade relations were also maintained with New Granada, Panama, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and both parts of Hispaniola. Curaçao's rise as a trading center in the late seventeenth century was inextricably bound up with its slave market. Over the years, tens of thousands of slaves were carried to Curaçao from western Africa and Angola. Dutch slavers were called on to meet the labor demands of planters in the Spanish colonies, as Spain itself only played a minor role in the slave trade, and the foreign merchants who had been granted the *asientos* could not always fulfil the stipulated quota (Postma 1990). Part of the Africans were not sold to the Spanish territories, but remained on the island, working either for the West India Company (WIC) or individual planters and merchants. White settlers and Company personnel were soon outnumbered by the Africans. In the eighteenth century, slaves continued

to arrive in Curaçao, though their numbers decreased after the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-13).

The white community was made up of Protestants and Jews, both of whom contributed to the island's prosperity, with the Jews being the more affluent group due to their successful trading activities. Most Protestants were from Holland, West Friesland, or Zeeland, but Germans and Scandinavians came to the island as well, as servants of the WIC (Emmanuel & Emmanuel 1970, I:93, 206, 226-28; Hartog 1961, I:340-43). Shipmasters, sailors, and merchants from other countries also settled on Curaçao, availing themselves of the island's status as a free port, which implied that any white man who married on the island, or promised to obey local laws while registering as a guard, was considered a full citizen. Marriage did not necessarily have to be with a white woman, as it was not uncommon for males in Curaçao to marry mulatto women.² A white elite ruled the island under the direction of a governor, who was appointed by the directors of the WIC. He had to swear allegiance to the Dutch States-General and the Prince of Orange. Together with a varying number of councillors he made up the Council, which combined judicial, legislative, and executive powers (Hartog 1961, I:221-22).

Curaçao's planters could not employ all their slaves in and around the house or in the fields, and sent some of them to town to earn wages as artisans. According to one source in the early nineteenth century, these slave artisans could even keep the proceeds of their products, provided that they handed over 6 to 14 *reales* each week to their masters (Hartog 1961, I:453; Visman 1981:41). Other slaves fulfilled Company tasks, like drumming. These were slaves owned by Company personnel, and their salaries were paid by their masters. In addition, slaves were to be found in many occupations, as is evident from a list compiled in 1775, showing all slaves of private persons who had fled the island – probably to *Tierra Firme* – in the previous decades.³

TABLE 1. MAIN OCCUPATIONS OF RUNAWAY SLAVES 1729-1775

Men	(n = 500)%		Women	(n = 85)%	
Field slaves	129	25.8	Laundresses	15	17.6
Seamen	82	16.4	Seamstresses ⁴	12	14.1
Carpenters	47	9.4	Knitters	10	11.8
Fishermen	32	6.4	Vendors	9	10.6
Shoemakers	30	6.0	Field slaves	8	9.4
Cooks	16	3.2	Domestic slaves	8	9.4
Musicians	15	3.0	Others	23	21.1
Bakers	15	3.0			
Bricklayers	14	2.8			
Tailors	14	2.8			
Others	106	21.2			

Source: ARA, NWIC 1166 fol. 124, list of slaves belonging to the citizens of Curaçao that fled to Coro or other places. Curaçao, July 7, 1775.⁵

It would, of course, be wrong to consider the runaways as representative for the entire slave population, but it is possible to make some observations. First, the number of field slaves in proportion to artisans clearly shows that Curaçao was not a typical Caribbean plantation economy. The list also draws attention to the interesting phenomenon of slave musicians: nine runaways had been violinists, five were drummers, and there was one French horn player. Among the women household slaves prevailed. Eight women were listed as domestic slaves in general, while most others apparently specialized in one or two tasks.

Also, a conspicuous number of slaves enlisted as sailors in Curaçao's merchant navy. Although they were bound to hand over their pay to their masters upon returning to Curaçao from a voyage, the slave-sailor still enjoyed some freedom, which in practice was increased through the assistance of the free coloreds. Slaves frequently borrowed documents from free slaves that bore witness to a person's enfranchisement, and ship captains signed them on. Governor Jacob van Bosvelt put an end to this custom by reintroducing a regulation which permitted free blacks and mulattoes only to be recruited when they possessed a document signed by the bailiff. Slaves could only enlist by submitting a written authority from their masters.⁶

Not all black and mulattoe slaves spent their whole lives in bondage. Some were freed by their masters and set about to make a living on their own. Manumission was prompted by a number of motives. It could be a token of affection from the planters for their loyal slaves or for their own flesh and blood, but it might also be an easy way to get rid of a slave who had become a burden, either because he was ill or crippled, or because the planter's earnings were decreasing. In the latter case, freedmen would often find

themselves unprepared for their new status and responsibilities. Unlike their counterparts in the British West Indies, Curaçaoan planters were not required to pay a manumission fee to support freed slaves (cf. Handler 1974:39-44).

There also existed a vast difference between the practice of manumission in Curaçao and in Suriname. In the latter colony, slave owners could only free a slave after receiving permission from the colonial authorities, which was only granted if it was guaranteed that the freedman would be able to maintain himself. Furthermore, manumitter and manumitted were obliged to support each other in the future. As a consequence of these measures, which became effective in 1733, the number of free non-whites in the colony remained low for a long time to come (Hoetink 1972:62; Brana-Shute 1989:41, 43).

Only during the period 1750-52 the planters had to pay 100 *pesos* to the Company for the manumission of every male slave under sixty years of age, and every female slave under fifty years. This stipulation, however, was not intended to render assistance to the freedmen, but rather as a fine for the masters. At the time, whites were feeling uncomfortable about the rapid growth of the group of free blacks and mulattoes.⁷

To obtain their freedom, slaves on Curaçao were not completely dependent on the decision of their masters, but also had the right of self-purchase. Those who worked on the land had to pay 300 *pesos* (or approximately 750 Dutch guilders) or the equivalent in kind, and the bondsmen who worked in the town of Willemstad sometimes made similar arrangements. Three hundred *pesos* were no trifle. The average slave price in Curaçao between 1740 and 1795 was 233 Dutch guilders or 93 *pesos* (Visman 1980:40-41, 43; Postma 1990:268). Manumission was relatively frequent among the slaves who lived on the WIC plantations.⁸

Most freedmen settled in Willemstad sooner or later. The only reliable census of the eighteenth century, the one taken in 1789, indicates that 70 percent of the free blacks and mulattoes lived in town.⁹ A substantial number of male freedmen worked as artisans and sailors. Around 1740, two-thirds of the Curaçaoan mariners were made up of non-whites, who like their white colleagues were enlisted by merchants and ship captains. Along the Spanish coasts blacks and mulattoes were usually the ones to be sent ashore in canoes, where they ran the risk of being seized by coastguards looking for Dutch smugglers. After returning to Curaçao the sailors were paid off and each went his own way. When it subsequently appeared that incidents had occurred on board, it was invariably difficult to locate the sailors again. Isaac Faesch, the island's governor between 1740 and 1758, considered it impossible to impose a regular tax on the free blacks and

mulattoes, as they were "sometimes absent from the island a year and a day, hanging around here and there at unknown places."¹⁰ A possible explanation is that because for many sailors trade was the only source of revenue, a slack season forced them to make a living elsewhere in the region. In addition, free blacks and mulattoes from the French, British, and Spanish Antilles temporarily found shelter on Curaçao. Initially, they were ordered to leave the island, but since 1754 all free blacks and mulattoes from the English, French and Spanish colonies had to enlist for militia service, and were thus recognized for practical purposes.¹¹

Sailors did not exactly make a fortune. In the middle of the eighteenth century many seamen families had to live off a pittance of ten *pesos* a month. This meant that slave sailors needed at least the income of two and a half years to purchase their freedom, if their owners agreed on a manumission sum of 300 *pesos*. Often, however, sailors supplemented their incomes by engaging in small trading operations, as part of Curaçao's contraband trade with the Spanish colonies. For this, they incurred debts with merchants and shipowners. In times when Spanish coastguard vessels increased their vigilance, this trade was a gamble, because all products that were brought along from the Spanish ports might be lost if the ship was seized.¹²

There were exceptions to the straitened circumstances that most free blacks and mulattoes were living in. A famous example was Antonio Beltran, since 1747 the captain of the free black guard, who bought a house with a large porch in Otrobanda, the new western quarter of Willemstad. Beltran had made his money as a captain and supercargo on the sloops and schooners of the coastal trade. Some of the better-off free coloreds, mostly mulattoes but also blacks, became slaveholders. Jean Rodier (acting governor in 1758-61 and 1762-64, and governor from 1764 to 1782) informed the directors of the West India Company:

There are perhaps people who want Your Honours to believe that among them [the free non-whites], there are some who have many slaves. It is true that a few female mulattoes or *mustiesen*, being the concubines of some fools, own a lot of slaves, but that is only temporarily, and the saying "Easily won, easily lost" applies to these people quite well. On the other hand, you will find one hundred who own one or two slaves at the most, and the rest owns none, having to work harder than slaves and being in want, especially in bad times, when there is no shipping traffic, as they owe their existence solely to that.¹³

Former slaves and their descendants, blacks and mulattoes alike, constituted – as elsewhere in the New World – a distinct social category, and were therefore listed under a separate heading in tax lists. Whites were usually the only ones liable for the household tax, but since 1719 free blacks and

mulattoes were also assessed. The tax lists give an impression of the island's population. Whites, including Company personnel, were divided into three classes: ten families were assessed for seven pesos, seventy-four for four pesos, and 227 for two pesos. All free non-whites were assessed for two pesos. It is clear from the lists that nuclear families (mother, father, children) were rare among the free non-whites, as is shown by the large number of single women who paid taxes: nine out of eleven free mulatto households and twenty-three out of thirty-seven free black households.¹⁴

At irregular intervals, better-off free coloreds like Beltran were liable for two taxes: a poll tax for free blacks and mulattoes and a poll tax on slaves, which came to four *reales* (half a *peso*) per adult slave owned. Before 1747 both whites and free non-whites were assessed for the tax on slaves and, after a period of exemption, the directors of the WIC again proposed to collect it among the free non-whites in the 1760s. Jean Rodier disapproved of this idea and emphasized, as we have seen, that many families in the free non-white sector were poverty-stricken.¹⁵

The other poll tax, already referred to above by Governor Faesch, was a property tax that the WIC (around 1740) wanted to levy on free non-whites exclusively. The WIC's Amsterdam Chamber took the view that "the free blacks and mulattoes living on the island are enjoying this Company's protection, and should contribute something to public welfare."¹⁶ Faesch was opposed to the levy because of the difficulty of collecting the tax, as well as security reasons. He warned the Company not to alienate the free non-white sector, which in wartime would be vital to the island's defense. Nevertheless, 400 blacks and 140 mulattoes were assessed, but Faesch had the last word and decided not to collect and continue the exemption, as the free non-whites were on guard duty and contributed in this way to the public welfare. In 1769 a new policy was inaugurated. The growing number of free coloreds – by 1789 they outnumbered the whites – and the resulting increase in costs, led to resumption of the collection of the property tax. Moreover, at the end of the eighteenth century, new additional taxes – an excise on drink and a two percent tax on the sale of real estate – were levied on free blacks, mulattoes, and whites alike.¹⁷

As is shown in Table 2, a large majority of the population was still enslaved. In the following decades the slave population was overtaken by the free non-whites, whose numbers increased to 4,549 in 1817 and 6,531 in 1833, or 32.2% and 43.5% of the total population respectively (Hoetink 1987:75).

TABLE 2. THE POPULATION OF CURAÇAO IN 1789

	Willemstad and outskirts	Countryside	Total	
Protestants	2,001	468	2,469	(11.8%)
Jews	1,023	72	1,095	(5.2%)
Free non-whites	2,617	1,097	3,714	(17.7%)
Free servants ¹⁸	483	363	846	(4.0%)
Slaves	5,419	7,445	12,864	(61.3%)
	11,543	9,445	20,988	(100 %)

Source: ARA, Raad van Coloniën 120, General survey of Curaçao and dependant islands, appendix no. 16: Report of private houses.

On account of their African ancestry, free coloreds on Curaçao – like everywhere in the Caribbean – did not enjoy the same rights as whites. If a free black or mulatto wounded or insulted a white person of irreproachable conduct, no judicial inquiry was opened, but the white man was simply taken at his word, and the alleged colored aggressor was exiled or received corporal punishment. If a white man wounded a free black or mulatto, the victim was not allowed to call a black or mulatto witness because their testimony lacked any legal recognition. White witnesses, however, were welcome. If the white man was found guilty he had to pay a fine. Preferably, no publicity was given to this, whereas whippings of blacks and coloreds took place in public. An obvious example of judicial inequality was a 1748 regulation banning people from sailing towards arriving ships before the shipmasters had reported themselves to the governor. Whites violating this rule had to pay twenty-five pesos, while soldiers were allowed to fire on black and mulatto offenders.¹⁹

In a society based on African slavery, the idea that people of black descent constituted a kind of servant class was natural to many whites. How this view affected even the free non-whites is shown by an ordinance of 1742 that assigned them to supply clay and stones for the construction of fortifications. Whites would never be charged with such tasks. The free non-whites were disadvantaged in other ways as well. In 1749 obstacles were put in the way of the traders among them, as they were considered to be formidable competitors of the less well-to-do Protestants. From then on, free blacks and mulattoes were forbidden to keep a shop in town, although they could continue to have commercial dealings in their homes and to take their merchandise downtown during the daytime. It is not clear when this measure was revoked.²⁰

Competition by non-whites became a problem for whites in the second half of the eighteenth century. Whereas up to 1787 manumission was a rarity in the plantation colony of Suriname, the commercial character of Curaçao

did not call for limitations on the numbers of slaves that were set free. To the dismay of the island's authorities, frequent manumission created a relatively large group of free non-whites. Members of the Council of Curaçao often complained about the difficulties they experienced in governing the island. They purported that only one out of twenty inhabitants was white, and expressed their concern about the self-assured group of free coloreds. Due to their pride, one white man argued, none of the free coloreds wanted to be in service to somebody else, which they considered to be incompatible with their social position. They would rather suffer in poverty. According to this white individual, the free non-whites' impudence manifested itself when they gathered in groups to stroll the streets armed with sticks while singing loudly, or when they caused accidents by riding horseback along the city streets at great speed.²¹

Apart from the free non-whites, the Company faced a slave population it did not trust, and even less so after the rebellion of 1750, in which Company slaves of the Hato plantation rose in revolt against an unpopular overseer and killed an unknown number of people, probably five to ten. The revolt was put down – mainly by the free black and mulatto militias – and thirty-four rebels were executed and thirteen exiled.²² Although none of the victims was white, this insurrection filled the whites with dread, as was shown by the measures that were taken. Gatherings of slaves were promptly prohibited, while drum beating and violin playing, traditionally viewed as seditious activities, were outlawed on penalty of either a fifty *pesos* fine or whipping, branding, and banishment to the salt pans of Bonaire. In this way, an end was put to the common practice among slaves to add luster to their weddings and funerals with music. No more than six slaves a time were allowed to attend funerals, and afterwards they had to return “home” straightaway. Moreover, they were not permitted to go out after nine o'clock in the evening. These measures were again introduced in the wake of the events that took place the day after Christmas 1760. The governor was informed that a group of slaves was about to rise in rebellion, whereupon he dispatched a patrol of militiamen. In the Jewish quarter of Willemstad, they encountered more than one hundred blacks making music with drums and other instruments. The mere sound they produced had led to the rumor of a rebellion.²³

White fears again surfaced later in the 1760s, when the island's fiscal, who had to see to the observance of the laws, created quite a stir within the small white community. He was accused of systematically refusing to deal in a serious way with white complaints about black or mulatto crimes, while a mulatto complaint about a white offence was enough to have the white man imprisoned. His policy was clearly not in line with tradition. The whites

raised a hue and cry over that.²⁴ Most of them probably took the same view as a British planter who alleged in 1790 that "in all the islands ... I have known, both English and French, they have considered free Negroes and Mulattoes as a nuisance ... and the only advantage the Colonies can receive from them is by employing them in the defense of the Island, in case of invasion" (cited in Cox 1984:132). While Governor Faesch and his successor Rodier agreed upon this advantage, faith in a brave free colored performance in case of a foreign invasion was not shared by all white citizens of Curaçao. One of them expressed his fears of a repetition of a strategy that had proved successful in the Seven Years' War. During the siege of Havana, the English had announced that free blacks and mulattoes who took up arms against them would be enslaved again together with their wives and children. Upon hearing this, the free non-whites reportedly left the city in force. Rodier, however, was more afraid of Spain than of England. In 1780 he argued that in the event of a Spanish attack, Curaçao was not able to conscript more than six to seven hundred whites, while they could not rely on slaves or free coloreds, since they were "blind Roman Catholics" and felt much affection for both Spanish clerics and the Spanish nation.²⁵

At times, the authorities were indeed worried by the massive black and mulatto affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church. Since 1661 Catholic priests had, on certain conditions, been allowed to preach in Curaçao. Between 1680 and 1705 no less than fifty-five of them came to the island.²⁶ Some arrived merely to baptize the newly born, while others settled on the island. Unlike the Protestant ministers, these priests directed their efforts towards the Africans and their descendants. As time went by the Protestant authorities of Curaçao found themselves governing a predominantly Catholic population. It took considerable time before the WIC directors were informed about this situation.²⁷ In 1740 Governor Faesch pointed out to them that almost all blacks and mulattoes, either slave or free, were Roman Catholics, "this religion being more congenial because of its ceremonies, while its priests take more trouble attracting them than our clergymen do." The WIC directors were alarmed and took up their pens, assigning the Rev. Wigboldus Rasvelt to pay special attention to the conversion of blacks and mulattoes, and advising him to set an example with a pious and edifying way of life.²⁸ Rasvelt responded that there was an unfair competition going on:

It is, indeed, no surprise that Father Cloeck [the Catholic priest] has converted many blacks to Christianity (if those who don't know anything about the faith in Christ, and at the very most mumble some prayers, though without knowledge or attention, can bear the name of Christians) as it is well-known that *ex navitate*, and as it were *ex natura*, blacks are Roman Catholics or have a leaning to it. That is why a priest will baptize a

bozal [a recently arrived slave] ... for two reales, if he can only say some common prayers, and has a godfather and godmother, even though he does not understand the religion at all.²⁹

In the end, the secular arm acquiesced in the general non-white adherence to Roman Catholicism. In the closing years of the eighteenth century, the Curaçaoan governor Johannes de Veer even opposed the sending of an Anglican parson. It would only disturb the peace:

[A]ll blacks in this land, slave or free, profess the Roman Catholic religion and therefore they are Christians, a faith that in view of the common weal of this land is more suitable and beneficial to that kind of people than the Protestant or Lutheran one, because the Roman Catholic priests manage to keep them in check, owing to a more despotic authority, as a result of which there is, until today, among those people not even the semblance of insurgency, which there is in the colonies of Suriname, Essequebo, Berbice etc., where the slaves are mainly left in their pagan opinions and are not given the slightest instruction in the Christian religion, so there has to be continuous rebelliousness, while the slave owners fancy they may treat these poor creatures as animals ...³⁰

Ironically, only seven months after these words were written down, in August 1795 a large rebellion broke out among Curaçaoan blacks and mulattoes. Between two hundred and three hundred joined an unsuccessful movement aimed at putting an end to taxes and slavery. Several rebels were killed in battle, or executed afterwards.

As underlined by De Veer, Curaçao and Suriname differed markedly in terms of their respective numbers of non-white Christians. In the eyes of Suriname's colonists, no slaves qualified for Christianization. Up to the 1820s, planters preferred that their bondsmen stuck to pagan beliefs, which they used as another justification for slavery (Oostindie 1992:154-55). In Curaçao, planters initially watched with indifference how Catholicism became an important constituent of non-white culture. The colonial authorities were not troubled by conversion to Roman Catholicism, even though some officials were worried by the regular church attendance of blacks and mulattoes, fearing that large meetings could lead to rebellion.

The conversion of the Africans and their descendants reinforced latinization of Curaçao's population, since there were many Spaniards and a few Frenchmen among the priests on the island. The blacks and mulattoes had a distinct preference for the Spanish priests, to the great dissatisfaction of the Dutch Catholic Church wardens who depicted the Spaniards as "good-for-nothings."³¹ When thereupon a Dutch priest arrived, the bishop of Caracas was angered, claiming religious authority in Curaçao. Through diplomatic channels, Spain now requested the States General to allow the bishop of Caracas to appoint the island's priests, if only to solve the language prob-

lem. The Dutch priest wasn't exactly fluent in Spanish, and therefore his contacts with the faithful left much to be desired.³² The decision in 1776 of the Dutch Franciscans to preach in Papiamentu should therefore be seen as a Dutch bid to gain the confidence of the faithful. Spanish priests, however, continued to arrive. Father Theodorus Brouwer in 1785 complained that they turned up from time to time, saying Mass, preaching, baptizing, and marrying. This meant a substantial financial loss for Brouwer's mission, which missed out on 50 Dutch guilders for every celebrated marriage.³³

The black and mulatto Catholics – white Catholics constituted only a small minority – did not welcome all priests. They wanted somebody they respected, like Miguel Grimon in the early 1750s, whom they almost worshipped. The religious leader had to be of unimpeachable conduct and should not administer the sacraments in a drunken stupor, as once had happened.³⁴ When in 1747 the blacks and mulattoes found out that their priest, Michael Roldan, was living in sin, they demanded he be removed from office. The church wardens called him to account and the priest immediately sent his woman away. Unsatisfied, the blacks and mulattoes unrestrainedly expressed their dislike in church on Sunday, and the following day they assembled in large numbers in front of the church building,

committing all sorts of mischief, and they even tried to break down the doors with chopping-knives and other weapons in order to get hold of the priest, who managed to flee and hide with one of his neighbors.

Escorted by the bailiff and his servants, Roldan could later be brought back to his church. There was more to this incident than just moral indignation of the blacks and mulattoes. It so happened that there was a second priest on the island, a certain Salvator de Guebarza, who had been expelled two years earlier for obscure reasons, probably seditiousness. He came back and built up a host of followers among the blacks and mulattoes by treating them on the same footing as the whites. Roldan and Guebarza were avowed enemies...³⁵

Obviously, white, black, and mulatto are relative categories. As Gad Heuman (1981:4) has observed for Jamaica, continuous intercourse between whites and non-whites eventually made free coloreds form "a separate group ... with their own social hierarchies and a specific nomenclature to account for their varied racial origins." In the case of the free non-whites of Curaçao, Hoetink's view (1987:83) that prosperity and somatic traits tended to correlate, can only be endorsed. In 1752 some members of the island's Council drew attention to a number of families with African origins that were not only well-to-do and powerful, but also had forged marital bonds

with whites, as a result of which, according to the councillors, they should now be treated as the whites' equals.³⁶ The acceptance of this mulatto upper class in white circles was not accepted quietly, as is clear from a dispute in 1769 between the WIC's military commanders and the civil militia officers. The bone of contention was which organization could incorporate a group of twenty to thirty soldiers who were the offspring of either whites and mulattoes (so-called *mustiesen*), of *mustiesen* and mulattoes, or of *mustiesen* and *sambos* (the children of mulattoes and blacks).³⁷ Since Isaac Faesch's government, the free black and free mulatto militias had come under the jurisdiction of military commanders. The commanders wanted to keep the near-whites within the mulatto militia, but the white militia officers also laid claim to them, arguing that they were not real mulattoes. The white commanders eventually won the argument in most cases and by 1789, 214 *mustiesen* were part of a 1,063 men strong white militia unit. Still, the authorities questioned their reliability in the event of a Spanish attack.³⁸

Free mulattoes set great store on being considered as *mustiesen*.³⁹ Aiming to climb the social ladder, at least some of them looked down upon the free blacks in the same way as whites generally did. This was obvious, for instance, from their claim to precedence over the blacks on the day Governor Faesch was installed in 1740. The former governor had separated mulattoes and blacks on duty, creating distinct militias. The first time for the two corps to perform as such was at the inauguration of the new governor. Immediately, problems arose because the free blacks and the free mulattoes wanted to march ahead of each other in the parade. The mulattoes did not go on record as saying that they were entitled to have preference because of their lighter complexion, but this surely must have been one of their arguments. They may also have stressed their greater prosperity. The blacks, interestingly enough, countered with two arguments in their own favor. Governor Faesch reported that they "argued that they should be considered superior to the mulattoes, because their race had produced kings, and besides, without blacks there would never have been any mulattoes."⁴⁰

For some time after, there was intense competition between two unidentified groups of free non-whites, probably divided into blacks and mulattoes, who came to blows at the slightest provocation. In the slave rebellion of 1795 the free non-whites were again divided amongst themselves. On the one hand, free blacks and mulattoes were instrumental in spreading French revolutionary ideas, while on the other hand, the contribution of their respective militias in crushing the revolt was indispensable (Lowenthal 1973:388; Paula 1974; Hamelberg 1979:164). There was no division along color lines in this case; instead, the dividing line was right across free non-white ranks, with blacks and mulattoes in both camps.

Throughout the eighteenth century, hooliganism and inflammatory actions were perpetrated concertedly by blacks and mulattoes. Such deviant behavior by mulattoes has been explained by Hoetink (1987:118, 123-26, 160-61) as part of his theory on Curaçao's ingrained patterns of slave holder behavior and slave behavior, two complementary complexes of ideas and rules concerning the suitable attitudes of these groups. According to Hoetink, a majority of the mulattoes lived outside this system and were therefore insecure and unpredictable.⁴¹ Similar behavior by free blacks cannot, of course, be explained in this way. Perhaps an economic explanation would do better. Taking into account the peculiar nature of Curaçao's economy, in which plantation labor was not important, and many people of African descent, both free and slave, could make a living in a rather independent way, the unpredictability of black behavior could have resulted from the conflicting demands of the pattern of slave behavior on the one hand, and the lack of servitude in everyday life on the other.

In summary, it may be said that Curaçao's mercantile character left its mark on the island's demographic and judicial divisions and resulting social relations. The white minority viewed blacks and mulattoes with a mixture of fear and indifference. Feeling uncomfortable about the non-whites' numerical superiority, they were alarmed at the drop of a hat. Nevertheless, although some prohibitions were issued, the non-whites were not excessively burdened with all sorts of restrictive laws. Not thwarted in their religious affiliation, blacks and mulattoes adopted Catholicism, which became an essential element of their culture. To some extent, blacks and mulattoes were also left to their devices in the economic sphere. A good number of slaves were sent out to earn a living as artisans or sailors. If these examples of white lack of care were not unknown to plantation colonies, they were certainly less significant. The same was true for Curaçao's manumission rate, which eclipsed that of Suriname by far. In general, the manumission rate in Curaçao was more comparable to the situation in the Spanish colonies than that in plantation societies like Jamaica and St. Domingue. Consequently, a large group of free non-whites was created who competed with less affluent white traders. Obstacles were put in the way of these freedmen, which made them share the fate of their peers in other slave societies. They were no slaves, nor were they free, but neither did they resign themselves to their fate. They manifested themselves when the occasion arose, sometimes vis-à-vis the whites, and at other times amongst themselves. Their growing numbers and assertiveness alarmed the whites, who nonetheless as time went by were not able to get around admission in their midst of those mulattoes that were their equals in terms of social status.

NOTES

* Thanks go to Remco Raben, who made some useful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

1. See Heuman 1981; Cox 1984; Pérotin-Dumon 1991; Trouillot 1992.
2. Algemeen Rijksarchief (ARA), The Hague, Liassen Staten-Generaal 5800, J.B. Bicker, director of the WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, to the States General, Amsterdam, May 13, 1777; ARA, Nieuwe West-Indische Compagnie [NWIC] 591, fols. 714-715, Governor Isaac Faesch to WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, February 2, 1745; ARA, NWIC 1158 fol. 84, Jan van Schagen, fiscal of Curaçao, to the Board of X of the WIC, Curaçao, September 30, 1743. Foreigners were registered as guards after a stay of one year and six weeks on the island; see ARA, NWIC 1176 fols. 333-334, the minutes of the Council of Curaçao, September 16, 1789, and Kunst 1981:206.
3. Of all these slaves, one was reported to have fled as early as 1729. Allegedly, ten more slaves escaped before 1750.
4. Besides, nine female slaves combined sewing with another occupation.
5. See also ARA, Verspreide West-Indische Stukken 972, the report by W.A.I. van Groenestein and W.C. Boeij, The Hague, February 11, 1791, pp. 62-63.
6. Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Seville, Sección Santo Domingo 781, Testimonies of Evert Franken and Samuel Levi Maduro, Puerto Cabello, September 6, 1730. ARA, NWIC 603 fols. 1249-1250, Ordinance of Governor Jacob van Bosvelt, Curaçao, July 29, 1761.
7. Hamelberg (1979:178). As late as 1787, two commissioners sent by the *stadhouder* found no regulations dealing with manumission. Considering the practice of abandoning old or sick slaves, they proposed to make it obligatory for slaveholders to commit themselves to take care of their former slaves if they were reduced to poverty. ARA, Collectie G.K. van Hogendorp 154 f no. 32, Memorandum of considerations on the report on the state's colonies in the West Indies, handed to His Serene Highness by His commissioners, March 19, 1787.
8. The number of manumitted slaves or the frequency of manumissions is not known. This topic is worth a separate study.
9. ARA, Raad van Coloniën 120, General survey of Curaçao and dependent islands, appendix no. 16: Report of private houses. See Knight (1990:140-41) for the conscious and subconscious motives of freedmen to live in towns.
10. ARA, NWIC 588, fol. 890, Intelligence collected by the delegates of the Council of Curaçao, J.G. Pax, Johannes Stuijlingh and Jan van Schagen, Curaçao, June 18, 1741; and NWIC 588, fol. 726, Isaac Faesch to WIC, Chamber Amsterdam, Curaçao, July 4, 1741.
11. ARA, NWIC 607, fol. 344, Governor Jean Rodier to WIC, Curaçao, September 27, 1769; NWIC 603, fols. 1193-1194, Ordinance of Governor Jacob van Bosvelt, May 20, 1761. Ordinances of October 24, 1743 and March 4, 1754, in Schiltkamp & De Smidt 1978, 1:234, 290.
12. ARA, NWIC 599, fols. 912-913, J.G. Pax and Nathaniel Ellis, delegates of the Council of Curaçao, to Governor Faesch and councillors. Curaçao, September 24, 1753. Monthly wages of sailors are given in ARA, Oud Archief Curaçao 814, fol. 482.
13. ARA, NWIC 607, fol. 344, Governor J. Rodier to the WIC, Curaçao, September 27, 1769.
14. ARA, NWIC 574, fols. 461-462, Family list.

15. ARA, NWIC 317, Antonio Beltran to WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, August 17, 1750; NWIC 607, fol. 341, Governor Jean Rodier to WIC, Curaçao, September 27, 1769.
16. Goslinga 1985:103, 119. ARA, NWIC 474, fol. 150, Cornelis Hop and Willem Backer, WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, to Governor Isaac Faesch, Amsterdam, November 14, 1741.
17. ARA, NWIC 601, fols. 782-783, Governor Isaac Faesch to WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, April 5, 1758; NWIC 590, fols. 445-451, Poll tax of free blacks and mulattoes, 1742; NWIC 1176, fol. 417, Minutes of the Council of Curaçao, 1789. In the middle of the eighteenth century the island had four militia units: two white ones, one free black, and one free mulatto. See ARA, NWIC 1160, Council of Curaçao to WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, May 18, 1751; Goslinga 1985:123.
18. In the census, this group was not subdivided into Jews, Protestants, and freedmen.
19. ARA, NWIC 318, J. Rodier, J. Lix Raaven, Cornelis Stuijlingh, Gerrit Specht, J.C. van Brandt, Philip Schoonenboom, and Pieter de Meij L. Zoon to WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, December 30, 1766. Ordinance of February 21, 1748 in Schiltkamp & De Smidt 1978, I:259.
20. ARA, NWIC 1176, fol. 453, Michiel Römer to WIC, Curaçao, November 4, 1789; NWIC 1159, fol. 154, Proposals of Marten Hempel, Jan Hendrik Brugman, Claas Visser, and Hendrik Smits Dirksz, on behalf of the citizens of Curaçao, Curaçao, January 31, 1749; NWIC 1159, fol. 141, Governor Isaac Faesch to WIC, Curaçao, March 15, 1749. See also Cox (1984:65-66) on proposals to counter competition of white traders by freedmen in St. Kitts.
21. ARA, NWIC 596, fol. 343, J.W.C. van Laar, Statement of secret considerations, Curaçao, December 25, 1747; NWIC 613, fol. 245, Fiscal P.Th. van Teijlingen to the WIC, Curaçao, July 12, 1785. Ordinances of April 22, 1767 and March 3, 1747, in Schiltkamp & De Smidt 1978, I:340, 247.
22. De Hoog 1982:42-43; Hamelberg 1979:165-71; ARA, NWIC 317, Governor Isaac Faesch to the directors of the WIC, Curaçao, May 2, 1752. Apparently it was very difficult to enforce such laws. Either they were quickly forgotten or they had to be repeated at regular intervals.
23. ARA, NWIC 603, fols. 1235-1237, Ordinance of Governor Isaac Faesch, reintroduced by Governor Jacob van Bosvelt, Curaçao, July 28, 1750 and July 2, 1761; Schiltkamp & De Smidt 1978, I:270-72; NWIC 1176, fol. 454, Michiel Römer to WIC, Curaçao, November 4, 1789; NWIC 605 fols. 577-578, Gerrit Specht, militia captain, to WIC, Curaçao, January 21, 1767.
24. ARA, NWIC 318, Council of Curaçao to WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, December 30, 1766.
25. ARA, NWIC 607, fol. 341, Governor Jean Rodier to WIC, Curaçao, September 27, 1769; NWIC 612, fol. 146, J. Lix Raaven to WIC, Curaçao, April 12, 1782; NWIC 611, fol. 485, Governor J. Rodier and Council of Curaçao to WIC, February 15, 1780. Rumors of a Spanish attack also frightened the authorities of the Dutch Wild Coast colony of Essequibo. In the late 1760s, no more than thirty-nine soldiers could be raised there, though many able-bodied men were not recruited, since the Director General questioned their loyalty. They were Spaniards, Frenchmen, Swiss, and Flemings. ARA, Staten-Generaal 5792, D. Luycx Massis and Abraham Duvelaer to the States General, Middelburg, August 21, 1769.
26. Goslinga 1985:247, 257-58; Brada 1965:33; AGI, Sección Santo Domingo 744, Governor Diego de Melo Maldonado to the King, Caracas, May 3, 1686.
27. Even so, the Company directors had been told as early as 1690 that Roman Catholic priests were walking around on Curaçao wearing habits (Brada 1961:11, 14).

28. ARA, NWIC 588, fol. 251, Governor Isaac Faesch to the WIC directors, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, September 22, 1740; NWIC 474, fol. 143, Jan van Loon and Bauduin van Collen, WIC directors, Chamber of Amsterdam, to the Rev. Wigboldus Rasvelt, Amsterdam, July 4, 1741.
29. ARA, NWIC 589, fol. 6, The Rev. Wigboldus Rasvelt to the WIC directors, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, January 29, 1742.
30. ARA, Raad van Coloniën 77, no. 171, Governor J. de Veer Abz. to the members of the Council of the West Indian Colonies, Curaçao, January 30, 1795.
31. ARA, NWIC 600, fol. 1171, Antoni Slijk and Jan Baptista Goehassine, wardens of the Roman Catholic Church, to the WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, January 7, 1756.
32. ARA, Collectie Fagel 1820, *Extrait d'une representation que le Conseil des Yndes a fait au Roy...*, February 1767. This request did not convince the States General, which continued to prefer Dutchmen. They did not object to the fact that the priests would receive their mission from the bishop of Caracas, provided that arrangements were made to ensure that runaway slaves from Curaçao and the Spanish colonies would be taken back to where they belonged, Register Resolutions Representative *stadhouder* and WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, March 31, 1767.
33. ARA, NWIC 613, fol. 197, P.Th. van Teijlingen, fiscal, to Governor Johannes de Veer, Curaçao, June 3, 1785; NWIC 613, fol. 192, Governor Johannes de Veer to the WIC, Chamber of Zeeland, Curaçao, June 4, 1785.
34. ARA, NWIC 601, fols. 448-450, Memorandum of Antoni Slijk, warden of the Roman Catholic Church, Curaçao, June 13, 1757.
35. ARA, NWIC 596, fols. 23-29, Joan Wilhem Claus van Laar to the WIC, Curaçao, December 31, 1747; Brada 1951:9-10.
36. ARA, NWIC 599, fols. 348-349, Deputies J.G. Pax, Chr. Raphoen, and Herm. Rojez to WIC, Curaçao, December 22, 1752.
37. This classification was reported by the agronomist Teenstra 1836-37, I:166.
38. ARA, NWIC 607, fols. 89-91, Governor J. Rodier to WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, January 17, 1769; NWIC 1176, fols. 323-324, 420-421, Minutes of a meeting of the Council of Curaçao, September 16, 1789.
39. On the other hand, *mustiesen* were also to be found among the slaves. There were nine among those slaves who in 1775 were reported to have fled in the previous decades, ARA, NWIC 1166, fol. 124.
40. ARA, NWIC 588, fols. 57-58, Governor Isaac Faesch to the directors of the WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, Curaçao, August 6, 1740. See also: NWIC 588, fol. 478, Faesch to the directors of the WIC, Curaçao, April 2, 1741.
41. Still, it is valid for Curaçao as for the Caribbean as a whole: little is known about the lower and middle strata of the free colored group. See also Sio 1981:157-58.

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