CHAPTER 4

The Ascent of the Surinamer, 1690s–1730s

The term *Surinamers* (people who are Surinamese) appeared in print for the first time in 1716 and was used by a set around the colony’s former bookkeeper Jan van der Marsche to refer to the colony’s planters as a grouping with common interests. In the decades after the founding of the Suriname Company a transatlantic group of people arose with increasing economic interests in Suriname. They included plantation owners, plantation managers, shipping companies and metropolitan investors who were not part of the chartered Suriname Company or Dutch West India Company. Their business interests became more intimately connected across the Atlantic than those of the earliest frontier settlers, many of whom had arrived from other colonial ventures. The closer connection between the colony, shipping companies and metropolitan investors allowed for an expansion of the plantation economy in the decades that followed but also meant that the ties increasingly limited the colonists’ ability to run plantations independently. In return for reliable shipping services and investments they became subject to greater supervision over their business practices. Shipping obviously played an important role in the relationship between the colony and the metropolis. Since sugar and the other plantation products were not bought directly from plantations but were mostly consigned by colonists to representatives in the Dutch Republic to be sold on the market of Amsterdam, the dynamics of the market for cargo space on board the freighters sailing between Suriname and the metropolis were of great importance.

The ascent of “the Surinamer” was a contradictory process involving the forming of a local elite and a growth in ties to the metropolis. This chapter will outline three aspects of the ascent of the Surinamer beginning with the evolving vision of the colonial project that went along with the consolidation of the colony after the uncertain frontier era had passed. This new vision marked a departure from the idea that the colony was to be based solely on sugar production for metropolitan markets. In its place arguments began to surface in favor of experimenting with other products to give the colony a more solid foundation. This changing vision also altered the perspective on

---

1 SvS, *Request van J. van der Marsche en andere belanghebbenden om een regeling te treffen voor de aanvoer van slaven naar, de defensie van en de vrije handel op de kolonie Suriname* (1 April 1716) entry 1.05.03 inv.nr. 125.
the military aspects of the colony. The crucial contribution of the civil militia during a French assault on the colony in 1712 played an important role in shaping strategic military discussions amongst colonists, investors, the Suriname Company and the States General. Secondly, this chapter will highlight how the freight shipping between Suriname and the metropolis changed with the development of the colony and the expansion of plantation production. The expanding shipping seemed to provide an opportunity for Zeeland to gain access to the colony again, but this attempt failed because of the economic power of Amsterdam. Thirdly, the Suriname Company and the Dutch West India Company tried to find ways to control their agents who were to ensure that the colonists repaid debts and did not engage in smuggling. Together these three parts show that Suriname was beginning to consolidate as a colony and the colonists were acquiring a political voice of their own, while simultaneously developing greater dependence on the metropolis.

Changing Vision

The growing group of people (in the colony as well as in the Republic) who had invested considerable sums in the plantation economy had no formal representation in the Dutch Republic and therefore very little political influence in questions directly concerning the colony. Their primary concerns involved matters of defense and taxation. The relationship between the planters and the Suriname Company has been described by historians as troublesome and rife with conflict, prompting Van der Meiden to title his political history of early modern Suriname *Bestwist Bestuur* (*Contested Government*). The small number of European colonists, their isolation, and their single-mindedness about making a quick fortune in the colony were said to have caused much of the bickering described by Van der Meiden. Obviously, the planters, directors and local government were in agreement about many of the basic aspects of how Suriname was to be governed, and there was much more to the local elite than just incessant infighting. What changed in the decades after the War of the Spanish Succession (1703–13) was that the planters and interested parties outside the Suriname Company were becoming more vocal about their interests.

In the period after its founding in 1683 the Suriname Company functioned as the formal representative of Suriname interests to the Dutch States General. The fact that the interested parties both in the Republic and in Suriname were

---