The New Year’s celebrations of 1863 went by peacefully. The people were cheerful because they started the year as slaves and would end it as free people, brother Räthling wrote in his diary. According to this Moravian missionary, New Year’s Day seldom passed so quietly and smoothly. The planters’ fear that slaves would be unwilling to work after the celebrations proved to be unfounded. On the contrary, Räthling believed that the plantation owners were deliberately pessimistic. Rebellion and disorder would have played into their hands because they could have used such defiance to convince the government that the slaves were not yet ready for freedom.  

The garrison in Suriname was reinforced temporarily with a company of Marines, made up of five officers and 195 men prepared for any disorder after emancipation, which was to take effect on the first of July, 1863. The Marines would return home before the end of 1863. Their presence turned out to be unnecessary, because no disturbances occurred. After the example of the British, the abolition of slavery was followed by a period of apprenticeship. Emancipated slaves were obligated to work on the plantations for another ten years, although they were free to choose their employer and received pay for their work. All former slaves between the ages of fifteen and sixty had to enter into a contract. Compared to the four years of apprenticeship in the British Caribbean, this arrangement lasted exceptionally long in Suriname, supposedly to prevent social and economic upheaval.

Piet Emmer has argued that even though many believed that the ending of both slavery and apprenticeship would cause revolutionary changes in Suriname’s economy and society, the transition was

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1 Archiv der Brüder-Unität Herrnhut (ABUH): 15 Lb 15 Salem.
2 Koloniaal Verslag 1863.
3 Gouvernementsblad der kolonie Suriname (GB) 1962, no. 6.
in fact far more gradual than anticipated. As he explains, many of the plantations functioned reasonably well during the apprenticeship, even though the export of sugar dropped by 25%, and declined more afterwards. The largest plantations in particular were able to adapt to the new circumstances, although the labor costs weighed heavily on the budget. Furthermore, the economy of Suriname offered the freedmen few viable alternatives to working on a plantation, according to Emmer. Be this as it may, the apparent peace and quiet after emancipation conceals the social transformations brought about by the abolition of slavery. In this paper I will demonstrate the importance of changing social practices in this transformation process. It was not social and economic upheaval that affected society, but people’s daily routines and social interaction. What were the consequences for plantation culture of the changes occurring in interactions between plantation management and their emancipated slaves? What was the importance of the practices and the enactment of social hierarchy among slaves for the management of the plantation? Emancipation had different meanings in the collective symbolic schemes, plans, and intentions of planters, former slaves and local authorities. As Marshall Sahlins has argued, “acting from different perspectives, and with different social powers of objectifying their respective interpretations, people come to different conclusions and societies work out different consensuses.”

### The Apprenticeship

The awareness that abolition of slavery would become inevitable grew in the course of the nineteenth century in the Netherlands and in Suriname, in particular after the outlawing of the slave trade in 1814

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