

# Stories of Autonomy on Non-Sovereign Saba

## Flipping the Script of Postcolonial Resistance

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The Caribbean island of Saba is a rather insignificant and at times invisible dot on the map, seemingly marginal to political modernity.<sup>1</sup> Its five square miles is home to about 1.500 permanent residents. On this little rock in the Caribbean Sea, people subtly rewrite the script of postcolonial resistance.<sup>2</sup> Until 2010, Saba was a constituent part of the semi-autonomous Netherlands Antilles. This constellation of five was dissolved in answer to a series of referenda. Sint Maarten and Curaçao attained the status of autonomous countries within the Dutch kingdom and the three smaller islands – Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba – were integrated into the Netherlands as *openbare lichamen* or ‘public entities’, administrative units that are sometimes described as ‘special municipalities’.<sup>3</sup> This means that, formally, Saba now is under direct Dutch-metropolitan

control. Saba’s new place in the Kingdom of the Netherlands acquires meaning and is actively reshaped through storytelling in ways that go unrecognized in Dutch Caribbean studies.

Dominant scholarship presents the continued link with a metropolitan power as a constraint to national identities and political autonomy of Caribbean populations (see, for example, De Jong 2009; Oostindie 2009). It is considered peculiar that these islands opt for a closer governmental relationship to the Netherlands instead of taking steps towards ‘true’ national emancipation. The unprecedented integration of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba into the government system of the Netherlands is therefore referred to as a paradoxical reversal of normative decolonization (Oostindie and Klinkers 2001: 13-14). According to scholarly publica-

tions, this situation inevitably leads to conflicts over autonomy as increased administrative supervision is locally experienced as ‘recolonization’ (Oostindie and Klinkers 2001, 2003, 2012).

I challenge these conventional wisdoms in Dutch Caribbean studies by listening more closely to the stories that people on Saba themselves tell about their non-sovereign political status. It is true that Sabans do not passively accept the way state power is now differently exercised. Their attitude of resistance is, however, difficult to capture in the vocabulary of Eurocentric social science. In their stories about Holland and its agents, Sabans do not describe themselves as victims nor do they invoke anticolonial rhetoric. Rather, they boast of their ability to outdo the Dutch in matters of governance while calling for a more actively and genuinely engaged metropolitan state. Averting direct transatlantic conflicts over local autonomy, Sabans tell stories in a subtler attempt to educate civil servants from overseas about local priorities and moralities of governance. In this article, then, I analyse Saban ways of talking about Dutch state agents and how these relate to scholarly work on non-sovereignty in the Dutch Caribbean. In particular, I argue that these stories suggest a different view on metropolitan state power and postcolonial agency than is common in the dominant literature.

This article is based on seven months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2015. This fieldwork mainly involved participant observation at Saba’s harbour and at town hall meetings, island council meetings and central committee meetings. In addition, I interviewed civil servants, politicians, business owners and seamen on the way they exercise or relate to state

power within this non-sovereign context. It was mainly due to stories about metropolitan-Dutch state agents that people shared with me that I started to question the dominant discourse on non-sovereignty in the literature. The article zooms in on three stories in particular, which all feature Dutch state agents (such as civil servants, politicians or engineers). A note on this ethnographic material: I have chosen to incorporate fairly long quotations from interviews and conversations. This is partly in the spirit of the theme ‘Stories’ and partly to fill a gap in Dutch Caribbean studies, which has traditionally offered little space for the people of these islands to tell their tales in their own words.<sup>4</sup>

In the following, I first introduce the scholarly debate on non-sovereignty that informs this study. I then briefly describe the historical context in which Saba became a ‘public entity’ of the Netherlands, which is followed by a discussion of the ethnographic material. The first story I discuss is akin to a founding myth and tells the tale of how Sabans built their own road. The second is a re-telling of a Dutch folkloric legend by a Saban administrator. The last is more of a version of events, rather than a story. In it, a harbour master reflects on the spectacular event of a plane crash and the conflict that arose between him and a Dutch-metropolitan police officer. In the discussion of these latter two stories, I focus particularly on the way in which the speakers alternate between English – their native tongue – and Dutch. By analysing these stories, I show how Sabans attempt to shape their non-sovereign present and future (Scott 2004). Most importantly, I show how the stories they tell about their relationship to the metropolitan state present those willing to listen

with alternative notions of state power and postcolonial resistance.

## After anticolonialism, what's next?

The traditional narrative of decolonization tells us how nations ride triumphantly and progressively towards emancipation (Scott 2004: 13). In defiance of this Romantic notion of postcolonial history, societies worldwide continue to express the wish to remain non-sovereign. To be clear, the concept of non-sovereignty as I use it in this article refers to the political status of those postcolonial societies that continue to opt for juridical integration with their metropolitan centres rather than political independence (Bonilla 2013: 209).<sup>5</sup> This political reality is especially evident in the Caribbean, where the political landscape is made up of a plethora of governmental arrangements with the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France and the United States. To complicate the matter even further, some scholars have argued that the majority of Caribbean societies are *de facto* non-sovereign, since even those that have achieved a formal sovereign status struggle to assert self-determination over their political and economic development (Lewis 2013; Bonilla 2015a; Pugh 2017).

The postcolonial present is thus 'a present after the collapse of the social and political hopes that went into the anticolonial imagining and postcolonial making of national sovereignties', as David Scott (2004: 1) gracefully phrases it. Despite this widespread disappointment with unfulfilled promises of political and economic modernity (Bonilla 2015a: xiv), dreams of

nation and state and desires for statehood and self-determination have not disappeared. The general question that drives this article is how the people that live in these non-sovereign societies shape and talk about the politics and structures of entanglement that characterize the current postcolonial moment. In particular, I explore the ways in which the non-sovereign entanglement of Saba with the metropolitan Dutch state manifests locally and what kind of stories this generates.

There is a long tradition in Dutch Caribbeanist literature that offers explanations for non-sovereignty in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Although recent political developments have given new incentive to these explorations, the scholarly paradigm remains strikingly consistent. There seems to be widespread agreement that the choice of Dutch Caribbean societies to remain non-sovereign is a pragmatic one. Most scholarly works assert that non-sovereign societies maintain a political link to the metropole because it provides them with material benefits, such as financial support and economic protection (also referred to as 'aid addiction') and a metropolitan passport. According to this discourse, the material advantages of non-sovereignty outweigh the disadvantages, which are of an ideological, emotional or cultural nature. The assumption here is that non-sovereignty is in direct opposition to insular nationalisms and/or cultural identities. The dominant narrative is thus one of strategic instrumentalism. This line of thinking about non-sovereignty leads scholars to conclude that the current governmental status of islands such as Saba is the result of a 'painful trade-off between head and heart' (Veenendaal and Oostindie 2018: 41). 'For all kinds of

pragmatic reasons’, Veenendaal and Oostindie further propose, ‘the people of the Dutch Caribbean islands have a strong preference for a continuation of the present non-sovereign constitutional relations, even if they are well aware that the (European) Netherlands ultimately decides about their fate – at least, as long as they do not opt for full independence’ (ibid.).

Of critical concern, too, is the idiom of ‘good governance’. The literature strongly associates the governments of the Dutch Caribbean islands with corruption, nepotism and political clientelism (Oostindie 2009; Oostindie and Klinkers 2012; Roitman and Veenendaal 2016; Scheepmaker 2009), and scholars assert that these non-sovereign islands are plagued by morally wrong political practices and governmental incompetence. Since the 1990s, the involvement of the Dutch government in island affairs has been characterised by the promotion of an agenda of ‘good governance’ and, in response, this concept has come to play a central role in Dutch Caribbean studies (Hoefte 1996; Oostindie and Klinkers 2003). Scholars observe that this political agenda has led to resistance by local administrators who feel that their autonomy is undermined (Hoefte 1996: 42) and who seek options to keep matters under their own control (Oostindie and Klinkers 2012). *Deugdelijk bestuur* or ‘good governance’ in this discourse refers to administrative and financial norms set and controlled by the metropolitan centre. Scholarly works present the metropolitan-Dutch government as the guardian of ‘good governance’ in the kingdom and, however implicit, as exemplifying such ‘good’ qualities of efficiency, transparency and professionalism. It is striking that even those scholars that are mild in their judgment of the island governments (see, for example,

Hoefte 1996; De Jong 2009) do reproduce this moral geography of governance.

To summarize, scholars typically write about the Dutch Caribbean islands as entities that are willingly trapped in unfortunate state structures: they trade in true national emancipation for economic guarantees of metropolitan protection. In this discourse, metropolitan state power is considered to be materially beneficial and a force of good, however problematic in the face of the ‘distinct cultures’ of the islands. Resistance against its manifestation on the islands takes the form of national and cultural ‘identity issues’ (Oostindie 2009: 135) and is expressed in anticolonial, nationalist rhetoric. Resistance, moreover, is said to be directed at carving out spaces of governmental autonomy. Seemingly, the main objective of these non-sovereign populations is to profit economically from the metropole whilst keeping the Dutch at bay.

Although the Dutch Caribbeanist paradigm has been criticized for its ethnonationalist perspective on ideas of belonging and for the assumption of instrumentalism (Van der Pijl and Guadeloupe 2015), a sustained critique based on empirical research so far does not exist. Also, ethnographies of the state are still a rarity in Caribbean studies (Jaffe 2014; Pugh 2017). The narratives offered below directly challenge the discourse in the literature. I hope to highlight the ways in which Sabans, through storytelling, subvert and actively reconfigure the moral geography of governance in the kingdom. Before moving on to the ethnographic material, however, I first wish to outline the history of Saba’s governmental relationship to the Netherlands – a history that in many ways sets the stage for the stories that form the basis of this article.

## A history of hardship and hope

In the days of colonialism, Saba was of little economic worth to the Netherlands. The island was claimed in the geopolitical wargames of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when political struggles in Europe were fought out in the Caribbean (Espersen 2017; Guadeloupe 2009a: 20-21). Its geopolitical value may have been of some significance at some point, but this steep and inhospitable rock did not offer much in a capitalist sense. Despite early efforts to establish a plantation colony, the economy of Saba has mostly been one of small scale subsistence and modest regional trade, which did, however, rely on the labour of enslaved Africans (Espersen 2017). Nowadays, the descendants of those enslaved Africans still make up about half of the population. Other residents are of Irish, Scottish, English and Dutch descent, and newcomers who hail from the Caribbean region, the United States, Europe and Asia (Guadeloupe 2009b).

In 1954, the *Statuut* or Charter signalled the formal end of the colonial era in the Dutch Caribbean. The Charter established that the Kingdom of the Netherlands would henceforth exist of three equal partners: the Netherlands, Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles. The expectation was that, in the near future, full independence would be transferred to the Netherlands Antilles as a whole, following Suriname which achieved formal independence in 1975 (Oostindie and Klinkers 2001). Aruba fractured this dream in 1986 when it was granted a *status aparte* as autonomous country. This was mostly in answer to Aruban resentment over Curaçao's dominance of the central Antillean government (Hoefte 1996). In the meantime, Saba

continued its existence at the outer margins of the Dutch kingdom. The politicians and lawmakers of the Netherlands Antilles were largely indifferent to Saba and generally perceived it as a costly burden to the other, economically more prosperous islands (De Jong 2009: 15; Guadeloupe 2009b: 59).

It is in the light of this enduring position of postcolonial marginality that I refer to the diverse group of residents of Saba as 'Sabans'. Although there is not, nor has there recently been, a strong independence movement on Saba, its historical experience is characterised by insular autonomy. In an interview, a local merchant reflected on the way that island life has been influenced by external indifference. She said: 'Most of the time we're here on this island by ourselves. We have to fend for ourselves basically. We don't have extra help'. This attitude affects and informs the lives of everyone who calls Saba their home, regardless of passport, political affiliation, skin colour, or even financial means. The outside world does not seem to care about Sabans, even in times when they live lives of poverty, hardship and chronic fragility.

Hoping to improve their predicament, Saban administrators sought a closer relationship to the Netherlands when the Netherlands Antilles showed signs of further disintegration in the early 2000s. After a political campaign, an overwhelming majority of 86 percent of Saban-Dutch citizens voted for integration into the Dutch state system in a referendum in 2004. The new political status of 'special municipality' for Saba, Bonaire and Sint Eustatius came into effect on October 10, 2010. Dutch citizens on this side of the Atlantic therefore commonly refer to the governmental reorganisation and its aftermath as '10-10-10'. The

Netherlands has since then governed the islands as a single entity that variably goes under the name of the BES (short for Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba) or the ‘Caribbean Netherlands’. The *Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland* (RCN; Central Government Caribbean Netherlands) is the name of the metropolitan bureaucracy for the three islands. It oversees the execution of Dutch policies and governmental tasks, such as, amongst other things, law enforcement, customs, education, labour affairs and social welfare. The RCN has a few small offices and departments on Saba and Sint Eustatius, while its centre is located on Bonaire, separated from Saba and Sint Eustatius by roughly 900 kilometres of sea. A number of governmental responsibilities still reside with the island government, such as public works, regulation of the harbour and airport, and agriculture. It should be noted, however, that the budget for running the island government is set and strictly supervised by the metropolitan government. Money for local initiatives in policymaking is project-based and is acquired by appealing to separate and ‘special’ funds.

There is widespread disillusionment about the way things have turned out after ‘the Dutch took over’. Residents complain about ‘all these rules, rules, rules from Holland’, are annoyed by the dominance of Bonaire in matters of governance and have come to be convinced that the ‘taxman is out to kill us’. Contrary to general discourse in scholarly publications (see, for example, Veenendaal 2015; Veenendaal and Oostindie 2018), however, I never heard anyone on Saba describe these developments as ‘recolonization’. At the beginning of fieldwork in August 2015, almost exactly five years after the constitutional change, I was initially

surprised that people did not express their disappointment in stronger, anticolonial rhetoric. By listening to their complaints and anecdotes, it slowly became clear to me that the way in which people on Saba relate to the metropolitan state follows a different storyline than the scholarly one I was familiar with. The stories I offer below speak of more subtle and ambiguous forms of resistance and power. I will interpret and provide context for each of these stories individually, after which I will offer a more general analysis of the way Sabans talk about their non-sovereign status.

## The road that couldn’t be built

Saba’s four small villages have poetic names – The Bottom, St. John’s, Windwardside and Zion’s Hill (more commonly known as Hell’s Gate) – but its only road is simply called ‘the road’. This concrete roller-coaster winds its way through the settlements along steep cliffs and spectacular panoramas. The road is the subject of many a local legend. The island government has installed a monument to honour the man who designed it. Young Sabans shoot videos whilst driving their motorbike – zigzagging up through Hell’s Gate, down to The Bottom – and upload them for the world to see on YouTube. Many Sabans love to talk about their road to whoever cares to listen.

The general story goes something like this. In the 1940s, most of the rest of the world had entered the motorized era, yet transportation on Saba still happened on foot, using stairs and donkey paths. This Sabans had done so for centuries, but some of their seamen had travelled abroad and returned back home with dreams

of progress and development. They wanted cars, thus they needed an actual road. Sabans appealed for help to the Netherlands, which sent two engineers to examine the possibilities. After an in-depth investigation, these experts concluded that Saba's cliffs were too steep and its geography too extreme: the road couldn't be built. In response, a Saban native by the name of Josephus Lambert Hassell (also known as Lambee) took matters in his own hands. He subscribed to a civil engineering study through mail correspondence, made his own calculations and eventually planned the road. Fellow Sabans then set out to build it themselves by hand. Together they proved, through perseverance and hard work, that the impossible could be done.

Those who tell this story often adapt little details, but their message is remarkably consistent. Listen to Maggie, for instance.<sup>6</sup> Maggie is a businesswoman and a member of the local Chamber of Commerce. As such, she participated in some of the negotiations that preceded and followed '10-10-10'. She introduced her criticism of the recent Dutch investments in the islands' infrastructure with her story of the road:

The Saba road, the road that couldn't be built, you hear about that? And it was Saba people that finished it, because when the Dutch engineers came in and they had reached to the guts in Hell's Gate – that area where it's just cliffs – they were like: 'No, you need to stop here, you'll never be able to make it to Hell's Gate'. After the guy said that, they [the workers] were like: 'No, we gotta get home'. Because most of the people that were building the road was [sic] from Hell's Gate. They said: 'We've come all this way, we've built all these roads, it's impossible

for us to stop here and not get home'. And so it was. And it was just by hand. They had no big machinery, no trucks, not anything like that. Everything, the rocks was [sic] on their heads, the cement. Everything was by hand.

For those who are unfamiliar with Saba's geography: Hell's Gate is the village that is furthest away from Ladder Bay, which for centuries was the only way to enter and leave the island. The road would drastically minimize the time and effort required to move goods and people to and fro Hell's Gate. In their narration of the history of the road, Sabans therefore often assert that the residents of Hell's Gate worked the hardest on its construction. Others, such as Maggie, imagine that the people from Hell's Gate were the ones who took on the challenge that the Dutch engineers could or would not face.

All variations aside, two themes can be counted on to surface each time someone tells the story of the road. The first is an emphasis on hard, manual labour; it was Saban bodies that cut out hills and moved rocks. The second is the failure of highly educated Dutch experts to do what Sabans managed to accomplish with modest means and limited knowledge.

Maggie started our conversation by sharing this story and thus set the stage for the rest of it. She went on with a lengthy list of complaints about some of the infrastructural projects that have been funded by the Dutch government since '10-10-10'. Most of the public bids for these projects have been won by construction companies that are based in the Netherlands, and much less so by locally owned and operated businesses.<sup>7</sup> Local entrepreneurs are obviously disgruntled about this situ-

ation. The way they express their critique, however, is striking and is inspired by the story of the road. Rather than speaking of injustice, they tend to complain about the projects' improper execution and ridicule the fact that so many of these 'supposed experts' or 'doctoranduses' deliver bad constructions. This is what Maggie had to say about the new social housing project in The Bottom:

When they built it, they built it with a septic tank. Might be used in the us, or even Sint Maarten. You have to pump it out with a specialized truck, you have to carry it to the waste treatment plant and process it. On Saba, we don't have a waste treatment plant, we don't have specialized trucks. So, as soon as they finished it and the people moved in, they figured out what was happening. The tanks was [sic] filling up and there was nowhere to put it. It was creating a very bad environment over there.

To many of my research participants, this situation was as much tragic and frustrating as it was bitterly amusing. Any resident of Saba, they would say, can tell you that toilet waste on Saba does not go into septic tanks (with a closed bottom), but ends up in cesspits (with open bottoms, so that waste is slowly absorbed by the soil). During my fieldwork, this faulty construction was so well-known across the island that many Sabans indulged in jokes and complaints about improper sewage systems and rising costs of repairs. They would brag: 'We can do it better' – and, especially, cheaper.

These stories and anecdotes are noteworthy, since the infrastructural programs rolled out over the islands by the Dutch government function as key symbols of

metropolitan benevolence in dominant public and political discourse. For example, visiting officials from the Netherlands hint at this image of the state as a benevolent provider by producing a remarkable mantra: 'The Netherlands spends 300 million dollars per year on these islands, and we only collect a 100 million in taxes'. Rather than serving a purely developmental purpose, the renovations of harbours, airports, roads and school buildings thus also allow some people to conjure up the powerful story of Dutch goodwill and local dependency (cf. Bonilla 2015b: 159). Ironically, Sabans target exactly these projects to contest not the legitimacy, but the competence of the metropolitan state. Sabans can actually be heard repeating the 300-million-dollar-mantra but will question the need or proper execution of those investments in the same breath. Many people on Saba perceive the Dutch state as an extremely wasteful organisation and rightly point out that much of the funds for local development flow back to Dutch-metropolitan corporations (ibid.). In these stories of infrastructure, Sabans assert that, although they may not possess the advanced education and technology of Dutch-metropolitan engineers, they certainly know better ways to build and work with their island. By constantly telling themselves and others 'we can do it better', they cleverly subvert the dominant discourse of Dutch benevolence.

### **A little boy put his thumb in the dike**

Besides generating an unprecedented flow of money, the new constitutional order in the kingdom has also intensified contact between the metropolitan-Dutch



government and its local counterpart on Saba. The Netherlands has recruited several hundred civil servants from the Dutch public service corps to raise the quality of state services on the islands. They are part of the metropolitan mission to promote ‘good governance’ on the islands. Local administrators now also communicate directly with the ministries in The Hague and visit the Netherlands much more often than before. This means that people – politicians and civil servants – with different styles and moralities of governance regularly encounter one another.

I explore this issue through a story that was shared with me by Harold. Harold is a high official in the local island government. He was born and raised on Saba and returned to his homeland after obtaining a university degree in the United States. He is part of a family that has been active in the local government for decades. I interviewed Harold about his experiences with transatlantic bureaucracy and his working relationship with representatives of the Dutch government. At one point in our conversation, he asked me:

You have never been to Madurodam?<sup>8</sup> Go to Madurodam. I think on the left side where you go to enter Madurodam you have the little boy with his thumb in the dike. You know that story?

I told him I did, but for those readers who do not: Harold here refers to a legend in Dutch folklore. It is about a young boy who discovers that the dike near his village is leaking. To stop the leakage, he puts his finger in the dike and stays there all night until he is discovered. This way, the boy saves the country from a flood. Harold continued with a re-telling of this legend:

Okay. There was a problem, a solution was found. So I tell a lot of these people who come here to tell us and teach us better, that they know better: ‘If that same situation would happen now, first you will have to have maybe five or six consultants to study the problem. You’d have ten reports. You’d have *Europese aanbestedingsregels* [European procurement rules]. You would have the *Verdrag* [treaty] of Genève or the *Verdrag van* whatever. Then you’d have the bureaucratic thing. And then you would have to have a consultation. And then it would be: but wait a minute, the water is over the dike now. What do we do now? The whole of the Netherlands would be under water’. So not to be rude or sarcastic, but this is how the Netherlands has progressed.

The original story of the boy who put his finger in the dike speaks of the legendary ability of the Dutch to tame the threat of water. This, of course, is a source of national pride in the Netherlands, of which Harold is acutely aware. Harold turns this legend into a bureaucratic drama. To readers who hail from the North Atlantic, this story might raise the well-known theme of bureaucratic inertia. In that sense, there is nothing remarkable or unfamiliar about this passage.

When we place this story into its historical and political coordinates, however, its relevance becomes clear. Since the 1990s, the Dutch political agenda of ‘good governance’ has been a way to exercise increasing degrees of control over the island governments (Oostindie and Klinkers 2012; Scheepmakers 2009). The technocratic interventions that are part of this agenda promote order, rationality, efficiency, fiscal correctness and transparency. These measures aim to transform the

island governments into a neutral force of regulation. In Dutch Caribbeanist literature, local, ‘informal’ ways of practicing politics and bureaucracy are often framed as a threat to strong, transparent and democratic state institutions (Roitman and Veenendaal 2016; Scheepmaker 2009; Veenendaal 2016). ‘Good governance’ is thus explicitly presented as a way to modernise local governance and implicitly presents the island governments as exhibiting backward characteristics; hence Harold’s sneer at the end of his story.

Such bureaucratic prescriptions do not transport unchallenged and unchanged to the context of Saba.<sup>9</sup> Here, I am mostly interested in the way Harold verbalises his resistance to metropolitan ideas of ‘good governance’. Harold explains that he tells the bureaucratic story of the dike to Dutch civil servants (‘these people who come here to tell us and teach us better’). He lists all the bureaucratic actions that protocol nowadays dictates to administer a minor and manageable situation. He essentially says: that little hole in the dike, that is Saba. He questions the need for conducting so many surveys, for following complex regulations, and for staging consultations when governing an island so small. The form of governance that Harold experiences from The Hague does not exemplify efficiency and, he tells us, is inappropriate. In fact, he argues that many of the interventions that are necessary for ‘good governance’ produce situations that become unmanageable. Harold suggests that ‘these people’ do not know better at all and promotes a more common-sense approach: ‘There was a problem, a solution was found’.

In the literature, this kind of resistance-talk is generally interpreted as a call for a retreat of the Dutch state (Oostindie and Klinkers 2001; Oostindie and Klinkers

2012). I interpret Harold’s words instead as an expression of a desire for a metropolitan state that is proactive and involved in local affairs. Harold does not categorically reject the metropolitan government or its agents; they simply need to adapt to the local context. When I asked him how he further communicates this message in transatlantic conversations, he said:

[A]t times when they [Dutch civil servants] try to come up with nonsense, I use a *spreekwoord* like *praatjes vullen geen gaatjes* [talking about something does not get it done]. They like that one. It’s like: *hou op met die onzin* [stop all this nonsense], *van al die pòh wòh wòh wòh* [all this pòh wòh wòh wòh, in a pompous voice]. Let’s just try and get to work.

In this quote, Harold’s impatience with the complexity of transatlantic bureaucracy becomes clear. He explains how he urges his fellow administrators in The Hague to stop using big words, to stop talking, and to put things in motion. This is a plain invitation to act: let us get to work, together.

This approach to the metropolitan state is not the attitude of a sole and exceptional Saban administrator. Harold’s message is widely shared amongst Saba’s politicians, commissioners and high officials. One politician, for instance, explained to me that they do not wish The Hague to be like ‘a babysitter’ simply watching over them. What Saba wants instead is something ‘more in terms of that you really be there and be active, an active role. More in-depth’. Their common strategy is to try and comply to the new regulations that constitute ‘good governance’ in order to charm the Netherlands into genuine engagement.

I thus view Harold's storytelling as an act of resistance, but one that leads his audience into an unexpected direction. In both quotes above, Harold manipulates (bureaucratic) language by strategically code switching between English and Dutch. He smoothly integrates Dutch words such as *aanbestedingsregels* and proverbs such as *praatjes vullen geen gaatjes* into his story – both don't easily roll off the tongue of a non-native speaker. The selective use of these words serves to mock metropolitan efforts at 'good governance'. Harold thus shows that he speaks the words of 'good governance' whilst playing with their meaning. Proper governance, according to Harold, is not solely about adhering to the strict rules of technocracy and exemplifying fiscal correctness but is about getting to work and getting things done. In other words, he resists the notion that transatlantic relations of governance should be rooted in distrust and focused on control. Rather, these relations should be characterised by a shared commitment to get to work and make progress happen. The re-telling of the legend of the dike powerfully conveys the idea that the Netherlands might have a view of what constitutes 'good governance', but that this is not the only way of governing well.

### Local people don't wait for no *overleg*

The last story that I want to discuss here is set in Saba's harbour. A Saban harbour master named William and a Dutch-metropolitan chief of police are its protagonists, the harbour master is its narrator. This story allows me to go beyond discourse to explore power and resistance in a more practical sense. In particular, it

shows how the main themes discussed above can come together in a real-life situation and inform the exercise of state power on non-sovereign Saba.

On an otherwise calm day in August 2015, a small FedEx plane crashed in the Caribbean Sea just outside of Saba's harbour. From the dock, the plane moved in and out of sight as it bobbed on the waves. The plane's unusual flight course had been observed by many on the island and rapidly drew a mass of people to the harbour. Emergency personnel and other functionaries also were present at the scene within ten minutes. A sail ship that had dropped anchor nearby quickly rescued the pilot and medical professionals helped him into an ambulance.

Then, however, things turned ugly. Various uniformed civil servants started quarrelling with each other. The disagreement between the local harbour master and the Dutch chief of police was the most heated. It revolved around the small fishing boats circling the airplane. They were trying to collect the plane's cargo before it would sink and came back into the harbour carrying the pilot's logbook and some packages. The fishing boats were too small to pull the entire airplane into the harbour. William and the captain of the larger ferry then decided over the radio that they would drive the ferry close to the airplane so that two swimmers could try to wrap a rope around it, so as to prevent it from sinking. All of this infuriated the Dutch head of police since protocol prescribed that no one but police officers were allowed to touch evidence. As they were the ones to conduct an investigation on the crash, the police were to be the authority in charge, not the harbour masters.

After much yelling, cursing and walking away – with

the plane still in the water, slowly sinking – the Governor was able to mediate between the angry officers. Amongst them, it was decided that a police officer was to be on board of the ferry. Over the radio, the captain of the ferry could be heard yelling that they were to hurry up. When William passed this message on in English to a nearby Dutch police officer, the young man replied: ‘*Wacht even, ik moet eerst overleggen*’ (Wait a minute, I first need to consult [my superior officer]). Eventually, the ferry drove out too late and the airplane sunk before the boat had reached it.

Later in the afternoon, when things had calmed down and the harbour master was back in his office, I asked him about what happened on the dock. Below is his version of events:

I told a fishing boat to go and retrieve the debris from the airplane and the officer just started screaming at me. ‘They can’t fucking do that! It’s evidence!’ He was saying that the police are supposed to remove the evidence, but the way he was speaking to me... I just said ‘fuck it’ and walked away. Then the Governor had to speak to him. He said: ‘You know, that’s the harbour master you were speaking to’, so he came to offer me an apology. I said *I* gave the fishing boat the authority to pick up the debris. *I* am responsible for that. The debris was just floating around in the ocean, it was just gonna cause another accident. And you don’t even have a boat; you’d ask the same fishermen to pick up the debris. I told him: ‘I know you [sic] from a big city where things are different. Here, when something like this happens, friends and enemies come together and help out and then continue their normal lives’. I know he was

trying to follow protocol and everything, you know, close off the scene and all. But how you [sic] gonna close off an ocean?

The harbour master then continued talking about the unsuccessful compromise they had reached, to have a police officer aboard the boat that was going to retrieve the airplane. He said:

You either work with local people, or you work without local people. If you work without them, local people themselves will do it. Local people don’t wait for no *overleg*. They try to get things done.

By now, the reader hopefully recognizes some common themes in the stories that Sabans tell about Dutch state agents. In William’s narrative, we again find accusations of metropolitan incompetence and the notion that local people will simply get things done. Without overestimating the effectiveness of this discourse of resistance, I would like to draw attention to its practical effects.

First, let’s look at the harbour master’s strategic code switching between English and Dutch. William’s use of the word *overleg* conjures up connotations of irrational overregulation and inertia. To have an *overleg* means to talk instead of to act. It is all too clear for him that such technocratic logics undermine proper governance. This attitude cannot be interpreted as a categorical rejection of metropolitan state agents. Indeed, even William here does not denounce the involvement of the police officers in managing the plane crash, but he questions the usefulness of their particular actions. On many other occasions, and with regards to routine

bureaucratic practices, I observed how local residents found subtle or more direct ways to educate civil servants from overseas about proper and fair ways of governing. This involved training civil servants into the nuances of executing their jobs while allowing for the smooth continuation of regular life. It is clear that metropolitan state bureaucracy is not wished away; rather, it is expected – or coached – to conform to local values and needs. In a statement that echoes Harold's earlier remarks, William explains that to govern well on Saba means to 'try to get things done'.

William also stresses the inappropriateness of protocols and consultations by contrasting them with a romanticised notion of local sociality: 'Here... friends and enemies come together and help out'. By doing so, he not only professes that 'we can do it better' but also establishes his superiority over the chief of police; he says that *he* commanded the fishermen to salvage the debris and explicitly takes responsibility and accountability for their actions. Moreover, in William's version of events, the police officer humbly offered his apologies. A week later, when I asked him about the aftermath of the event, William stated that the chief of police had apologised again, but this time in a meeting in front of all the functionaries involved. It was clear that the harbour master experienced this as a personal victory over a Dutch-metropolitan officer, or at least presented it that way in his reflection on the event. Even though the attempt to salvage the plane was unsuccessful, the event allowed for a reconfiguration of power relations between local and metropolitan civil servants.

## Beyond revolutions lie ordinary tales of autonomy

The old story of postcolonial independence is a seductive one. It promises oppressed and exploited nations a way to take control over their own lives, truly free from outside interference. This paradigm of freedom is so persuasive that one would almost forget that this is not the only way in which formerly colonized people have imagined their political futures (Bonilla 2015a). Scholarly attention to these alternative postcolonial narratives has grown in recent years (Bonilla 2015a; Guadeloupe 2009b; Lewis 2013; Oostindie and Klinkers 2013; Pugh 2017; Veenendaal 2015). Building on this tradition, I have explored how people in a non-sovereign society speak about their entanglement with a metropolitan state. In particular, I have examined the stories that Sabans tell about Dutch state agents. I have suggested that they offer alternative notions of metropolitan state power and forms of resistance than are common in dominant narratives about the non-sovereign Caribbean. These Saban stories encourage a rethinking of such concepts as sovereignty, self-determination and independence that are considered to be the pillars of political modernity.

The stories I have presented here speak of an attitude of autonomy. This attitude is less ideologically motivated than born out of historical necessity. The story of the road that could not be built, for example, alludes to the shared knowledge that residents on Saba depend on each other for their survival and progress; no one else has proven to care about their lives before. This, Sabans hoped, would change after '10-10-10', the constitutional reorganisation which formally places the island under

direct control of the Dutch government. In its aftermath, they have to conclude that their dreams of Dutch care and technological advancement have not altogether come true. In their stories about infrastructure and bureaucracy, Sabans indulge in the myth of Saban superiority, bragging that whatever the Dutch set out to do on Saba, they themselves can probably do better. In effect, they creatively subvert the dominant discourse of metropolitan benevolence. But although convinced that they can beat the Dutch at their own game, Sabans are not tempted by the romance of independence.

This leads me to the main problem in the dominant story in Dutch Caribbean literature, which is that it presumes the *desirability* of political sovereignty. While popular support for a political status of fully independent nation-state is low on all of the Dutch Caribbean islands, scholars still write about non-sovereign societies as conflicted about their relationship with the metropolitan state (Veenendaal and Oostindie 2018). Specifically, it is said that the material benefits of non-sovereignty are at odds with the ideological or emotional wish to govern oneself. With this, scholars imply that non-sovereignty still is a stopover status in the postcolonial road toward independence. In other words, whilst stating that non-sovereign societies are abundant in today's world, scholars do assume that the desire for statehood is a universal one. When we listen to Maggie, however, we hear her proudly proclaim that 'we can do it better', but she does not say 'without the Dutch'. In Harold's drama of bureaucratic inertia and complexity, he does not imagine a retreat of The Hague. Their stories of postcolonial resistance do not evidence a struggle against oppression, but one against indifference and neglect.

In addition, I have argued that the dominant narrative on 'good governance' glosses over other moralities of governance in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The literature easily steps over the fact that the agenda of 'good governance' is mostly about strengthening Dutch hold over local administrations (Scheepmaker 2009) and fails to critically examine what these technocratic interventions look like in practice. Whenever a local politician or administrator expresses discontent over these metropolitan interventions, this is interpreted as a call for more autonomy. What I have suggested here is that, on Saba, these lamentations are instead about seeking ways to make transatlantic bureaucracy *work* for Saba. This entails an attempt to make The Hague genuinely recognize Saba as equally deserving of progress – not simply of supervision.

While calls for more formal autonomy might be largely absent on Saba, I have suggested that resistance to the words and works of 'good governance' does establish conditions of self-government. The stories of roads, dikes and plane crashes all attribute characteristics of diligence, vitality and perseverance to the Sabans. The Dutch appear in these stories as tragic, incompetent figures who make things too complex for their own and Saba's good. By doing so, Sabans not only challenge the moral hierarchies of governance in the kingdom; these tactics are also important educational tools for residents of Saba who attempt to train functionaries from overseas about their notions of proper governance. Through storytelling, Sabans are actively involved in setting and guarding the parameters of legitimate state power. Thus, rather than accepting the Dutch government's definition of *deugdelijk bestuur*, scholars would do well to recognize that non-sovereign

governance is shaped by moral frameworks both proximate and distant.

I do not wish to sound celebratory or triumphant about these discourses and acts of resistance. The concern of this article is, rather, with recognizing that the people of the postcolonial world might tell tales and engage in practices aimed at improving their (collective) lives in ways that challenge supposed universal truths of political modernity. I thus encourage an examination of state power and resistance in non-sovereign contexts that looks beyond grand narratives of overthrowing or changing the system. In Yarimar Bonilla's words, if we only attend to 'the supposedly empty horizon of nationalist revolution, we are sure to miss the many "unspectacular" transformations that abound in the daily re-creations of ordinary life' (2015a: 172). An attentiveness to local, quotidian stories of autonomy shows us how people in a non-sovereign context might be able to subtly bend the hand of state bureaucracy.

In conclusion, research into current-day postcolonial politics should start with the recognition that the grand, romantic narratives of national emancipation have come to an anticlimactic ending. Whilst some might still produce the prose of independence, they too have to confront the sobering reality of today's interdependent world. This is true as much for politicians as it is for students of (non-)sovereignty. As David Scott (2004) has argued, the scholarly work of decolonisation spoke to particular problems in a particular historic moment. The contemporary postcolonial world does not show signs of a radical break from the days of Empire, but it does offer us a different 'problem-space' to engage with (ibid.). The political landscape has

changed and, with it, so have conditions of possibility for political action (Bonilla 2015a). As scholars, we have to confront our assumptions of what postcolonial resistance looks like and accept that this does not necessarily or naturally take the form of a struggle for an independent nation-state (Bonilla 2013: 222). This means that we have to train our ears to pick up on alternative notions of self-determination and entanglement. Then we might discover, together with our interlocutors, that the contemporary script of postcolonial resistance might have less to do with breaking free from colonial chains than with finding ways to work together.

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## Notes

- 1 Parts of this article are based on my master's thesis '*This don't make no sense*': *Encounters with the State on Non-Sovereign Saba* (2016, unpublished).
- 2 With the term 'postcolonial' I do not refer to a period in time after colonialism, but aim to address the continued significance of colonialism in contemporary political formations (see Mitchell 2002: 7).
- 3 The status of autonomy for Sint Maarten and Curaçao does not translate in more autonomy from the Netherlands but has in fact resulted in increased metropolitan oversight on financial and governmental issues.
- 4 Francio Guadeloupe's ethnography on Saint Martin/Sint Maarten, *Chanting Down the New Jerusalem* (2009a), is an exception. My reference to Dutch Caribbean studies here excludes studies of Suriname.
- 5 Since the 1990s, a large body of anthropological scholarship has engaged with the concept of sovereignty. Much of this literature builds on the work of Max Weber (1946 [1921]), Michel Foucault (1991), and Giorgio Agamben (1998). Specific approaches vary, but political anthropologists typically examine sovereignty as an emergent form of authority grounded in violence (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Even though these works have yielded important insights, it is less suitable for the present analysis. This article follows a line of work that rethinks the concept of sovereignty and its place in North Atlantic political theory from an explicitly postcolonial and Caribbean vantage point (see, for example, Trouillot 2003; Scott 2004; Bonilla 2015a).
- 6 Please note that all personal names in this article are pseudonyms.
- 7 Partly, this has to do with lacking technology and machinery on Saba, but this situation is also caused by other factors, such as bidding restrictions regarding minimum insurance coverage for businesses and hiring practices of international companies that bypass Dutch labour regulations.
- 8 Madurodam is a miniature park in The Hague, the Netherlands, and features small replicas of Dutch landmarks.
- 9 In my thesis, I explore in more detail how bureaucratic models are reconfigured in practice by structural exceptions inherent to Saba's non-sovereign status as well as by local notions of proper bureaucratic behaviour.

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