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Summary

This dissertation, largely based on the study of primary sources, focuses on the free black and coloured population of eighteenth century Curaçao. It is predicated upon the hypothesis that the agency of the non-white population in asserting their aspirations, realising their freedom and bringing about the improvement of their economic and social situation is largely underestimated in the historiography. The specific nature of the colony's economic orientation, centred on commerce and shipping, offered opportunities for both slaves and free non-whites – opportunities that were recognized and seized by these slaves and free non-whites.

During the second half of the seventeenth century, Curaçao became an important Atlantic trading hub. By the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the colony had grown into an important regional slave market, especially for the nearby Spanish Main. Although, after the first decade of the eighteenth century, the Curaçao slave trade became less important, the island continued to serve as a trade entrepôt, where European and North American products were exchanged for tropical produce grown on the neighbouring colonies. The island itself was not suited for the cultivation of tropical cash crops; plantations mainly served the local demand for provisions, especially with the cultivation of sorghum or 'small maiz', the staple food of the slaves, and with cattle farming, all of which had a direct influence on the development of the nature of slavery on the island.

Until the early nineteenth century, for instance, trade and shipping remained the dominant sectors of the Curaçao economy and this profoundly influenced the character of slavery. The port of Willemstad and the local merchant fleet offered possibilities to earn an income, which in turn gave enslaved Curaçaoans opportunities to save money in their *peculium* or 'money-box' and to use this money to buy their freedom and the freedom of loved ones. At the same time, there were hardly any legal barriers against freeing slaves. This resulted in relatively high rates of manumission and a fast-growing free black and coloured population, which, at the end of the eighteenth century, was comparable in size to the white population. The majority of the manumissions were initiated and made possible by the free black and coloured population itself.

Formally, free blacks and coloureds did not form a special judicial category different from the whites, as the slaves did. This does not mean, however, that they were treated as fully equal to whites judicially. For example, a free non-white was not allowed to give evidence against a white in court, and statements from free blacks and coloureds could not be confirmed with an oath, which made them of less value. As defendants in criminal cases, free non-whites could not always expect a fair trial. But, at the same time, they had access to all existing legal instruments: they could sue, marry, draw up valid wills and testaments, inherit, own property, buy and sell real estate, slaves and ships, trade, get a mortgage, etcetera. Essentially, then, there were no formal judicial barriers preventing free blacks and coloureds from engaging in economic activities.

Many free non-whites actually did make use of the legal rights they had at their disposal, which indicates a certain level of economic prosperity. It also reflects concern with consolidating the assets they had built up over the course of their lifetimes, and the

wish to pass these assets on to the next generation. In contrast to the existing image of a free non-white group mainly made up of paupers and outcasts who struggled to find a *niche* in Curaçaoan society – outcasts and paupers who, moreover, were likely to engage in unpredictable and violent behaviour – many free blacks and coloureds proved quite capable of earning an income in trade and shipping, and, in some cases, became very successful economically. It was not uncommon for free non-whites to buy and sell real estate, to own slaves and some even became ship owners.

Economic success, however, did not automatically lead to a higher level of social prestige or more respect from whites. Free blacks and darkly-coloured mulattoes were considered no better than slaves by many whites, and they were even literally called 'free slaves'. Although formally free, they were usually lumped together with the slaves in the popular perception, as is illustrated by the contents of many of the by-laws issued by the island's council which were aimed at maintaining law and order. Official marriages between blacks and coloureds, let alone blacks and whites, were very rare, which illustrates the amount of segregation within Curaçaon society. Only some well-to-do and very lightly-coloured mestizos or quarteroons (the offspring of a mulatto and a white person) were more or less acceptable as social equals to some whites, but even these people who, in appearance, may have not looked any different than the whites, were certainly not acceptable as social equals to all the white population. Nevertheless, there was already intermarriage between white and free coloured families during the first half of the eighteenth century, which, in turn, incited some whites to petition for the issuing of a ban on such marriages. The Curaçaon authorities, however, appeared not to be eager to support such a ban, perhaps out of a fear of angering or alienating the free coloured population. And this fear was quite reasonable.

The free blacks and mulattoes played a crucial role in the defence of the colony and in maintaining law and order. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, non-whites, both free and enslaved, were armed and incorporated in the colony's defence force, especially in case of emergency. During the 1730s, two segregated armed units, one made up of free blacks and one comprised of free mulattoes, were formed. Their main task was to police the suburb of Otrobanda and to prevent slaves from escaping to the nearby Venezuelan coast. The 'Free Negroes' were actively involved in the quelling of a slave revolt on the West India Company plantation of Hato in 1750. During the large slave revolt in 1795 their role was less prominent.

By this time, the shockwaves of the French and the Haitian revolutions had reached Curaçao, and among non-whites, both free and enslaved, expectations had grown that society was about to change. The French had first emancipated the free non-whites in their colonies in 1792 and, two years later, they abolished slavery. These developments were known to the Curaçao slaves and inspired them to revolt in August 1795. It was also known that, earlier that year, the Batavian Republic was proclaimed, which had then become an ally of revolutionary France. Consequently, French privateers with black and coloured crews, often including recently freed slaves, frequented the Curaçao harbour and actively spread revolutionary ideas.

Although the mother country sided with the French in the war against Great Britain, the Curaçao population was still deeply divided by political controversies between groups loyal to the stadholder and the House of Orange and pro-French adherents of the Patriot

movement. After the French-supported bloodless *putsch* in 1796, the Patriots prevailed, but unrest remained. Because of the war, communication with the mother country was difficult and, at times, almost non-existant. The local government largely had to fend for itself.

A first concern was to organise the colony's defences. At the same time, there was a pervasive fear among many whites that the watchwords of the French Revolution would inspire the non-whites to undertake violent action. When, in 1797, the leaders of a republican conspiracy in Caracas fled to Curaçao, the island's non-white population clearly showed themselves to be sympathetic to these revolutionaries.

The white civil guard was re-organised to become the largest and most important defence unit and was renamed the 'National Guard'. Although the segregated companies of free blacks and free mulattoes were maintained, free blacks and coloureds were also incorporated in the National Guard. These were mainly men employed in the Curaçao merchant marine who were experienced in handling guns on board the ships, and these men were now recruited for the artillery units that manned the forts. Coloured ships' captains were appointed in the lower officer's ranks, as well.

The re-organisation of the Curaçao military was intended to achieve more than just preparing the island for an enemy attack. The garrison and part of the naval forces were considered unreliable and, therefore, had to be reduced to a number that could not pose any serious threat to the internal stability of the island. At the same time, the government wanted to tighten its grip on the non-white population. This was achieved by incorporating the non-whites in the command structure of the military, as well as by avoiding the concentration of all blacks and coloureds in just two armed units under their own captains.

The government undertook no direct action against the free black and coloured groups, in general, but it did remove some coloured officers after a near-mutiny within the National Guard. There seemed to be more fear of manipulation of the slaves and the free non-whites by radical white elements than there was for any actions initiated from within these groups themselves. It is against this backdrop that the accusations against a number of whites with clear patriotic sympathies, not to mention close ties with the free coloured community, should be considered. This culminated, in 1799, in the revelation of a conspiracy to free the slaves – a never proven conspiracy allegedly initiated in Saint-Domingue – which led to the removal from the island of three men which were accused of being the conspiracy's leaders.

It is hard to prove the existence of a political consciousness among the free non-white population. No black or coloured political leaders can be identified, and no written proof of free non-white political ideology has been preserved. But it is beyond any doubt that the revolutionary watchwords, especially the idea of equality, were readily accepted among the free blacks and coloureds, although most of the evidence is, admittedly, circumstantial. At the same time, free non-whites also had much to lose. This became clear when, in 1800, an expeditionary force from Guadeloupe attempted to seize the colony. The French fear of losing Curaçao as a base for its privateers was probably the main motivation for undertaking military action. Although most of the field slaves supported the predominantly black Guadeloupean troops, the free non-white segment of the Curaçao population remained largely loyal to the government. It is not unlikely that this must mainly be attributed to a general fear for chaos,

plunder and a bloodbath instead of a love of the ideals of liberty and equality. British and American military intervention, called for by the Curaçao government, prevented the French from attaining their goal. A British occupation of the colony followed, and this ended all hope for further political change.

The prominence of the free black and coloured population in eighteenth century Curaçao society, as reflected by their economic, social and military activities, which left myriad traces in the colony's archives, is a long-underestimated and under-studied reality. Despite persistent discrimination, free non-whites managed to participate actively in the island's economy, in which they came to play an important role, and became indispensable in the military defence as well as the maintenance of internal order on the island. Although revolutionary dreams of equality were, in the end, dashed by international political developments, the Curaçao free blacks and coloureds continued to demonstrate their agency; for a people of mariners the world was known to be much bigger than a small arid island off the Venezuelan coast.