

Inter-colonial networks and revolutionary ferment in eighteenth-century Curaçao and Tierra Firme

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Whether or not the slave uprisings that occurred within three months of each other in Curaçao and Coro in 1795 were part of a coherent conspiracy remains open to debate, and it may never be resolved with irrefutable evidence. There is no doubt, however, that the revolts were connected at a much deeper level: people of African descent were part of well-established communications and exchange circuits that had linked the two areas for over one hundred years. In fact, ties between Curaçao and Tierra Firme, most especially the area around Coro, had a much longer history, one which predated the Dutch and even the Spanish presence in the Caribbean, and which was integrally tied to the area's geography.¹ Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, once the island and the nearby mainland became part of separate colonial spheres (the Dutch and the Spanish, respectively) denizens from across the socio-economic spectrum forged their own inter-colonial networks, especially via contraband trade (Rupert 2006:35-54). The links that people of African descent developed between Curaçao and Tierra Firme were embedded in these wider trans-colonial connections and went much deeper than any possible slave conspiracy.

OVERLAPPING JURISDICTIONS

Markedly different degrees and styles of imperial management shaped the character of the inter-colonial ties that developed between the two areas. For the Dutch in Curaçao, territorial hegemony was almost incidental to the development of empire. Control over this small Caribbean nodal point, with its strategic location and excellent deep-water harbour, was sufficient for opening the broader commer-

1 Havisser 1987:11, 51-4; 73-9, 140-9; Watlington 2003:31-2; Whitehead 1995: Introduction.

cial networks that were necessary to develop and sustain their vigorous Caribbean and Atlantic trade.² The small, arid island of Curaçao was tightly and continuously governed by the Amsterdam Chamber of the Dutch West India Company (WIC), which had a full complex at Fort Amsterdam, perched at the entrance to the capacious harbour on St. Anna Bay. The establishment of a regional trade centre at Curaçao was a logical extension of WIC activities throughout the Atlantic and Caribbean (Den Heijer 2003). Because Curaçao lacked the climate and soil for agricultural production, the compact port of Willemstad, adjacent to the fort, soon became the motor of the island economy. The WIC's decision to open Curaçao to free trade in 1675, an unusual move for the times, stimulated the island's role in inter-colonial commerce, most of it illicit from the point of view of other imperial powers. Even while the Dutch successfully maintained tight and continuous political jurisdiction over Curaçao their primary focus was the lucrative economic gain provided by much more extensive and amorphous inter-colonial trade circuits.

Spanish imperial control over Tierra Firme, in contrast, was both more tenuous and more concerned with territorial domination. Initially under the jurisdiction of the Viceroyalty of Santo Domingo, located on the island of Hispaniola hundreds of miles to the north, Tierra Firme was transferred to the newly-created Viceroyalty of New Granada in 1717 in an effort to improve contact with representatives of the Spanish Crown and also to discourage the growing contraband trade. However, effective overland communication within this vast and varied continental jurisdiction proved even more unreliable than the maritime connections with Hispaniola, and so throughout the eighteenth century Tierra Firme repeatedly was transferred between the viceroyalties of Santo Domingo and New Granada (Briceño 1965:41-51). Due to this fluctuating authority and to the difficult, unreliable communications with either colonial seat of power, governance of much of Tierra Firme was chaotic throughout the eighteenth century. Lines of colonial authority often were unclear over the sparsely inhabited coast (Castillo 1981:113; Ferry 1989:114-7). Such administrative confusion, along with overall Spanish neglect of the region, spurred the development of a thriving contraband trade by a variety of people across the socio-economic spectrum. This included local authorities who often were uncertain about the precise imperial chain of command and their own authority and position in the hierarchy, but were

2 For different perspectives on the relative roles of commercial maritime networks and territorial control in the development of the Dutch imperial project see Schmidt 2009:163-87; Enthoven 2003:17-47; Seed 1995:154-60. More generally, Lauren Benton has argued that territorial control often was an 'incidental aim of imperial expansion' in the age of European empires (Benton 2010:2).