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Wim Klooster
wklooster@clarku.edu

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3

The rising expectations of free and enslaved blacks in the Greater Caribbean

Wim Klooster

As David Geggus has shown, scores of slave conspiracies and revolts occurred during the Age of Revolutions. In the Greater Caribbean, slave uprisings were especially frequent in the 1790s. One year stood out: 1795. While in a number of colonies revolts were planned in that year but failed to materialize, and in other colonies small numbers of slaves took up arms, large-scale rebellions involving slaves did occur in Coro and Curaçao. The seeds for such rebellious behaviour had been sown in 1789 with the destruction of the *ancien régime* in France, the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and the promulgation in Spain of a new slave code by King Charles IV. The overthrow or reform of time-honoured structures had an impact not only on slave populations, but also on underprivileged free people of colour. Abolitionism and the immediate French termination of slavery added fuel to the flames.

I will argue here that the French revolutionary message had a more direct impact on free people of colour in the Caribbean than on slaves. Aiming to achieve full legal equality, free blacks and mulattoes echoed the message of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Although some enslaved blacks in Saint-Domingue also adopted the Rights of Man as their mantra, slaves generally were more often inspired by the notion of a royal decree that emancipated them, but that was withheld by local authorities and slaveholders. As we will see, rumours spreading this false idea existed long before the 1790s and would still circulate long afterwards, but they were particularly potent in the aftermath of the French and Haitian revolutions.

Although such rumours seem to have bypassed Curaçao, the island had multiple ties to the revolutionary Caribbean around the time of the unprecedented revolt of 1795. A lively commercial

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entrepôt, Curaçao was intimately connected to the French, Spanish, British, and Danish colonies. These close ties were replicated on an individual level, as evinced by the involvement of Curaçaoan blacks in a maroon community in Santo Domingo, slave conspiracies in Louisiana and Cuba in the 1790s, and the Coro revolt of 1795.

FREE COLOUREDS, SLAVES, AND EQUALITY

The tumultuous Caribbean decade of the 1790s had its roots in the European events of 1789, although the outbreak of the French Revolution did not in itself spark rebellious behaviour of free and enslaved blacks in the colonies. More important among free people of colour than the demise of the *ancien régime* was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and, by extension, the notion of equality as emanating from France. Free people of African birth or descent embraced the document's message as it stressed an attractive alternative to their plight. Genuine equality was still a remote prospect for them prior to the Revolution. In Spanish America, free blacks and mulattoes were not allowed to live on their own, could not become clergymen, scribes, or notaries, and were forbidden to have Indian servants. In Venezuela, females were forbidden to wear gold, silk, or pearls, and males did not have the right to walk side by side with whites in the streets, nor were they to be given a chair in white houses (Ponce 1994:38-9; Pellicer 1996:42, 116-7). In the wealthiest French colony, Saint-Domingue, the separate legal status of free blacks and mulattoes was not stressed until the 1760s and 1770s. Starting in those decades, they were forbidden to ride in coaches, to be surgeons or midwives, to have certain types of household furniture, and to adopt the dress or hairstyles of whites. They were to be rigorously punished for hitting a white person, even if they had been injured first.[1]

In order to properly understand the notion of equality held by Caribbean free blacks, it may be helpful to contrast their public and private opinions and actions in pre-revolutionary with those in revolutionary times. Before the 1790s, free nonwhites, even those who ended up joining white-led revolts and revolutions, usually did not aspire to the creation of a slaveless society; if they did, no public record has survived. Instead, they aimed at obtaining and

1 Raymond 1790; Raymond 1791:8: Debien 1956:75; Debbash 1967:38-9, 53-4, 74-5; King 2001:168; Garrigus 2006:95. See for legal discrimination in the British Caribbean: Cox 1984:92-6.

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enforcing privileges for themselves, individually or collectively, resorting to the available channels to achieve their ends. The free *pardos* (mixed-bloods of African origin) in the province of Caracas, for example, used the courts to be individually admitted to offices legally reserved for whites. Some already *de facto* enjoyed traditionally white privileges, but aspired to legal recognition, while others sought to obtain privileges never before granted to a nonwhite. Their petitions show that they had mastered the vocabulary of successful petitioners, which revolved around the concept of honour. They stressed their 'cleanliness of blood', Catholicism, lineage, worthy occupation, and devotion to duty.[2]

Such strategies did not disappear overnight in times of revolt. There are numerous examples of free mulattoes eager to climb the social ladder fighting against rebels and revolutionaries. At the same time, the outbreak of an anticolonial revolt could invite radical responses. One source of inspiration may have been the text of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, although it is impossible to ascertain for every case whether this document – in whatever form it came to the nonwhites – only made manifest what was in the hidden transcript or if it actually changed their outlook. The widespread fear of so-called French mulattoes among officials across the Caribbean and in ports along the eastern seaboard of the United States in the 1790s was not unfounded. Many of them adhered to the principles of the French Revolution (Morales 1986:36). Nor were authorities in Venezuela delusional when they labelled some mulattoes subversive. By 1795, *pardo* males were addressing each other with the title 'Don' and asserted that there had not been both a white Adam and a mulatto Adam. Some mulattoes began to complain openly about the inequality between whites and *pardos*. Venezuela's War Council singled out one of them, a musician named Juan Bautista Olivares, who had requested the bishop to be admitted to the priesthood. The bishop noted that Olivares' petition was filled with arrogance and pride, revealing the author's spirit, which was 'capable of animating his class to throw off the yoke of obedience and subjection'. What also alarmed the War Council was that he had read and explained to another mulatto a sermon attributed to a Parisian constitutional priest. The text contained references to liberty and equality. Olivares was also accused of having given a fellow musician a book that contained a subversive message. Citing as additional evidence against him the fact that he possessed a large library and that he had spread

2 Pellicer 1996:132, 135. In other parts of Spanish America, free blacks as well as slaves availed themselves of the legal system to assert their rights: Bennett 2003:Chapter 5; Johnson 2007.

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the 'Rights of Man', the Council arrested Olivares and sent him to Spain, where the king freed him and sent him back to Caracas (Briceño-Iragorry 1947:58-9; Pellicer 1996:85, 102).

As far as is known, Olivares did not go on to take part in any revolt. A lieutenant in the free *pardo* militia of New Orleans named Pedro Bailly went one step further, according to contemporary accusations. In 1793, he was found guilty of having professed ideas suggestive of revolution. Besides, he stood trial twice in the same decade for criticizing the Spanish government and following 'the maxims of the French rebels'. He was acquitted in 1791, but condemned in March 1794 to serve a jail sentence in Havana. One testimony was perhaps decisive: that of Luis Declouet, second lieutenant of the Louisiana regiment. When Declouet had called the French a foe to all humanity, Bailly had replied, 'Humanity! Humanity! I am going to speak frankly to you, sure that you are a man of honor. Sir, I do not see that any acts of inhumanity have been committed. It is true that they have done wrong by murdering their king, but sir, the French are just; they have conceded men their rights'. Declouet asked Bailly to elaborate. To what rights did he refer? Bailly answered: 'A universal equality among men, us, people of color. We have on the Island of Saint-Domingue and other French islands the title *ciudadano activo* [active, participatory citizen]; we can speak openly, like any white persons and hold the same rank as they. Under our [Louisiana] rule do we have this? No, sir, and that is unjust. All of us being men, there should be no difference. Only their method of thinking – not color – should differentiate men' (Hanger 1997:152-3, 156).

The Declaration of the Rights of Man was a new ideological weapon for people of colour. In its absence, would they have lacked an effective argument to bolster their fight for equal rights? The answer, I think, is no. Consider the writings of blacks and mulattoes in the Thirteen Colonies during the American Revolution. A dozen years before the French Revolution, these authors assailed the inconsistency of the independence movement for criticizing slavery metaphorically without pleading for its actual downfall. They availed themselves of the prevalent natural rights philosophy, according to which being human sufficed to have natural rights (Im Hof 1994:183-4). Having imbibed the same sources as the authors of the Declaration, they shared the conclusions of many black activists elsewhere in the Americas. One of these Americans was Lemuel Haynes, son of an African father and a white mother. Originally an indentured servant, he went on to become a clergyman-in-training who joined the patriots in Massachusetts as a minuteman. In his manuscript antislavery tract *Liberty Further Extended*, Haynes wrote

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that liberty was 'an innate principle [...] unmoveblly placed in the human Species' and 'Coaeval with Existence'. Depriving men of their liberty meant to counteract 'the very Laws of nature'. 'Liberty', Haynes added, 'is Equally as pre[c]ious to a Black man, as to a white one, and Bondage Equally as intollerable to the one as it is to the other', since, Haynes reasoned, 'it Effects the Laws of nature Equally as much in one as it Does in the other'.[3] Here was a vocabulary akin to that of the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

So far, I have avoided discussing reactions of *enslaved* Americans to the messages emanating from revolutionary France. Obviously, they were not immune to the principles of the Revolution. Nor did they live entirely in a world of their own, tied as they were in many ways to the free coloureds, who formed a significant section of the colonial populations and who often had reasons of their own to take part in 'slave revolts'. In Saint-Domingue, the large revolt of 1791 that started as a fight against slavery and became a struggle for independence was, as might be expected, influenced by the Declaration of the Rights of Man. In Cap Français, the colony's largest city, slaves demanded 'the Rights of Man' as soon as they heard the news about the start of the revolt in the neighbouring countryside.[4] The issue of slavery resurfaced in 1793, after conservative white forces had captured Cap Français. In their desperation, the two French commissioners, Sonthonax and Polverel, approached insurgent and town slaves with the offer that all blacks fighting for the French republic would be given their freedom and enjoy the rights of other French citizens. This bold step they took without consulting the metropolis (Stein 1985:75; Fick 1990:159). In hindsight, this decision meant that the commissioners embarked on a course that was bound to result in general emancipation. Two months later, in August 1793, slaves as well as free men in Cap Français made known their wish for slavery to end. A petition signed by 842 free men

3 Bogin 1983. Like Lemuel, various groups of black petitioners addressing Massachusetts authorities condemned slavery as incompatible with the rights of man: Davis 1989.

4 'Le début' 1993:774-6. In addition, according to a journal that appeared in the U.S. press, some rural slaves, interrogated about the meetings they had attended prior to the revolt, answered that 'they wanted to enjoy the liberty they are entitled to by the Rights of Man' (Dubois 2004:105). It is no longer possible to portray a letter, supposedly penned by Jean-François, Georges Biassou, and Gabriel Bellair to the Colonial Assembly and the French commissioners on the island, as having been inspired by the Declaration. In the letter, cited by Dubois 2004:141, the authors argue that the Declaration stated that 'men are born free and equal in rights' and that their 'natural rights were liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression'. Although, they went on, the French had sworn to follow the Declaration, officials had crossed the ocean to fight the insurgent slaves. The rebels then offered to lay down their arms if all slaves were freed and an amnesty was declared 'for the past'. David Geggus (2006) has exposed the letter as fake, produced by counterrevolutionaries.

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demanded that the rights of man be extended to the slaves, in the name of whom they spoke. The petitioners were accompanied by a crowd of 10,000 slaves to the house of Sonthonax, who told them he would yield to their demand. By the end of October, general liberty had been introduced throughout the colony.[5]

White elites realized the power of the Rights of Man. A few days into a massive revolt of free people of colour on the tiny island of Grenada (1795), there was a festive atmosphere among the rebels. Men played fiddles in front of the prison door, and white prisoners noted the prominent part played by a black man who 'from his hideous figure and ludicrous dress, we supposed personated their guillotine-man, or the avenger of the rights of man' (Hay 1823:47). Nor did the Declaration's impact in the colonies catch officials in France by surprise. They had warned from the beginning against keeping news about the French Revolution from the overseas provinces. Slaves arriving in France from Saint-Domingue were sent back before they were able to hear about the revolution, and captains of ships leaving France in the opposite direction had to leave the letter bags behind. Especially the Declaration of the Rights of Man was seen as a dangerous document (Laborie 1789:4-5n; *Observations* 1789:11-2).

A MONARCHIST RUMOUR

Outside Saint-Domingue, it is hard to detect the impact of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, in part because it cannot easily be separated from the very influence of the Haitian Revolution. This is particularly true for the aftermath of the French abolition of slavery in February 1794. New World slave revolts in the 1790s were often blamed on French revolutionary concepts, but it would be too simplistic to assume that the Declaration propelled slaves into action.[6] For all the influence that the enlightened notion of freedom had in slave societies, its impact was often invisible. Historian Manuel Barcia has argued that the overwhelming majority of slave revolts in Cuba during the Age of Revolution 'were not induced or provoked by external factors. Rather, they grew out of personal experiences

5 Stein 1985:79, 88-9; *Journal des Révolutions de la partie française de St.-Domingue* [Philadelphia], 7-10-1793; Dubois 2004:162-5.

6 See for a critique: Aizpurua 1988:715. More generally, Eugene Genovese's argument that the French Revolution and its egalitarian message inspired slaves everywhere to relinquish traditional modes of revolt and aim for an equal place in dominant society can no longer be considered valid: Genovese 1979:xix-xx.

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– cultural, military, religious, and so forth – rather than revolutionary ideas imported to Cuba from elsewhere' (Barcia 2008:46). Similarly, Michael Craton has written that the reasons for most slave revolts during this period 'were essentially internal, intrinsic, and traditional' (Craton 1982:272).

However, denying any impact of European ideas and policies is not prudent either. Although numerous slaves may have had only mundane reasons to revolt, others consumed texts and ideas arriving from adjacent colonies or distant shores, which they appropriated and adapted to their cultures, and in the process reshaping those cultures. Slave cultures were often monarchical. Hidden forms of resistance were cloaked in royalist language, and fantasies about a better world involved the intervention of a good king. In order to grasp the impact of the notion of equality on enslaved Americans, we first have to understand their monarchist affinities. The monarchism of New World Africans was not solely African in orientation but extended to an affiliation with the imperial ruler in Europe. Brendan McConville has recently suggested that slave subcultures in colonial British America drew on inspiration from the British king, a distant, but powerful ally (McConville 2006:175-9). This same phenomenon can be discerned in other empires.

Africans in the Americas unmistakably derived inspiration from 'monarchist' rumours. Rumours can serve an important function. In a classic study, two psychologists have argued that rumours 'sometimes provide a broader interpretation of various puzzling features of the environment, and so play a prominent part in the intellectual drive to render the surrounding world intelligible' (Allport and Postman 1947:38). A historian of colonial India has added that 'rumour is both a *universal* and *necessary* carrier of insurgency in any pre-industrial, pre-literate society' (Guha 1983:251). Any student of premodern or early modern revolts will therefore detect the workings of rumours. In American slave revolts, one remarkably common element was the rumour that a European monarch had decreed slave emancipation, but that local authorities or slaveowners withheld the freedom.[7] The longevity of this type of rumour is striking. I have found evidence of this 'monarchist' rumour as early as 1669 (Bermuda) and as late as 1848 (St. Croix) (Bernhard 1999:137-8; Holsoe 1996:164). The rumour was invoked particularly frequently in the period 1789-1832: David Geggus has counted over twenty actual or attempted slave revolts in these years, including the largest slave rebellions in the history of the New World (Geggus 1997:7-8).

7 Such benevolence was not always attributed solely to a monarch. See, for instance, Viotti da Costa 1994:177-84. For a more in-depth discussion of this rumor, see Klooster 2011.

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Such rumours could spread across imperial borders. This may have been the case with a revolt in 1790 in Tortola, one of the British Leeward Islands. The slave rebels, who argued that the white inhabitants were suppressing an act of Britain's government to abolish slavery (Goveia 1965:95), were likely influenced by the rising expectations among people of colour in nearby French colonies. What may also have carried weight was a rumour circulating in the Spanish colonies about Spain's king. What prompted this rumour was a slave code with far-reaching implications issued by King Charles IV in 1789. It regulated the treatment slaves were to receive from their masters, stipulating that owners should exempt their slaves from before sunrise, past sunset or on Catholic holidays. They had to allow slaves to interrupt their work to spend two hours each day on their own provision grounds. Masters had to encourage their slaves to marry, and they were to take responsibility for old and sick slaves. Authorities in Havana and Caracas did everything they could to keep this slave code a secret, but to no avail (Scott 1986:153).

The news about the code had a powerful effect, and not so much because of its actual content. In Venezuela, the slave code may have resuscitated the 'monarchist' rumour that had been dormant for decades that the king had issued a decree that implied immediate freedom for all slaves. The first recorded instance of this rumour occurred during a widespread slave revolt in the province of Caracas in 1749. One man, the sergeant of the free blacks, stated that another black from Cádiz, Spain, had told him that the bishop who was expected to arrive from Spain would bring the emancipation decree with him. He would also be accompanied by four black crusaders on horseback. A slave who was later interrogated declared that ever since a former member of the municipal council had died, his spirit wandered around on a white horse – a clear reference to the Second Coming of Christ. The horse had brought him to Spain, from where he had returned with the liberty decree.[8]

In May 1790, one year after the promulgation of the slave code, a manifesto authored by blacks appeared in the streets of Caracas, once again stressing the imagined royal decree favouring the slaves (García 1991:187-8). Six years later, the rumour of a royally-sanctioned emancipation decree reared its head again, even though the slave code had been repealed two years before. An inquiry ordered by the province's Captain-General yielded that slaves in the valleys of Caucagua, Capaya, and Curiepe believed that an edict had been

8 García Chuecos 1950:71. See for other manifestations of this rumour in Venezuela in 1749: Castillo Lara 1983:280; Ramos Guédez 2001:459.

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issued in those valleys in the previous years. The edict had supposedly announced the king's decree setting the slaves free (Castillo Lara 1981:281). The rumour may have hibernated in the years after 1790 (or even 1749), but it may also have been introduced by way of Coro, where the famous uprising had occurred the previous year.

The monarchist rumour did indeed surface in Coro, even though the insurrection of May 1795 was not exclusively a slave revolt. Slaves were joined by free people of colour and tributary Indians, who had tried in vain to address their own grievances through legal channels in the previous years. The participation of these groups was reflected in the revolt's stated aims, which also included the abolition of Indian tribute and exemption from payment of the hated sales tax (*alcabala*). Slaves, nonetheless, played an important role. The road to their revolt had been prepared by a healer without any formal occupation called Cocofío, who had roamed around the area for many years. Once news of Charles IV's slave code made it to the area, Cocofío's message that the slaveholders had suppressed the royal emancipation decree found fertile ground. After Cocofío's death in 1792 or 1793, his successor further disseminated the belief in the thwarted decree, which eventually inspired at least one section of the rebelling slaves in 1795.[9] All over the Greater Caribbean, reformism, abolitionism, and French revolutionary ideology contributed at best indirectly to slave uprisings. These factors seem to have confirmed time-honoured notions among enslaved populations of the legitimacy of black freedom, thereby increasing rebelliousness.

What added another dimension to the turbulent Caribbean of the 1790s was the *actual* emancipation of all slaves in French-held colonies, as decreed by the French Convention on 4 February 1794, as well as the war afloat and ashore waged by France in the Caribbean. The war leader and administrator of Guadeloupe, Victor Hugues, targeted the British islands with the threat of liberating their enslaved populations if the French were to win, scaring planters everywhere, in the hope of rallying slaves to his side. In reality, the French would not have ended slavery in the British islands, but their propaganda was effective (Pérotin-Dumon 1988:293). Hugues's campaign, begun in late 1794, seems to have had an effect on slave populations. It is no coincidence that perhaps no year saw more (attempted) slave revolts than 1795.[10] The slaves who conspired at Pointe Coupée, Louisiana, in that year, debated the pos-

9 Testimony of Manuel de Carrera, Valle de Curimagua, 2-6-1795, in *Documentos* 1994:44-5.

10 David Geggus lists conspiracies in four or five and revolts in five to seven colonies. See the appendix to his essay in this volume.

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sibility of a French invasion, in which case they would side with the French for the sake of liberty (Hall 1992:369; Din 1997). Similarly, one account of the Coro revolt mentions the leaders' envisaged collaboration with the French. Their plan was to conquer the entire area from Maracaibo to Puerto Cabello, for which French aid was said to be forthcoming. The rebels presumably maintained contact with the French by means of a shuttling vessel.[11] While probably non-existent, the discussion of such contacts may have convinced some slaves to join the revolt.

THE CURAÇAO CONNECTION

It is not clear whether Curaçao's insurgents contemplated collaborating with French forces in 1795, but the power of the French did impress them. Propaganda diffused by colonial Frenchmen on their island must have influenced them. Since late 1792, French refugees from Saint-Domingue went around exaggerating the success of French armies on the European battlefields, which prompted Governor De Veer to order those spreading unrest to be removed from the island.[12] Hyperbole was no longer needed in 1795, when the French overran the Dutch Republic and set the stage for the establishment of the Batavian Republic. In his meeting with Father Jacobus Schinck, rebel leader Tula connected his revolt to that invasion, reasoning that since French blacks had been emancipated and the Netherlands was now under French control, 'hence we too must be free'.[13]

Curaçaoans of African birth or descent did not have to rely only on news arriving on foreign vessels or ships from the Dutch metropolis to inform them about the revolt in Saint-Domingue. As sailors, many free coloureds had spent time in French colonial ports. Since the Seven Years' War (1756-63), Curaçao had conducted a brisk trade with the French Antilles, supplying provisions and Venezuelan mules in exchange for cash crops. The links with the southern parts of Saint-Domingue were especially close, in particular after the outbreak of an Anglo-French war in 1779, when French

11 Testimony of Manuel de Carrera, in *Documentos* 1994:51.

12 Nationaal Archief, The Hague (NA), Raad van Koloniën 77, Journal of Governor De Veer. Curaçao was certainly not alone in introducing such a measure. In 1794, the authorities in English Antigua ordered as many French refugees as possible to be removed from the island and all blacks hailing from French colonies to be imprisoned. The next year, many whites and blacks from the French islands were expelled from St. Kitts (Goveia 1965:254).

13 Account of Father Jacobus Schinck, 7-9-1795, in Paula 1974:268.

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authorities invited foreign merchants to do business there. By the mid-1780s, sixty-eight vessels arrived annually in Willemstad from Saint-Domingue.[14] Heavy traffic continued well after the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution. When a disappointing number of free coloureds reported for militia inspection on Curaçao on the first day of 1793, their captains explained the many absentees by reference to the trade with the French colonies, in which they were employed.[15]

The trading partners of Curaçaoan merchants included free coloured residents of Saint-Domingue born in Curaçao – the small town of Aquin offers an interesting example (Garrigus 2006:75, 76, 193, 217). Free Curaçaoans of colour were conspicuously mobile, sojourning and settling in a variety of foreign colonies. In 1803, a total of 156 Curaçao-born blacks and mulattoes lived on the Danish island of St. Thomas, representing the largest contingent of free coloureds not native to that island.[16] A number of Afro-Curaçaoans are known to have taken part in seditious activities outside their native island. A few were part of the floating population of a runaway logwood community in Santo Domingo in 1790, described by contemporaries as exclusively male and living 'without God, law or King' (Lienhard 2008:97-8). Five years later in Louisiana, the Pointe Coupée conspiracy featured a creole slave from Curaçao who went around telling the story that 'they [the authorities] are awaiting at the Capital an Order of the King which declares all the slaves free [...]'.[17] The investigation of another abortive slave revolt, prepared in the sugar-rich area of Trinidad, Cuba, in 1798, yielded that the ten-men leadership of a planned uprising included natives of Curaçao, Jamaica, and others described as Mandinga, Mina, and Canga slaves. The impending start of the revolt came to light after a slave called José María Curazao told his overseer about the events bound to transpire the following night (González-Ripoll et al. 2004:280).

Given the close commercial and personal ties linking the Dutch island and Coro – carefully analyzed by Linda Rupert in this vol-

14 Klooster 1998:96-7. Garrigus 2006:52, 70, 172, 175, 183-4. NA, Nieuwe West-Indische Compagnie [NWIC] 609, fol. 556, Governor Jean Rodier and Council to the WIC, Curaçao, 14-3-1774. NA NWIC 612, C.A. Roelans and Michiel Römer to the WIC, Curaçao, 4-4-1783. NA NWIC 1174, daily registers, 1-7-1785 to 30-6-1786. In the year 1785-86, twenty-five vessels sailed from Martinique and seven from Guadeloupe. One firm maintaining close connections with Les Cayes and Jacmel was that of Pierre Brion, the father of the later revolutionary Luis Brion: Häberlein and Schmölz-Häberlein 1995:91, 102.

15 NA, Raad van Koloniën 77, Journal of Governor De Veer.

16 Three-quarters of them were freeborn and one-quarter had received their freedom in the course of their lifetime: Knight and de T. Prime 1999.

17 This was, indeed, yet another version of the emancipation rumour. Hall 1992:352.

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ume – it is no surprise that Afro-Curaçaoans also took part in the revolt that shook the Venezuelan town in 1795. The route to nearby Coro was not only crossed by numerous merchant vessels,[18] but traversed informally by slaves stealing boats and rowing their way until they hit land.[19] In the year 1774 alone, with Curaçao facing a severe food crisis, 140 slaves succeeded in escaping from the island to Coro. Five of them staged a great escape along with sixty-seven other slaves from the same plantation in an attempt to flee to Coro. When they departed in a large canoe, they were spotted and captured. Only those five eventually reached the Coro coast.[20]

Provided they converted to Catholicism, Curaçaoan slaves received their freedom upon arrival – a prospect that had been a major incentive for slaves to turn maritime maroons throughout the century (Rupert 2006:43-45; Rupert 2009). By the 1790s, as many as 400 former Curaçaoans lived in the southern part of the town of Coro. Not all refugees, however, settled here, scores of them surviving on their own in various parts of Coro's mountainous surroundings (the *serranía*) or moving to runaway communities (Castillo Lara 1981:61, 285). One such community, located near Coro, founded by Curaçaoans, and predominantly inhabited by males, was Santa María de la Chapa. Ramón Aizpurua has suggested that a feud that tore this town apart in the early 1770s, with creole blacks pitted against natives of Africa, may have originated in Curaçao.[21]

Some Curaçaoan refugees were apparently lured by José Caridad González, a long-time free resident of Coro and spouse of a slave. González had been born in the African kingdom of Loango, was shipped to Curaçao as a slave, but fled from the Dutch island to Coro in his youth. Since then, he was known to have traveled to Saint-Domingue (*Documentos* 1994:44-48; Rupert 2006:46-47). He was the man who took over from the recently deceased Cocofío, spreading the latter's notion of a hidden emancipation decree, and even claiming he had seen the document with his own eyes – a claim that appeared truthful in the light of a voyage he had

18 During a twelve-month period in 1785-86, the number was 117. NA, NWIC 1174, daily registers 1-7-1785 to 30-6-1786.

19 NA, NWIC 1166, fol. 124, list of runaways slaves, compiled in 1775. No actual slave trade between Curaçao and Coro has been recorded in the 1780s and 1790s, nor did any slave ship arrive from Africa after the 1770s. Nonetheless, although ignored by its historians, Curaçao remained a re-exporter of enslaved Africans to Tierra Firme in the late eighteenth century: Scott 1986:78; Andrade González, 1995:52; Romero Jaramillo 1997:72.

20 NA, NWIC 1166, fol. 17, Governor Jean Rodier to the WIC, Chamber of Amsterdam, 10-1-1775.

21 Aizpurua 2004:127-8. See also Acosta Saignes 1978:193, 196; Gil Rivas et al. 1996:71-5.

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undertaken to Spain. González also assured his Curaçaoan (or 'Luango') followers[22] that the French, with whom he pretended to maintain a regular correspondence, would offer the rebels protection. Whether he was actually a leader of the 1795 revolt as some historians have portrayed him is hard to establish. Nor is it possible to determine if his attempts to obtain the rank of captain in the battalion he had founded occupied him more than the ideas he professed (Aizpurua 1988:720-721; Jordán 1994:24). What is clear is that González bridged the divide between freedom and slavery, connected Coro with Curaçao and Saint-Domingue, spread a false emancipation rumour, and feigned close ties with the revolutionary French. He personifies the Greater Caribbean circa 1795: a closely connected, mutinous world, driven by a well-oiled rumour mill.

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22 In eighteenth-century Venezuela, the term 'Loango black' was often used coterminously with that of 'Curaçao black'. Loango ethnicity was the distinguishing mark of runaways from Curaçao who were among the founders of the town of Curiepe in the northeast of the province of Caracas in 1721. By the 1750s, these Loangos/Curaçaoans were still identifiable as a separate social group with different interests than the town's creole blacks: Castillo Lara 1981:23, 26, 30, 49, 51, 57, 61, 159ff, 176, 290.

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