

The Complexity of National Identity Construction in Curaçao, Dutch Caribbean

Rose Mary Allen

Abstract: Curaçao currently stands at a crossroad of constitutional reform. In the context of these changes at the political level, it is logical that national identities are being redefined and repositioned. The developments in the fashioning of national identities in Curaçao deserve attention locally but also regionally. How do people in Curaçao construct national identities in daily life? How is a national collective constructed on the one hand, and how are differences with other collectivities constructed on the other hand? The historical context of constitutional changes that have occurred over the years is considered as well as an examination of the present discourse on constitutional reform. These identity issues are then placed within a wider Caribbean context. *Keywords:* constitutional changes, construction national identity, Curaçao, diaspora, cross regional analysis.

Curaçao, one of the five islands of the Dutch Caribbean federation called the Netherlands Antilles, currently stands at a crossroad of constitutional reform. In this new context, Curaçaoan notions of national identity are being re-examined, reconstructed and reclaimed. In Curaçao, discussions about national identity are centred on the concept of *Yu di Kòrsou*. Translated from the local Creole language Papiamentu, this literally means: Child of Curaçao. In the debate about identity, the crucial questions are: Who is a *Yu di Kòrsou* and who is not? What characterizes the *Yu di Kòrsou* and, by extension, what is authentic Curaçaoan culture and what is a 'good' *Yu di Kòrsou*?

Overview of constitutional changes, 1954-2010

In the context of the post-World War II decolonization era, Curaçao as part of the federation of the Netherlands Antilles left its colonial past behind in 1954. After negotiations between the Netherlands and its two Caribbean colonies, i.e. Suriname and the six-island grouping formerly called 'Curaçao and subordinates,' the *Statuut* or Charter of the Kingdom of the Netherlands came into effect on 15 December 1954. Curaçao, the largest island both in size and population, became the seat of the federal government of the new, autonomous entity called the Netherlands Antilles. At the time the Netherlands Antilles consisted of six islands, namely Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius and Sint Maarten. Autonomy meant that the islands as a federation were responsible for their internal affairs, while nationality, foreign relations, defence, and cassation were the jurisdiction of the Kingdom as a whole.

In 1975 Suriname severed constitutional ties with the Kingdom and became an independent republic. In 1986 Aruba separated from the Netherlands Antilles, obtaining for itself the status of an autonomous country within the Kingdom. That meant that since 1986, the Kingdom has consisted of three constituent parts: the Netherlands, Aruba, and the Netherlands Antilles (now a five-island federation).

The notion of (Netherlands) Antilleanness has been paradoxical on Curaçao (as well as on the other islands). The Curaçaoan sociologist René A. Römer (1927-2003) voiced the view of many when he said that he did not believe that an Antillean identity existed. When requested in 1967 to set the tone for a debate on Antillean identity organized by the Netherlands-Antillean Society for Academics (NAGA), he explained: ‘When I talk about culture and identity, don’t all of us unconsciously think about the *Yu di Kòrsou* or not? Do we perhaps think about the Antilles? Or only about Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao?’ (Amigoe 1967). Seven years later, he stated that the Netherlands Antilles were only a ‘juridical construction and not a community’ (Römer 1974, 49).

Still, in a consultative referendum held in Curaçao in 1993, 74 per cent of those casting a vote chose for Curaçao to remain within a restructured Netherlands Antilles federation. As of 1994, the federal government attempted to promote a ‘national’ Antillean identity, but for lack of funding did not implement the recommendations in the report of the Nation-Building Commission, other than establishing a new national anthem and a national holiday.

At the turn of the twentieth century, dissatisfaction with the functioning of the Netherlands Antilles and cries for constitutional transformation became stronger. In a series of referenda held between 2000 and 2005, four of the five islands (all except Sint Eustatius) voted for change in the constitutional structure that had defined the island grouping since 1954. In the referendum held in Curaçao on 8 April 2005, 68 per cent of the Curaçaoan electorate voted to sever ties with the other islands of the Netherlands Antilles and to become an autonomous country within the Kingdom.

After these referenda, negotiations on constitutional reform started with the Netherlands. In late 2006, agreements were reached and laid down in two so-called ‘Final Declarations’: framework documents outlining the future constitutional relationships of the islands with the Netherlands and with each other. In the new constitutional situation, the Kingdom will consist of four autonomous parts: the Netherlands (including Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba as three overseas municipalities), Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten. The Netherlands Antilles federation will cease to exist. The five islands that comprised it will remain part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in one form or another, but on their own, although they will continue to cooperate in a variety of administrative fields. Debt relief for the islands was included in the constitutional-reform negotiations and the Final Declarations of 2006 institutionalized Kingdom supervision of the public finances of the islands as well as measures to improve law enforcement on the islands. Implementation of several of these measures has already started, but the new constitutional arrangement is scheduled to formally take hold on 10 October 2010.

In the most recent referendum held in Curaçao on 15 May 2009, the electorate was asked to accept or reject the ongoing process of constitutional reform and in particular the negotiated agreements and proposed legislative measures. The run up to this referendum involved heated discussions. The result of the referendum was 52 per cent ‘yes’ voters (approving the negotiated agreements) and 48 per cent ‘no’ voters (disapproving). This appears to reflect the sharp discord and division on the island on the issues involved, in particular the desirability of consolidated local autonomy versus increased Kingdom (read: Netherlands) influence in local affairs.

While some commentators subsequently concluded that the constitutional reform process had apparently brought about a worrisome division to the island, others have suggested that the referendum result is ‘merely’ reflective of certain historical divisions and ambiguities within the Curaçaoan population, related to factors such as ethnicity and class. The division and discord has also been directly visible in the fact that the government coalition that ruled Curaçao between the election of April 2007 and the most recent election of August 2010, and which supported and implemented the ongoing constitutional-reform process, could rely on only a narrow majority of 11 seats in the island’s 21-seat Legislative Council (island parliament). The opposition parties by-and-large were against the reform process as implemented by the ruling coalition. To make matters more complicated, in the August 2010 election the parties of the incumbent coalition won only ten seats, thereby losing their joint majority in parliament. According to the remaining parties, this outcome could be interpreted as the reform process having been rejected by the electorate.

The discursive construction of national identity, 1969-2010

Curaçao is a culturally and ethnically diverse society, historically shaped by the mechanisms of colonialism and slavery. The three-tiered social structure that existed during slavery (which lasted until 1863) was well defined, with race/ethnicity/color and class hierarchies largely coinciding. One’s place in society depended primarily on one’s occupation, ethnic heritage, and skin color. These socio-structural features have influenced the ways in which people experience and define a local or national identity.

In the turbulent 1960s, the hierarchies, divisions and contradictions of Curaçao’s post-colonial society resulted in a labour protest and social uprising on the 30th of May in 1969: a struggle for higher wages. According to Anderson and Dynes (1973), the islands of the Netherlands Antilles at that time were still marked by cultural, racial and economic strains. Local philosopher Alejandro F. Paula (1967) had addressed some of these issues a few years earlier. He looked at identity and identity formation among the Afro-Curaçaoans and discussed the way in which they internalized certain standards of self-judgment set by the white elite, resulting in self-denial (Paula 1967, 31-2). After the uprising of 30 May 1969, there was an desire for more recognition of the Afro-Curaçaoan. In the 1970s, discussions about the ‘real’ *Yu di Kòrsou* came to involve race and class more clearly and explicitly. This decade saw the rise of several organizations in Curaçao that sought to craft a new, post-colonial identity of the black *Yu di Kòrsou*.

In the debates thereafter, the question arose whether the true *Yu di Kòrsou* was only the Afro-Curaçaoan. At the popular level, this has generally been understood to be the case. But this understanding has been criticized for excluding the other ethnic groups that have been present on the island for many generations and played an important role in local culture through the creolization process (Römer 1974, 53; Oostindie 1996, 223). These other groups include the Dutch and the Sephardic Jews who have been on the island since the beginning of Dutch colonization in the seventeenth century, as well as the large numbers of labour immigrants from South Asia, China, the Middle East, Portugal, Suriname, the English-speaking Caribbean,

and the Dutch who settled in Curaçao after the Royal Dutch Shell Petroleum Company established itself on the island in the early twentieth century. These and more recent immigrants from Haiti, Venezuela and Colombia have added new degrees of diversity and complexity to the multicultural fabric of the Curaçaoan society and, consequently, to the discussion about who can be classified as *Yu di Kòrsou*.

The 1970s also saw the beginning of formal efforts at nation-building. On 26 July 1979 an island anthem was officially instituted, replacing the unofficial one composed by a Dutch friar in celebration of the coronation of the Netherlands Queen Wilhelmina in 1898. The text of the new anthem contains words common in national anthems of newly independent states, expressing patriotism, struggle, liberty, grandeur and pride. In 1984 an island ‘Hymn and Flag Day’ was institutionalized on 2 July, a date that commemorates the first time that the island’s Legislative Council came together in 1951. More recently, the island government of Curaçao has invested increased resources to promote traditional culture (Rosalia 2001), for example, through the *siman di kultura* (cultural week).² It is organized by the *Kas di Kultura* (Cultural House, the agency that implements the government’s cultural policy) and focuses attention on what is perceived as traditional Curaçaoan culture. This *siman di kultura* has received broad popular acceptance and has grown in significance.

Römer claimed that Curaçao’s distinct national culture, attained through creolization, manifested itself especially through the Papiamentu language. For him, Papiamentu was a key constituent of Curaçaoan culture that clearly transcended class boundaries. It is the use of this language that, according to Römer, determines the autochthonous Curaçaoan or *Yu di Kòrsou*. The position of Papiamentu in relation to national identity has been a recurring topic of discussion. Language choice still functions as an indicator of who is and who is not considered a *Yu di Kòrsou* (Benjamin 2002, 85). However, the importance given to Papiamentu as a cultural signifier does not match the preference that is often given to Dutch as the language of choice for career and social advancement. A decades-long discussion on whether or how to use Papiamentu as a language of instruction in the education system continues today and reflects some of the persistent paradoxes and challenges of national identity in Curaçao.

Now that Curaçao is in the midst of a constitutional-reform process, that process is accompanied by a public discourse – on radio talk-shows, via the newspapers and in scholarly publications – that makes reference to a (presumed) common national identity, while the term *Yu di Kòrsou* is also presented as a category of (new) citizenship. So a new political/governance dimension has been added to the concept of *Yu di Kòrsou*. Emphasis tends to be placed on patriotism and unity (Nolda Römer-Kenepa 2008) and on cohesion and solidarity among all inhabitants, both those who have long historical roots in the society and the relative newcomers. So again, being *Yu di Kòrsou* is an issue of membership, of inclusion and exclusion, but now is said to also involve civic values and rights of participation in social/public life, while presuming a body of common political knowledge as Abowitz (2006, 653) suggests.

The local discussions on constitutional reform and cultural identity are further shaped by the problematic integration of Curaçaoan immigrants in the Netherlands. At the end of the twentieth century in the context of an island economy that was

deteriorating (at that time), Curaçaoans, especially from the lower classes, emigrated in large numbers to the Netherlands in search of better jobs, education and social security (Oostindie 2009). Issues affecting the Curaçaoan diaspora in the Netherlands were discussed in Curaçao, as people could easily follow current developments in the mother country with today's communication technology.

As elsewhere in Europe, anti-immigrant sentiment has been on the rise in the Netherlands. Some speak of a culturalization of citizenship in the Netherlands, i.e., cultural/ethnic conditions and restrictions being placed on Netherlands citizenship. Some Curaçaoans fear that the rising intolerance in the Netherlands toward ethnically different immigrants will extend beyond the European borders of the Netherlands. They point to the full inspection of passengers arriving on flights from the Dutch Caribbean at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, which is sometimes experienced as humiliating. They point to the fact that members of the Netherlands anti-immigrant political party PVV continually call the Netherlands Antilles a den of crime and corruption. Also, two much-discussed bills of law that would restrict travel within the Kingdom and enable the government to deport Curaçaoans who have committed a crime in the Netherlands are seen by some as evidence that Curaçaoans are apparently considered second-rate Kingdom citizens. Curaçaoans are also anxious about the changes taking place in nearby Bonaire, which has seen a significant influx of new Dutch immigrants from the Metropolis in recent years, where it is feared that the indigenous Bonairean culture will gradually become marginal, and where the liberal Netherlands legislation on same-sex marriage, euthanasia and abortion will soon come into effect.

It is said that globalization integrates markets and dissolves national boundaries. In a today's globalized world, cultural identity seems to have become less bounded and fixed and more fluid and flexible. At the same time, however, tension may arise between national and transnational or supranational identities. Rex Nettleford (2003) states that, 'cultural identity continued to be a persistent quest by the Jamaican and Caribbean people for place and purpose in a globalized world of continuous change'. His remark reflects the trials that former colonies such as Jamaica, even after more than 40 years of independence, continue to experience in finding a comfortable balance between following modernization and globalization on the one hand and affirming their traditional culture and local productivity on the other hand.

Meanwhile, new terms are being introduced to describe the situation of Curaçao and other non-independent territories in the Caribbean. One such term that builds on the notion of transnationalism and disappearing boundaries associated with globalization is 'extended statehood'. This term attempts to capture the diversity of constitutional relationships that exist between the USA, the UK, France and the Netherlands and their respective sub-national jurisdictions in the Caribbean. The essence of extended statehood is that people have chosen to remain under the dominion of a mother country. Therefore one cannot speak of colonies and colonization, which presumes forced dominion. Also, decolonization is no longer seen as a process that should ultimately lead to full independence, as was generally the assumption following World War II.

The new concept fails to take into account the unequal power relationships that have often endured since colonial times and that are sometimes reinforced by the present global order. It also says very little about how culture is experienced and

contested in a globalized world and within multicultural constitutional arrangements. Generally, the extra-regional powers will argue that certain values and norms to which they adhere are universal in the sense that all people should adhere to them. However, the way in which these values and norms are presented to Caribbean territories may reflect the power differential between the constitutional partners. A thought that frightens people in Curaçao is that in the new constitutional situation, the Netherlands may seek to gradually impose its liberal values and legislation concerning ethical matters (same-sex marriage, euthanasia and abortion), not only on the future overseas municipalities of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba, but also on Curaçao (as well as Sint Maarten and Aruba).

Curaçao within the wider Caribbean

The issues discussed above show significant overlap with the discourse on national identity in the rest of the Caribbean. In Caribbean societies, culture and national identity have been contentious issues of scholarly and general attention for quite some time. For Caribbean nations, to greater or lesser degree the construction of national identity has been tied to the search for political independence or autonomy and economic self-sufficiency, development or survival (Hall 1995; Nettleford 2003).

Of course, there are also important differences between the cases of Curaçao and the wider Caribbean. Cross-regional comparative analysis would certainly enrich the discussions on constitutional reform and on the constructing, negotiating and claiming of identities in the Caribbean as a whole. In most of the 'extended statehood' systems in the Caribbean, constitutional reform has been on the political agenda for a long time. This has certainly been the case in Puerto Rico and the French Caribbean. It seems that in these societies, too, the majority of the population prefers to maintain connected to their Metropolis.

In Puerto Rico the discussion is basically about maintaining the present Commonwealth status (a form of self-governance) or becoming a state of the USA. Consultative referenda on the status issue have been inconclusive; it seems that the population is equally divided between those wishing to maintain the status quo and those preferring statehood. In the 1993 referendum, 49 per cent voted for Commonwealth status, 46 per cent for statehood, and 4 per cent for independence. In the last referendum, held in December 1998, 46.5 per cent voted for statehood, 2.5 per cent for independence, and 50 per cent for 'none of the above'. In some ways, this voting pattern resembles the split in Curaçao between 'yes' and 'no' voters.

Meanwhile, Schnepel (2004) argues that the political assimilation of the French Caribbean with France in 1946 was not an abrupt or unexpected modification of their constitutional status, but rather the logical culmination of a centuries-long process of progressive incorporation of these territories into the political and legal framework of the French state – a process that had begun with the abolition of slavery in 1848. But Adlai Murdoch states that the people of the French Caribbean have become the 'inheritors of a double perspective, marking a transatlantic duality of location that increasingly separated them both from their politically independent Anglophone Caribbean counterparts and from the social and cultural materialities of the metropole, to whom they remain inexplicably linked in a complex symbiosis of contentious subordination' (2008, 258). In the double referendum organized on

Martinique and Guadeloupe in December 2003, the electorate rejected the proposed transformation of their two regions into new autonomous regions with more responsibility and less assistance, as 'it was feared that this nudge toward self-government would be the first nail in a French-imposed coffin of enforced independence' (Adlai Murdoch 2008, 262). In the referenda of 10 January 2010 in Martinique and French Guyana, increased local autonomy was again rejected by large margins in both regions: 80 per cent in Martinique and 70 per cent in French Guyana.

In the case of Curaçao, the result of the April 2005 referendum suggests that the percentage of people that want the island to remain part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in one way or other is quite high: 95 per cent. Opinion polls carried out in 1997-1998 (Oostindie and Verton 1998) reached the same conclusion. However, a complicating factor in the case of Curaçao that is not present in the Puerto Rican and French Caribbean cases is the desire to sever ties with the 'sister' islands of the Dutch Caribbean. Another difference between the three cases is that discussions in Puerto Rico and Curaçao are about giving up some of the relative autonomy that these two islands have enjoyed for the last fifty years in exchange for certain expected material advantages, whereas the option facing the French Caribbean territories involves increasing their local autonomy while foregoing the material benefits that they have been used to for over 60 years. Yet in all three cases, it is understood that autonomy is not only about administrative authority and sovereignty, but also about local economic control, indigenous business ownership, and the preservation of cultural traditions.

An interesting recent development in the English-speaking Caribbean is that of the Turks & Caicos Islands. This multiple-island grouping is a British Overseas Territory (formerly known as a Crown colony) that has had its own elected parliament and government since 1976, while an appointed Governor represents the British Crown. In August 2009, because of allegations of systemic corruption by the local government, the United Kingdom suspended Turks & Caicos Islands' self-government and reintroduced direct UK rule. The suspension is for a period of two years, subject to extension or abbreviation as necessary. During this period, the Governor will be responsible for the government of the Turks & Caicos Islands and for putting 'affairs back in good order'. This drastic measure on the part of the UK has been criticized locally as undemocratic and a form of re-colonization and was immediately condemned by CARICOM, the Caribbean Community of which the Turks & Caicos Islands are an associated member. This case illustrates how constitutional status issues in practice easily get tangled up with matters of proper financial management.

Concluding remarks

Partially hidden behind the dominant debate of the last four-five years on constitutional reform is a (sub-)debate on national identity. In fact, the discourse on identity has become more complex in Curaçao and identity construction remains heavily contested. Curaçaoans may call themselves a Latin American nation, a Caribbean people, African descendents, Netherlands nationals, members of the European Union, as well as global citizens. These different identities are flexible and situ-

ational rather than fixed, as people may hold on to several identity categories at the same time and move in and out of them in dynamic ways. One might say that identity issues on the island show the complexity of managing a plurality of ethnicities, of balancing resistance with pragmatism, while debating constitutional options within a globalizing context. Curaçaoan identities are constantly being negotiated, fervently debated, and convincingly claimed in ways and during circumstances that may not always be clear to outsiders, or even to insiders. As such, they merit more scholarly investigation.

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Rose Mary Allen lectures part time at the University of the Netherlands Antilles. She is also a research fellow on the project 'Citizenship, National Canons, and the Issue of Cultural Diversity. The Netherlands in International Perspective' at the Amsterdam School for Social science Research (ASSR), University of Amsterdam, which focuses on identity and identity-issues. Her most recent articles are: 'Geef het kind geen naam voordat het geboren is' (Don't give the child a name before it is born), *Kind aan de Ketting: Opgroeien in slavernij – toen en nu* (in Dutch), edited by Aspha Bijnaar, 2010, Amsterdam, KIT Publishers; and, 'Leren hoe je man moet zijn: Curaçaoase zeevaarders naar New York, 1900-1924' (Learning how to be a man: Curaçaoan seafarers to New York, 1900-1924), *OSO, Tijdschrift voor Surinamistiek en het Caraïbisch gebied*, 29(1) April 2010. <allen_rm@onenet.an> <adr550@hotmail.com>

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Notes

1. Some might argue that it is incorrect to speak of a national identity rather than a local or island identity in the case of Curaçao, but the fact of the matter is that Curaçaoans see themselves as a people and a nation. It is in this (anthropological) sense that I choose to apply the terms nation and national to Curaçao. The island will be an autonomous country by 10 October 2010 and at that time it will also be juridically correct to speak of a national Curaçaoan identity.
2. Presently it is called *Kulturismo*, an amalgamation of culture and tourism.

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