

## PORTUGUESE LABOR MIGRATION TO CURAÇAO

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### *ABSTRACT*

This article deals with the social, economic and political factors which determined the emigration of poor peasants and low skilled laborers from Madeira, to Curaçao and why they made this choice. A first and massive wave took place in the period of the 1920s until the 1950s and the workers came on a contract for the oil industry. The Portuguese island of Madeira, experienced serious economic problems and social disparities in those days. This was also the period in which the authoritarian Portuguese government controlled the migration of its people. The labor migration for the oil industry came to an end in the 1950s but the Madeiran immigration continued thereafter, because the need of labor for certain specific areas and jobs for which almost no local laborer wanted to apply, such as in agriculture in Curaçao, was an important factor. But it was, on one hand, also the result of persisting social and political problems in the homeland, conscription for the army in wartime and little perspective for individual progress. On the other hand the pull factors after the oil period were considered strong enough to maintain a considerable attraction to Curaçao.

**Keywords:** labor migration, contract laborers, oil worker, remittances, chain migration, multi-ethnicity

### *RESUMEN*

Este artículo trata sobre los factores sociales, económicos y políticos que propiciaron la emigración de campesinos pobres y de trabajadores poco diestros de Madeira a Curazao, y por qué tomaron esta decisión. Una primera y masiva ola tuvo lugar en el periodo de los años 20 hasta los años 50 con trabajadores que iban contratados por la industria petrolera. La isla portuguesa de Madeira experimentó serios problemas económicos y disparidades sociales durante este tiempo. Este también fue el periodo en el cual el autoritario gobierno portugués controlaba la migración de su gente. La migración de trabajadores para la industria petrolera terminó en los 50 pero la inmigración continuó después por la necesidad de trabajo en ciertas áreas específicas y trabajos para los cuales los trabajadores locales no querían solicitar, como la agricultura en Curazao, fue un factor importante. Pero también fue en parte el resultado de los persistentes problemas sociales y políticos en el país, el reclutamiento del ejército en época de guerra y la falta de perspectiva

para el progreso individual. De otra parte, los factores de atracción luego del periodo petrolero eran considerados lo suficientemente fuertes para mantener una atracción considerable hacia Curazao.

**Palabras clave:** migración laboral, obreros petroleros, remesas, migración en cadena, multi-etnicidad, obreros contratados

#### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse les facteurs socio-économiques et politiques qui ont provoqué l'émigration de paysans et de travailleurs peu doués de Madeira à Curaçao, pour lesquelles ils ont pris cette décision. La première vague d'immigration massive de travailleurs embauchés par l'industrie pétrolière s'est déroulée durant les années 1920 jusque dans les années 1950. Durant cette période, l'île portugaise de Madeira a subi de sérieux problèmes économiques et sociaux. Le gouvernement portugais a pris une série de mesure afin de contrôler l'immigration de ses ressortissants. L'immigration de travailleurs embauchés par l'industrie pétrolière a pris fin durant les années 1950. Cependant, cette immigration a continué et est devenue un facteur important, à cause de certains emplois dans des secteurs spécifiques, tels que l'agriculture à Curaçao, où les travailleurs locaux ne voulaient pas travailler. Cette immigration est aussi due aux problèmes sociaux - politiques qui ont persisté dans le pays, les recrutements réalisés par l'armée durant la guerre et le manque de perspective d'avenir. De plus, même après la période pétrolière, Curaçao a continué à être considérée comme un territoire attractif.

**Mots-clés :** migration des travailleurs, ouvriers pétroliers, transfert d'argent, migration en groupe, multiethnicité, ouvriers embauchés

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## Introduction

Migration has always been an essential element in the history of Curaçao. During the first centuries of colonization by the Dutch since 1634, subsequent waves of immigrants came to the island either by free choice or in bondage (Römer 1979; Hartog 1961). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this island society underwent profound changes because of the construction of the Shell oil refinery, which brought a considerable number of new immigrants from a wide variety of regions (van Soest 1976). With the ensuing prosperity, a Dutch based social security system and political stability, the island continued to be a receiving territory of immigrants in particular from the Caribbean

region but also from distant countries. Curaçao experienced also a considerable outward migration towards Holland from the 1970s onwards. Immigration however remained higher than emigration. In September 2011, according to the Registry Office in Curaçao, out of the 126,000 people born on the island, only 44,000 (35%) had both parents who had been born in Curaçao and the island counted over 150 nationalities in that year.

On the other hand Portugal and in particular the islands of Madeira and the Azores for a long time have been places of emigration. From the mid 19th century onwards emigration became a constant factor for the society of Madeira. It was the result of a continuous demand for labor on the international market as well as because of the difficult living conditions caused by the economic crisis and the oppressive social relations between landowners and tenants. "Emigration became as such the only way out from hunger and servitude" (Vieira 2003:133). In the 19th century the mass migrations of Madeirenses to the Guyanas and the islands of the Caribbean were primarily for plantation labor after abolition of slavery. In the 20th century the main pull factors for the Caribbean lands were the economic developments in Curaçao and adjacent Venezuela. The purpose of this study is to analyze the motives of poor peasants from Madeira to make the step to Curaçao. The central question is to determine what became so crucial in their decision to look abroad and in particular to choose for Curaçao to begin a new life or in other words: what were the push and pull factors on both sides of the migration spectrum? For the scope of this article the focus will be on the study of the bulk immigration on demand during the so called 'oil era' and the chain migration afterwards until the 1980s. In this research we will consider all Portuguese immigrants from mainland Portugal and from the islands of Madeira and the Azores. Due to space limitations, however, we shall only analyze the push factors from Madeira more specifically, as by far most immigrants for Curaçao came from this island.

The reason for this study was the almost total absence of an in-depth analysis of the Portuguese migration towards Curaçao in the 20th century, whereas for other parts in the region this has already been a subject for research for some time (Ferreira 1996). Knowledge about the immigration of specific ethnic groups is essential for a better understanding of the multi-ethnic Curaçaoan society.

### **Portuguese Migrations in modern times**

The migration of white European laborers to the plantations in the Caribbean in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as a preceding phase. "It was in this period that the separate colonial systems of particular states became

an integrated imperial world order. Whenever capital was to be made profitable, laborers were recruited by experiment and calculation to tap the cheapest supply. High returns on capital were matched by low returns on labor. For voluntary migrant workers, internationalized segments of labor markets provided options, as in the case of the Portuguese” (Hoerder 2002:5). When the socio-economic and political situation in a given country gets worse people will move to other places where perspectives are brighter in their concept. These are the classical push factors, such as poverty, unemployment and repressive political regimes, for emigration, often followed by chain migration based on family- and local networks (Boyd 1989). The period after 1820 experienced a migration much more intense and massive and the period between 1820 and 1924, when the US passed an act halting immigration, is called the Century of Immigration (Daniels 2002).

Portugal, comparable to the other Latin countries Italy and Spain, was an industrial latecomer on the European periphery and was also late to experience mass emigration, but it was not so different from the northwestern European countries (Lewis 1978b). The Latin emigration delay was because potential emigrants in the poorest European countries were so income-constrained by their poverty that they could not afford to move (Hatton and Williamson 2005:69). The most powerful force accounting for the surge in Portuguese emigration rates after the 1890s was a boom in the natural rate of population increase two decades earlier. The rising migrant populations abroad, helped to contribute to the surge in emigration by offering a foothold, or beachhead (Böcker 1994), abroad and remittances to help save for travel. The Portuguese migrants were part of the movement across the ocean to the new world and they also migrated to the plantation economies in the Caribbean to fill up the labor gap after the abolition of slavery. Here they were mostly recruited for the British colonies of Guyana and Trinidad. Brazil experienced a mass immigration somewhat later, after 1880 whereas the composition of immigrants was predominantly Portuguese for most of the period (Ferreira Levy 1974).

Mass immigration however affected the older or traditional inhabitants of the New World and put a stress on wage standards and living conditions, especially for the most vulnerable groups. Economic problems, growing competition on the local labor markets and for limited social facilities, ethnical, cultural and racial differences resulted almost everywhere in a growing resentment against immigrants. This resentment resulted in a restrictive policy with Brazil shutting its doors in the 1920s and the US adopted the Immigration Act in 1924. By 1930 the era of mass migration was (temporarily) over while nativism, together with the introduction of different forms of racism and bureaucratic rules to select

immigrants on the basis of ethnicity and race was on the rise (Daniels 2002:283-284).

The Portuguese emigration from Madeira to Curaçao will be analyzed by using primarily the push and pull theory without considering this theory to have an answer for all the research questions regarding migrations in general (de Haas 2003). For the follow-up immigration, after the oil-worker, we will take the chain-migration and bridging theories as most dominant elements. Although the research will deal with the Portuguese immigrant, we will focus on Madeira as almost 90% of them are originated from this archipelago, consisting of Madeira, Porto Santo and several almost uninhabited islands. The Azores is an archipelago of nine islands with São Miguel as the most populous but has had only a limited share in the emigration to Curaçao as was also the case for mainland Portugal. Madeira has approximately 268,000 and the Azores 247,000 inhabitants according to the census of 2011. They have shared a common history and culture with only slight differences due to their particular environment and relative isolation.

### **Methodological approach**

After an initial desk research, several meetings with a group of four persons who are closely related to the local Portuguese immigrant community took place. The participants were born either in Madeira or in Curaçao but out of Portuguese parents. These meetings were organized with the aim to get more information about the Portuguese immigrant group and to select respondents for the survey. The constellation of this group did not only give the author a firsthand insight into the Portuguese community on the island, but it also provided him with the necessary *entree* to conduct the interviews. Familiarity with the Portuguese language and culture was an important asset for conducting the interviews. The group exchanged information and discussed the different aspects of the Portuguese community in Curaçao. Members of the group participated in interviews and presented additional information as the survey was going on.

The second step in the desk research was to make a selection of the most relevant publications on migration in general and the Portuguese emigration in particular, with special interest in the emigration towards the Caribbean. In contrast to the many and varied publications on the general migration and even with regard to the Portuguese emigration, almost no academic research could be found with regard to the Portuguese in Curaçao. The study of the Portuguese immigrants in Curaçao by Tom Rijnenburg and Cora de Wit in 1984 gave the author a first overall view on this immigrant community. Of special importance is the

historical analysis of the oil industry in Curaçao by van Soest (1976) with references to the Portuguese laborers.

After having gathered essential knowledge about the subject, the interview topics were selected and a set of interview questions was formulated and arranged in a questionnaire. Important subjects were: the place of birth, time of immigration and motives to leave. Also important were arrangements for travel, competencies, the political and the socio-economic conditions of rural life, providers of papers, contracts, and accommodation on arrival, confrontation with a new work environment, society and culture. The respondents were selected on the basis of 80% from Madeira and 20% from Portugal and Azores combined, representing the quantitative composition of the Portuguese immigrants, and by the criteria of age, arrival date and gender. Their positions in a particular economic sector and their civil status during residence in Curaçao were also considered as being relevant. The first generation, i.e., those born in Portuguese territories, were more or less 1,000 individuals and the total group including the second-generation approximately 2,700. For a qualitative survey the sample had to take into account the above mentioned characteristics and the group of respondents was selected to incorporate all these variants. A sample of 30 first-generation respondents could provide the necessary insight. Together with some second-generation respondents, to complement the sample, 43 respondents were selected altogether. Of these respondents 35 were from the first generation and 8 from the second, while four respondents with only one Portuguese parent were also included.

All interviews were personally conducted and in-depth while using the questionnaire and in several cases with repeated sessions. At the final stage, the method of a group meeting with open questions and discussion was applied.

Table 1. Place of birth of respondents from the first and second generation of Portuguese immigrants.

<i>Country</i>	<i>Place of Birth</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
Madeira	Ponta do Sol	18
	Funchal	6
	Other	6
São Miguel, Azores	São Miguel	3
Portugal ( mainland)	Oporto	1
	Lisbon	1
Netherlands Antilles	Curaçao	8

Source: Interviews taken in 2012-2014.

For a better understanding of the context in which immigration took place, the socio-economic and political development of the Curaçao society in the 20th century and related processes were thoroughly analyzed. The same approach has been followed with regard to Portugal and its territories in general and Madeira in particular.

The study of archival records represented an important part of the research. Although not all archives were disclosed, e.g., those from Shell Curaçao, the data found in the National Archives, in private collections as well as in some family records were very useful. Based on visits by the group members and the author himself to Madeira, Azores, and Portugal in the recent past, some important experiences and archival material could be taken into account.

### **Migrants in a modern world**

World War I ended mass migration and closed the doors on the first global century of migration. The combined effects of two world wars, the Great Depression, and the introduction of restrictive immigration policy served to choke off emigration to the New World, and thus migrations never regained their pre-1914 levels in the half century that followed (Hatton and Williamson 2005:181).

The 19th-century mass migration experience shows that poor, low-wage, agrarian countries in Europe sent out few emigrants at first, but that their numbers rose during early industrialization before dropping during late industrialization. The second half of the 20th century illustrates how, at some point, these countries started to receive immigrants; as they grew more prosperous, labor became scarce whereas wages became higher. Towards the 1950s, the more-traditional outflow from southern Europe to the Americas was replaced by migration heading north within Europe, led by Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Spain, and somewhat later joined by Turkey. Latin America transformed from a major migrant destination to a major migrant source (Hatton and Williamson 2005:203-207).

The Caribbean region has experienced high emigration numbers during the 20th century, and although the focus was on the former European colonial powers as Great Britain, France and The Netherlands, many migrants went to the US and to Canada.

Intraregional migration also took place to the economic hotspots such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Central America for the shifting agricultural production of respectively sugar and bananas, and after 1960 to the booming tourist destinations. In the first half of the 20th century labor moved to the industrial centers of Trinidad, Curaçao and Aruba.

Emigration is not always a result of strictly economic factors or ethnic and religious conflicts. Crises, war and famine also displace people in modern times, political refugees, political asylum-seekers, and illegal crossovers are all modern-day problems. Migration studies are more and more focused on these human rights problems and on the questions dealing with integration, assimilation and the multi-cultural society.

### **On labor migration**

Scholars also tried to find push and pull factors on a micro and meso level to explain migration. Several labor market factors have been studied to explain labor migration, such as the wage gaps, risk aversion versus probability of employment (Todaro 1969), income constraints at home and incentives in receiving countries, and the existence of elastic labor supplies. Theories developed in particular for the rural-urban migration due to this unprecedented massive and historical movement of people from the rural countryside to the burgeoning cities of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The new viewpoints help explain to a certain extent the movement of people across national boundaries. As for Todaro, much of the early research on migration tended to focus on social, cultural, and psychological factors; while recognizing but carefully evaluating the importance of economic variables. Todaro did consider as part of these factors among others the desire of migrants to break away from traditional constraints of social organizations; the security of urban “extended family” relationships and the lure of the so-called “bright city lights”; and urban-oriented educational systems, and the modernizing impact of the introduction of radio, television, and the cinema.

Richard Easterlin (1961) saw emigration as a result of demographic growth over a generational period and, in relation with labor market conditions, such as the real wage, reflected the net impact of both labor supply and demand. Hatton and Williamson (page 56) conform neoclassical theory consider, however, the real wage gap between home wages and at the potential destination as a better measure of the emigration incentive.

Another researcher, Oded Stark (1993), focused on the relative deprivation approach, and in this way he also considered the relation between migrants and economy, i.e., labor economies, as fundamental. He believes that migration depends on the inequality in the distribution of income by size in the sending and receiving societies, that it is positively correlated with inequality in the society of origin, and that it is negatively correlated with inequality in the society of destination (Stark 1993:115).

For Baganha (2003), international labor migration is a socio-



economic process rooted in geo-economic inequality. International labor migration is economically determined and politically sanctioned. On the international labor market, some countries produce and sell labor that other countries consume. Although Portugal had a large economically marginal population, and the American economy demanded the inflow of unskilled labor, Portuguese emigration to the United States was only initiated after direct recruitment from the American economy. Migration models based on the economic advantages of the receiving society, and models based on deteriorating economic conditions in the sending society, performed poorly in the Portuguese case (Baganha 2003).

After migratory movement takes off, its main determinant and the most powerful filter of the direction the movement takes, seem to be the dynamics of the networks active at both ends of the trajectory (Baganha 2003).

Because international labor movements occur between nation states, governments are active and integral parts of the migratory process. Portuguese policymakers were promoting a male-dominated migration flow to the US, thus insuring the flow of remittances and relieving social and demographic pressure, without endangering their own labor supply.

Neoclassical advocates of the theoretical model of balanced growth perceive migration as a process that contributes to the optimal allocation of production factors for the benefit of all, in which the process of factor price equalization will lead to a drop in migration once wage levels are equal both in the country of origin and at the destination. Thus, in a strictly neoclassical world, the development role of migration is entirely realized through this process of factor price equalization.

## **Portuguese labor migration**

### *During the 19th Century*

The 19th century proved to be a time of political turmoil, and overall economic stagnation for Portugal. The repercussions were felt in Madeira, and in addition, more and more, poverty was becoming a harsh reality of life on the island (Noel Menezes 2000). Socio-economic factors, as well as overpopulation, had reduced the standard of living to the extent that migration became a matter of survival for many. Madeira experienced a series of social and economic crises because of the Portuguese civil war of 1828-34 and following the famine in 1846, known as the year of hunger, which affected Madeira and Porto Santo. This crisis was a result of a disease attacking potato crops, which at that time had become a staple. Later, the decline in the wine market during the 1840s, and the vine diseases in 1852 and 1870, resulted in widespread unemployment among agricultural

workers (Ferreira 2009). Emigration became a structural factor in Madeira in the second half of the 19th century (Vieira 2003:133) and considered as the only way out against hunger and servitude. It was due to the difficult conditions of life in particular the oppressive land tenure system with on the one hand the landlords who owned most of the land and on the other hand the *colonos* or tenants, the limited availability of arable land (27% of total) on the steep slopes, and the shift to other crops than vines. As a result of their geographical location and climate, the lower areas on the south coast offer conditions for the highly fruitful cultivation of tropical crops, such as sugar cane and bananas while the vine cultivation was reserved for the higher areas (Camara 2006:6).

Simultaneously, the pressure on agriculture intensified due to a large increase in population at a time when both possibilities for increasing the amount of land available and for alternative occupational activities outside of agriculture were non-existent.

Emigration was a solution for many poor families. Official efforts to promote colonization in the African territories failed to attract big numbers, and the Portuguese emigrants increasingly looked to North America and to Caribbean lands and islands due to higher prospects in these countries (Baganha 2003). The migration of poor peasants to the Caribbean started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the end of slavery in the British Empire in 1834 and the urgent need of the planter's class to find an alternative for slave labor. Meanwhile, in the British West Indies following the abolition of slavery, the import of migrants became a matter of economic survival for many plantation owners because of the impending labor problems. With the ending of the "old order" plantation system and labor regime, one of the experiments of the planters was to have European labor induced to migrate with government assistance. This experiment began in the mid 1830s but assumed larger proportions in the 1840s and some 40,000 Portuguese from Madeira, the Azores, the Cape Verdian Islands, and Brazil (*Stabroek News* 2003) came before 1882. Portuguese immigrants were welcomed wherever they went in the West Indies, mostly because they provided cheap labor and because their presence was supposed to act as a buffer between Africans and Europeans (Ferreira 2009:65). In 1835, just one year after the abolition of slavery, the Portuguese migration to Guyana, Trinidad, St. Vincent, Antigua and other destinations started (Ferreira 2009).

Religious oppression in Madeira of a Protestant minority was also a reason for a smaller group to migrate to Trinidad and other places. Prior to their arrival, small numbers of other Europeans, i.e., Irish, English, French, Germans, were tried but the Portuguese laborers resulted best. "The Portuguese however abandoned plantation labor as soon as possible and turned to small trading, often in competition and conflict with

local Afro-Caribbeans” (Hoerder 2002:395). The striking preference to emigrate to British territories can be explained by the very dominant position of British companies in Madeira. A large part of the export oriented production, in particular the wine trade, and also in sugar cane and the production of spirits, was in British<sup>1</sup> hands and their cultural and political influence was accordingly strong. It was therefore not surprisingly that between 1834-1871 of a total of 54,779 emigrants, 16,400 went to Demerara and 35,151 to other Caribbean islands (Vieira 1993).

### *In the 20th Century*

The migration of Portuguese continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with its ups and downs. Again political factors and economic recessions and setbacks were the main push factors for emigration. We observe a change at the “pull” side of the migration spectrum after World War I and in particular the restrictions imposed, e.g., in the USA and some other countries. The world economic crisis of 1929 resulted in more restrictions in traditional immigration countries and this motivated the new emigrants to look for fast upcoming industrialized spots in Latin America and elsewhere. It resulted also in a sharp decline of the emigration numbers.

During the corporatist regime (Baganha 2003) of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar as prime minister (1932-1968), Portugal was economically in a bad shape, lagging behind the other European countries. The economy was based primarily on agriculture, fishing and exploitation of the colonial resources. There was no urgent need to industrialize and the Portuguese government was not able to modernize its economy. In Madeira were very few opportunities outside agriculture. The two world wars and the big depression motivated again many Madeirenses to leave their homeland. Brazil reopened its door in 1939 and would become very popular as destination, while Curaçao took 5,911 during the period 1945-1966 (Cardose 1968) and before 1945 more than 4,000 (calculated by the author). The need for reliable workers, due to intensifying production of fuel, was so urgent that even in wartime (1944) Shell managed to bring in more than 1,200 men from Madeira. From this relatively big group who came to the island during the oil-period, most were reluctant to go back and many travelled after completing their term to Venezuela and some other countries. Venezuela became the most preferred destination during the 1950s with more than 30,000 Portuguese immigrants

In Madeira, as in other Portuguese territories, the economic development was taking place in some very specific places and in fact almost limited to Funchal with its industries and export facilities and with more opportunities for work and schooling. But, as was the case with the bigger cities on the mainland (Baganha 2003), this island capital did not have

the potential to absorb the economically marginal population of the deteriorating areas. It was particularly from those peripheral regions that most emigration was taking place.

According to the immigration statistics Curaçao became a very important destination during the 1930s until 1955, which is exactly the period of the so called *Portuguese oil worker* (Do Rego 2012) on the island. Besides this migration stream towards Curaçao was a much smaller contingent of Portuguese immigrants coming in for other employers than the oil refinery or for family reunion. From the 1950s onwards more and more Portuguese laborers would enter Curaçao but not at such a relatively high scale. The total numbers do not seem very impressive but one should bear in mind that the population of Curaçao in 1930 was only 50,165 persons, and in 1955 just 118,858 people (Verslagen Eilandgebied Curaçao, 1931 till 1955). Another aspect not to be ignored was that the Portuguese emigration to Curaçao made up a substantial part of the total legal emigration during the period of the 1930s and

**Table 2:** Portuguese Emigration 1930-1955.

Year	Total of legal emigrants	Portuguese Laborers at the oil refinery in Curaçao
1930	23,196	
1931	6,033	73
1933	8,905	31
1935	9,140	175
1937	14,667	1,029
1939	17,807	1,614
1941	6,260	374
1943	893	470
1945	5,938	3,002
1947	12,838	2,360
1949	17,296	2,022
1951	33,664	2,434
1953	39,686	2,376
1955	29,796	1,664

Source: Baganha 2003 (adapted). The figures in the last column are from CPIM (Curaçaosche Petroleum Industrie Maatschappij). The Portuguese population at the census of 1930 was 6,825,833, including Madeira and Azores.

1940s. There has been, however, very limited attention in the Portuguese emigration studies for statistics dealing with the emigration to Curaçao.

The number of emigrants remained relatively high but stable during the 1950s until 1964 from whereon emigration shows a substantial increase with its peak (129,732 emigrants) in 1973 (Baganha 2003). Remarkably was also the sharp rise of the illegal emigration from the 1960s onwards.

In the 1960s, Portugal became increasingly isolated in the international political arena, and the internal unrest also grew stronger. Internationalization of the armed conflicts in Africa and the policy to hold on to their colonies drove the Portuguese regime more and more into social, political, and even economic isolation. After the Carnation revolution in 1974 and the creation of a modern and more European centered republic we see a sharp decline in emigration numbers starting from the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

This diminishing immigration of Portuguese nationals has clearly been reflected in the immigration statistics of Curaçao. We also observe that the ratio between man and woman became more or less equal during the 1970s meaning that most laborers have been able to unite with their, Portuguese, wife in Curaçao. Another aspect was that not all Portuguese immigrants came from the Portuguese territories, but also from Venezuela, Brazil and other countries in particular from the 1950s onwards. In 1974, there were 2,501 Portuguese and their descendents in Curaçao, being the biggest group of non-Dutch citizens on the island. After this year Portuguese immigration became less and less important, even negligible.

The Portuguese immigrant was, until the 1960s, considered to be very poor and illiterate, but in general he could adapt fairly well to the conditions of his new environment. Opportunities were essentially a function of destination and we observe quite some differences due to the prevailing conditions in their receiving countries.

### **Looking for a new life in the Caribbean**

The Portuguese immigrants spread out all over the Caribbean islands and the Guyanas, but with a relatively stronger concentration in the Anglophone Caribbean. There are however no records of a systematic immigration of Portuguese to the Dutch Caribbean islands before the 1920s although some individuals have made their way to these islands according to several respondents.

My father, after serving his term in the army where he became a barber, came to Curaçao before 1929 to work at the oil refinery. He did not like the job and migrated to Panama but soon returned as he was attracted

by the economic boom on the island. He started a barbershop in a popular neighborhood.

This was probably due to the poor state of agriculture of the Dutch Leeward Islands as a result of the harsh conditions of a dry climate and a rocky soil, besides the fact that the Curaçao economy was considered 'extremely poor and needy' in those times (Paula 1973:11). The term "plantation" could hardly be used for the mixed farming on the estates, which were according to Renkema (1981) primarily used as securities and almost all under the burden of high mortgages.

With the industrialization of Curaçao in the 1920s, most poorly managed plantations (Renkema 1981:253-261) soon became obsolete but still a few landlords were encouraged to develop some agricultural and of extracting production because of the expanding local market. In addition, these estates looked for laborers who could fit their needs and these became the Portuguese. In the report for 1930 (Verslag Eilandgebied Curaçao, 1929-1930), based on the first census held in 1930, there were 57 Portuguese living in the countryside and most probably working in agriculture. However, no records of Portuguese men working on the plantations could be found in the National Archives. We can assume that before the start-up of the refinery in the early 1920s no Portuguese were contracted to work on the plantations. Not only were the plantations ill-managed except for a few, production processes were also still very conservative with traditional products, and with the use of cheap labor. This labor became less available also because of the attraction of agricultural laborers to the Cuban sugar fields between 1917 and 1930 (Paula 1973), and the reopening of the phosphate mine at Santa Barbara in 1913. From respondent's narratives it is known that a few individual laborers were tending gardens for the affluent families.

The vast majority of Portuguese immigrants in Curaçao are from Madeira, and remarkably, a considerable group came from the village of Ponta do Sol at the southwestern coast. Of the 37 respondents to this study, 12 (not including the fathers of those born in Curaçao) are from Ponta do Sol, which has only slightly more than 8,000 inhabitants in 2010 (the capital Funchal has 100,900 souls). In September 2010, there were 1009 first generation immigrants from Madeira, 43 from mainland Portugal, and only two from the Azores.<sup>3</sup> Of course, these figures are only for that date, but it reflects the proportions from every one of the entities.

A respondent revealed that

A change in the landlord-tenants relationship, involving land use and higher rents of land on the hills of Ponta do Sol, brought many families to a state of financial distress and poverty. That is why many emigrated during the 1930s and 1940s from that region.

The peasants of Madeira were used to working the fields on hilly lands and to constructing and maintaining irrigation systems. They were hardened by the work in their environment, and the warmer climate of Curaçao made the only significant difference. The landlord-tenant relationship was one of big owners from whom the small farmers had to rent a piece of land often on less favorable conditions. Where the land was owned by the family, it became more and more split up to allow all sons to have their part, making those plots too small to sustain the large Catholic families often seen in these environments, where birth control was only recently accepted.

Most peasants from the countryside received very limited formal education until the fifties. Most were illiterate and could hardly write their own names and often they just signed with an "X".

A respondent who immigrated in the 1950s revealed:

In our small and isolated village there was no school when I grew up and all the children had to help on the farm and in the household.

They spoke the dialect of Madeira and were in general sturdy types with almost no elaborate manners. The men from Funchal received better opportunities and were, in general, better educated, often with a completed primary education, and several with some years of secondary school. They were also better prepared to work in more technical and complicated environments but were often not able to do the backbreaking work of the peasant group.

For a better understanding of the push factors we should take the macro-economic and political aspects of different periods into account. As the migration towards Curaçao started at the end of the 1920s and developed in an accelerated pace until 1954, this period should be considered as the first immigration phase of Portuguese laborers. The next and last phase will be from 1950 until the end of the 1970s when immigration from Madeira to Curaçao came to a virtual standstill.

The first phase was characterized by the big world crisis (1929-1939) followed by the Second World War (1940-1945). This was thus a period of severe economic conditions and a rigid migratory policy. Until 1933 the liberal rights of freedom in Portugal were formally respected, after that date they became legally subject to the economic and imperial interests of the state (Baganha 2003). Article 31 of the 1933 Constitution stated: The state has the right and the obligation to coordinate and regulate the economic and social life of the Nation with the objective of populating the national territories, protecting the emigrants, and disciplining emigration (Baganha 1998). Those leaving for Curaçao during this period, until 1954, did this on a contractual basis with approval from the authorities. They were invited by the Royal Dutch Shell, using their British

connection<sup>4</sup> as middle person to make the necessary arrangements both with the local governments and with the laborers. Emigration was thus controlled and disciplined with among other regulations the obligation to send remittances to the family back home. Those remittances were part of the contracts with CPIM (the Curaçaosche Petroleum Industrie Maatschappij, a Shell subsidiary) and constituted a fairly high portion of the earnings during the 'oil period.'<sup>5</sup> The few who entered Curaçao before this period moved within a more liberal framework.

The next period, 1950-1980, reflected slow economic growth accompanied with political problems due to the critical stand towards the Portuguese colonial policy of western countries, the liberation struggles in Africa and a growing internal political opposition. A special government agency was created to regulate and supervise emigration and it was aimed to implement a quota system that defined the maximum number of departures by region and occupation. This policy was linked to the new economic model of development endorsed by the Estado Novo during the 1960s (Baganha 1998:4). During the decade of the 1950s the overseas flow was dominant (93%) but thereafter until the end of the 1970s lost its relevance. Portuguese emigration then was primarily from the mainland and directed towards the European countries, like France and Germany. Madeira's flow dropped markedly after the 1950s, when Brazil ceased to be a major destination, and has remained at a relatively low level since. Curaçao became an alternative for those men who could manage to get a contract with a local firm or agricultural enterprise. They had the aspiration to look for a better life in a distant country and to take this step on their own without the infrastructure of a big international company. With the help from family members they were able to collect sufficient funds for travel expenses and to make the necessary arrangements in the new land.

I had no job other than helping on the family farm and thus no money. My father who was in Curaçao for some time paid for my travel expenses. I paid him everything back and saved almost every penny.

They all, however, had a labor contract with a small firm or individual entrepreneur (Carling 2009). The scale was however limited to only a few thousands, although it was this second wave which succeeded in building up an influential position in the grocery sector. As revealed by respondents, remittances were no longer playing an important role in the emigration process and limited in amount and on a strict individual basis.

An important element for adaptation was the functioning of the migrant network, which varied from place to place (Baganha 1998). In Curaçao the network of family, friends and neighbors was already in place because of the oil workers who were, by then, already established



with the necessary contacts and adapted to the local environment according several respondents.

### **Push factors at the individual level**

From the respondents, most gave as primary reason for leaving their homeland the situation of poverty, in particular those from the rural country side. Because almost all were from the farming communities, there was generally speaking no shortage of basic food staples but not abundant and with little variations. Their diet was simple and consisted of what the family could produce and barter with others. A respondent:

We were very poor and could not afford anything that was not considered as strict necessary: only on Sundays we ate sometimes chicken. When one of the neighbors slaughtered a pig, the meat would be distributed and we were expected to do the same with them. Almost every part of the pig was used and we made the famous chorizo (sausages) for later use.

In times of crop failure the farming families had to endure severe hardships and were forced into debt. Money to buy other necessities was always very scarce. Both husband and wife worked the land, tended the animals and took all opportunities to earn some money. The wife and her daughters performed some kind of cottage industry such as embroidery. According to respondents men used to swarm away looking for a job and children were sometimes sent to help in the households of the wealthy as live-in servants. The poor families were always busy working or looking for work to make both ends meet.

However, more than being poor, was the fact that there was almost no perspective in the homeland. In the country side, such as in the area of Ponta do Sol from where a considerable part of the emigrants to Curaçao originated, there was only limited availability of formal education. There was only primary education available with four grades for the whole neighborhood and even so not all children attended school on a regular basis before the 1950s. Due to the rugged and mountainous structure of Madeira, people lived on small stretches of less hilly land near the coast, at small bays and in valleys. Travel between these spots was difficult and an arduous endeavor. The farmers had to carry their produce on their backs and shoulders or with a sledge. To attend school in another region or in town was difficult if not almost impossible, and that was not only because of lack of money. From the government came little or no incentives and support to develop the countryside. Besides these constraints, almost all farmers and farmhands had basically the same type of experience and knowledge, so it was difficult to make a difference at home.

Some respondents had experienced a more or less negative family history in the sense that their family lost land, a farm or a mill due to bad management, family troubles or inheritance problems.

My family owned a mill and belonged to the more affluent. But bad investments and giving too many credits, and a worsening economic situation brought us to bankruptcy. My father took the opportunity to go to Curaçao in 1946. The children from these families, who used to own land and or a business, got better education and had a more middle class attitude towards life, family and entrepreneurship.

People from the island capital in general had a better education, even some years of secondary school and sometimes a vocational training. They were able to read and write and were better informed about what to expect in their new environment. They were also more inclined to go for a change.

In interviews some male respondents gave as a personal push factor their disgust towards the fascist regime of Salazar in the 1930s.

Salazar was a dictator. He was convinced that he knew everything best and accepted no critics or opposition. We had nothing but we had to show respect and adoration for him.

For those immigrants from the 1950s onwards several respondents also gave as a motive for leaving the fear to be enlisted in the Army and to be sent to the African colonies to fight the liberation movements. The wars in Angola, Guinea and Mozambique became more and more unpopular as a respondent recalls:

My mother begged me to send money for my younger brother to come to Curaçao before reaching the age to be enlisted for the army.

On the other hand some respondents got some vocational training in the army, for instance as mechanics, drivers and cooks.

The immigration from Venezuela at the end of the 1950s and thereafter was the result of a deteriorating political climate during the transition from dictatorship to a democratic government.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, a decisive factor was the fact that CPIM (a Shell subsidiary in Curaçao) was looking for workers outside Curaçao and after a try out in 1929 decided to contract Portuguese laborers in particular from Madeira. It was not surprising that a British firm, Hinton & Sons, acted as intermediary and contracted some thousand laborers from the 1930s until the 1950s. As noted before, British firms occupied a very strong position in the economy of Madeira and were dominant in the sugar, wine and derived industries. Hinton & Sons were one of these firms in particular in the sugar industry (Vieira 2004) that later also entered into other sectors of the economy. The Shell Company on the other hand was a combined British (Shell) and Dutch (de Koninklijke or Royal

Dutch) enterprise and they made use of their British connection. The government only allowed these men to go with a contract wherein some strict regulations about remittances were incorporated. These contracts provided first of all the so needed travel expenses. Thus this emigration fitted in the policy regulations and the legal framework of the State. Those who migrated without a contract with CPIM were almost always family members of the contract laborers in the oil industry or contracted by other local firms or plantation owners and who were already in Curaçao. This was a clear case of bridging. These immigrants came to Curaçao in particular in the 1950s and later. It seems that the Portuguese were quite able to construct and further elaborate the so necessary networks in the new society. As non-nationals in a country with an unfamiliar administrative and legal (Dutch) system, they needed these contacts to obtain the necessary papers, permits, and capital.

The men from Madeira were used to the system of the "*contrato de colonia*" (Camara 2006) which gave them as tenants the right of owning farm constructions as walls, barns and the like. This system was applied in Curaçao where they offered local farmers money for the wells, cisterns, barns, dams and a shack to get an, often neglected, farm to start an agricultural business. These immigrants got in a relatively short time a firm foothold, and the process of chain-migration could develop as a bridge has been formed.

### Changing demography

In the official statistics for 1929/1931 (Koloniale Verslagen) the number of Portuguese totaled 167 persons, of which only one was a woman. During the oil-period most Portuguese were males and the first four women came just before the outbreak of the Second World War, but their presence grew substantially after 1945 when Shell relaxed its attitude regarding immigrant families. Families were reunited, new ones formed and a community of Portuguese evolved with a vivid and full scale social and cultural life in the residential compounds of the refinery. In the course of the 1950s Shell not only gradually stopped hiring more laborers from the Portuguese territories, but also started to lay off all immigrant laborers not strictly needed anymore. Gradually the group of Portuguese oil workers faded away but a new group of more permanent Portuguese migrants replaced the oil worker. The gender composition changed from an almost entirely male domination to a more balanced distribution. The total population of Curaçao grew from 1930 (first population census) to the census of 1960 with 150%, in numbers respectively from 50,165 to 125,181 inhabitants with the fastest growth during the period 1945-1950. Among the Portuguese, 75% was in the active age groups of 15-59 (for

Curaçao this was 51.8 %) while the category of 45-49 years had the highest representation and a very low percentage of children (0-14 years) indicating still a predominantly male population in 1960.

**Table 3:** Immigrant Groups according to nationality and gender, 1960

Nationality	Men	Women	Total	
			Absolute	Percentage of Population
British or French Caribbean	2,281	2,914	5,195	4.1
Portuguese	1,560	645	2,205	1.8
US and Canadian	112	71	183	0.1
Venezuelan	600	666	1,266	1.0
Dominicans	201	227	428	0.3
Chinese	311	81	392	0.2
Others				0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,659</b>	<b>5,070</b>	<b>10,729</b>	<b>8.6</b>

Source: Census 1961

In the census of 1971 no differentiation was made between Portuguese and others any more, indicating the diminishing importance in numbers of this ethnic group. From figures of the Civil Registry in 1974 there were however 2,501 Portuguese, including their descendants born in Curaçao and they were still the biggest group of non-Dutch citizens. Their sex ratio resulted much more balanced: 1,414 male against 1,087 females, indicating that it had evolved into a family based group. In the census of 1981 the Portuguese consisted of more or less 10% of the total foreign born population. A breakdown of statistical records of the Civil Registry for July 2011 gives a total of 2,350 persons of Portuguese descent, with only 1,038 born in respectively Madeira (993), mainland Portugal (43) and Azores (2). Those born in Curaçao accounted for 1,225 and 60 from Venezuela. The average age is 55 years while the sex ratio in 2011 was 525 females against 513 males.

For a short period after the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974 the immigration to Curaçao was still ongoing due to the uncertain future and the economic crisis which was still dominating Madeira and other Portuguese territories. In the 1980s, with a better economy at home, however this emigration diminished rapidly and almost no new

immigrants entered Curaçao from Madeira. Only a few specialized groups from mainland Portugal came on a contract for the local ship repair company whereas others came in from Venezuela .

Remarkably, several respondents mentioned the return migration in their families.

Quite some elderly family members have re-migrated at retirement age. They found a new Madeira as a prosperous, modernized and receiving country with high wages, but complained about the high costs of living.

According to the *Censos 2011 de Madeira*, 18.2% of the Portuguese residents in Madeira have lived abroad for a period of at least 1 year. The return migration rate from 1971 to 2000 was between 17% and almost 30% (for the most recent period).

## Conclusion

Labor migration became an important factor in the movement of people between sending and receiving countries on a global scale and many researchers have analyzed this phenomenon in depth. This has also been done with Portuguese labor migration that started from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the establishment of an oil refinery, belonging to the influential Anglo-Dutch Shell Company, in Curaçao a rising demand for low skilled, low wage laborers developed. This demand could be satisfied by the import of labor and Shell made use of its international relations to acquire these men. This is when the Portuguese, in particular from Madeira, came into the picture. Until recently the role of those Portuguese laborers migrating to Curaçao was not a subject of systematic study.

The most important push factors are to be found in the structure of the small farming communities where land was vital but also a scarce commodity and subject to the inequalities of landownership. There was almost no employment in other sectors outside agriculture and social mobility was very restricted. Madeira was caught in a spiral of low income, unemployment, limited investments in economic development and education. It became overpopulated and people were looking for alternatives abroad.

The emigrants embarking for Curaçao, in particular between 1933 until the 1950s, had to fit within the corporatist government policy which controlled almost every aspect of migration. Even the compulsory remittances became an integral part of the individual contracts. What makes this outward flow typical was the invitation to come and work for the oil industry in Curaçao. The call for labors from the oil refinery was the most essential and determining aspect of this migration flow; it was therefore

essentially a labor migration.

Once the first contingents had established themselves and were participating in the local economy and social life, the bridging effect for others to come began to develop rapidly. In the period when Portuguese laborers were attracted as oil workers the alternatives for emigration to other destinies were limited because of the restrictions in the USA, Brazil and other receiving countries. Curaçao became a reliable destination and many on the small Portuguese island accepted the challenge. The immigration of Portuguese laborers after the so called 'oil period' (1920s-1954) was also based on contractual invitations by the government or a local employer such as plantation owners and ice cream factories on the island. They provided papers, employment and some elementary dwellings, the immigrant himself had to provide for travel expenses in the post-oil phase. This was a prolonged labor migration, but under different conditions and with a stronger local migrant network in place making it essentially a network migration (de Haas 2003:32).

Respondent:

My elder brother has worked at the oil company for 8 years. He got afterwards a job as an ice-cream vendor and was able to get me a contract at the same ice-cream factory. The factory owner sent me a contract and with this letter I could get my legal documents. All arrangements for travel were made on my own account. As soon as I have put some money aside I changed work. During the first years I lived together with some other fellow workers.

From reports, archives, literature and migrant narratives we know that the push factors in the Portuguese society were the determinants for the sending-out of so many laborers from the 19th century onwards. We can also conclude that the pull factors has played a determining role in the direction of this flow of labor. Narratives from immigrants tell us the story at the individual and family level and explain the development of a migration network.

The study of immigration of one specific ethnic minority will provide us a better understanding of the combined and complicated migration processes in the receiving society and the changes in that particular social environment.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Hinton & Sons.

<sup>2</sup> In 1974 the number will drop to 80,859 and in 1981 it was just 26,607 (Baganha 2003).

- <sup>3</sup> Civil Registry in Curaçao (BSB & V), Sept 2010. The immigration from Azores was also a result of the 'oil period'.
- <sup>4</sup> Hinton and Sons in Madeira.
- <sup>5</sup> In 1948 the share of remittances was 42% of the loan of a low skilled Portuguese laborer (See also van Soest 1976).
- <sup>6</sup> End of the regime of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1958 and the new government of Rómulo Betancourt in 1959).

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### **Archival records**

National Archief (Nationaal Archief Curacao (NAC)

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Direção Regional de Estatística, Portugal