"LEARNING TO BE A MAN": AFRO-CARIBBEAN SEAMEN AND MARITIME WORKERS FROM CURAÇAO IN THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.[1]

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Abstract

In studying the history of seafaring in Curaçao much attention has tended to be placed on macroeconomic maritime and military aspects. In the past, when nearly all trade in food and other commodities occurred by ship, the Caribbean Sea played a pivotal role in the social life of many Curaçaoans, both the elite and the working class. Work at sea was an important basis for the livelihood and social mobility of especially the black working class. In this article I discuss the role and experiences of Afro-Curaçaoan seamen who sailed the seas between Curaçao and other places. This study argues for incorporating the perspectives of in particular lower-class experiences into the maritime historiography of Curaçao. The article focuses on but is not limited to New York (USA) as one of the destinations of Afro-Curaçaoan seafarers. It draws on a database of arrivals at Ellis Island in New York harbor, archival documents, as well as oral history data through which the voices of these men are heard. The study presents some findings and thoughts regarding seafaring in the Dutch Caribbean and raises questions for further research. In this way it hopes to contribute to filling the gap of information regarding this part of the Afro/Dutch/Caribbean world.

Keywords: Curaçao, maritime industry, social history, black popular class, livelihood, social mobility, ideas

Resumen

Al estudiar la historia de la navegación en Curazao se ha prestado mucha atención a los aspectos macroeconómicos y militares. En el pasado, cuando casi todo el comercio de alimentos y otras mercancías se transportaban por vía marítima, el Mar Caribe desempeñó un papel fundamental en la vida social de muchos curazoleños, tanto la elite como la clase obrera. El trabajo en el mar fue una base importante para la subsistencia y la movilidad de la clase obrera negra. En este artículo se discute el papel y las experiencias de los marineros afro-curazoleños que surcaban los mares entre Curazao y otros lugares. El artículo se centra en, pero no se limita a Nueva York (EE.UU.) como uno de los

destinos de los afro-curazoleños. Se fundamenta en una base de datos de las llegadas a Ellis Island en la bahía de Nueva York, documentos de archivo, así como los datos de historia oral a través de los cuales las voces de estos hombres son escuchadas. El estudio presenta algunas conclusiones y reflexiones con respecto a la navegación en el Caribe holandés y plantea preguntas para futuras investigaciones. De esta manera se espera contribuir a llenar el vacío de información sobre esta parte del mundo afro/holandés/caribeño.

Palabras clave: Curazao, industria marítima, historia social, clase obrera negra, medios de vida, movilidad social

RÉSUMÉ

L'histoire de la navigation de Curaçao accorde une attention particulière aux questions macroéconomiques et militaires. Jadis, quand presque tous les échanges de denrées alimentaires et d'autres articles se faisaient par voie maritime, la mer des Caraïbes a joué un rôle central dans la vie sociale de la population de Curaçao, y compris l'élite et la classe ouvrière. Le travail en mer constituait une base importante particulièrement pour la subsistance et la mobilité sociale de la classe ouvrière noire. Cet article discute le rôle et l'expérience des marins noirs de Curaçao qui ont navigué les mers entre Curaçao et autres points géographiques. L'article n'est pas limité à New York (USA) comme l'une des destinations des noirs de Curaçao. Il s'appuie sur une base de données relatives aux personnes débarquant dans le port Ellis Island de New York, des documents d'archives, ainsi que l'histoire orale permettant d'écouter la voix de ces hommes. L'étude présente des conclusions ainsi que des réflexions concernant l'histoire maritime des Antilles néerlandaises tandis qu'elle soulève des questions d'importance en vue de futures recherches. De cette manière, elle espère contribuer à combler un vide créé par le manque d'information concernant cette partie du monde afro-néerlandais-caribéen.

Mots-clés: Curaçao, industrie maritime, histoire sociale, classe ouvrière noire, subsistance, mobilité sociale

The Caribbean Sea has always been an important link in the sea routes between different continents. The island of Curaçao has played a very important role in this regard through sea commerce and travel. In the past, when nearly all trade in food and other commodities occurred by ship, there was much trafficking via the port of Willemstad, Curaçao.

The local white elite and in particular the black working class were directly and indirectly involved in the activities of the harbor. The sea was an important basis for the livelihood and social mobility of the latter

group. However, little study has been done regarding the role of lower-class Afro-Curaçaoans in the maritime sector; in the historiography of seafaring in relation to Curaçao most attention has been placed on macroeconomic and military aspects (Muskus 1940, Menkman 1930, Bakker 1962, Van Soest 1977).

Exceptions are studies about the enslaved people who were used for labor at sea. Both nationally and internationally the interest for this topic has been growing. These studies broaden the knowledge and insight into the different kinds of work performed by the enslaved. They show that enslaved worked not only in agriculture but did other types of work as well. The seminal book by W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (1997), is an example of this new trend. Bolster—himself a former sailor and now a Professor of History at the University of New Hampshire—describes the maritime experiences of African enslaved on ships and also looks at the symbolic meaning that seafaring had for this particular group. According to him their situation on the ships was far from ideal as they were ill-treated on board; still, many chose labor at sea as an alternative to heavy farm work with little personal freedom (Bolster 1997:11). For Curaçao, Wim Klooster (1999) and Linda Rupert (1999) have examined the role that enslaved persons played in this island's maritime history. The historian Emy Maduro (1986) has also written about Curaçaoan sailors, including enslaved ones, in a section of the book that she wrote together with Gert Oostindie: *In het land van de overheerser II: Antillianen en Surinamers in Nederland, 1634/1667-1954*. Her publication deals with the migration of the Curaçaoan popular class to the Netherlands, including black seamen who also sailed to the European continent.

The social situation of black Curaçaoan seafarers after Emancipation (1 July 1863) needs more scholarly attention, as seafaring and other maritime activities were important sources of income for many members of this group. In most cases, this was because of the poor opportunities in local agriculture due to drought and the structure of landownership. While part of the (male) labor force was absent from the island because of labor migration to other places in the Caribbean region, another part was frequently absent because of seafaring.

In this article I discuss the role and experiences of Afro-Curaçaoan sailors who sailed the seas between Curaçao and other places in the beginning of the twentieth century. In and after the 1920s the economy of the island came to depend heavily on the newly established Shell oil refinery, and the seafaring business was transformed in its nature; this development is beyond the scope of the present paper.

The article focuses on but is not limited to New York (USA) as one of their destinations.[2] I have used the database of arrivals at Ellis

Island, the harbor of New York. This database is available on the website <www.ellisisland.org>.[3] This database was constructed from the so-called ship manifests drawn from the detailed lists of all passengers and crew of the shipping companies that visited Ellis Island between 1892 and 1924. The data covers the name, race, gender, age, position on the ship, height, weight, eye color and even physical defects. It also includes: length of time that people worked on the ship, when and where they were engaged or shipped, whether they were (to be) paid off and discharged in the port of arrival and the date of arrival. It also mentions whether they could read and write. A second source for my study consists of official documents stored at the national archives in Curaçao as well as in the Netherlands. For this study I consulted newspapers and especially the published Colonial Reports *(Koloniale Verslagen)* from 1900 till 1924: annual reports of the Dutch colonial government that provide an overview of the matters that evolved in the colonies. Finally, I have also drawn from my own oral history research on migration performed since the 1980s, which includes information about seafaring.

Shipping and Trade in Curaçao

Seafaring was a logical extension of the important position that Curaçao held as a regional port for embarkation and transportation of goods and passengers.

As of 1675, Curaçao was declared a free port by the Dutch West Indian Company (WIC) and Willemstad was opened to all vessels of all nationalities. It reserved this right for a period of 100 years, making the island a center for the flourishing Dutch trade to and from the Americas (Rupert 2006:14).

Sea trade was an important source of income for the island. The descriptions of nineteenth-century Curaçao by travelers and temporary residents such as Van Paddenburg (1819), Bosch (1829), Teenstra (1836), S. Van Dissel (1857) and J. Van Dissel (1868), Simons (1868), and Brussels (1969) illustrate how trade and shipping determined the economy of the island. For example, the Dutch teacher Gijsbert Gerrit Van Paddenburg wrote in 1819 that there were many respectable houses and shops, as well as undocked ships ready to be loaded and unloaded at the wharf called 'Waterkant' [Waterfront]. The historian Van Soest states that trade in Curaçao was mostly international and very little local. A local company could be a wholesaler, importer, exporter and retailer at the same time. Sometimes they also had an agency for a shipping line (1977:37). Shipping declined in the first quarter of the 19th century. After 1850, when the economy stabilized and improved slightly after a period of decline, trade increased as ships called again at Caribbean and South and

North American ports (Rupert 1999:70-71). The number of incoming sailing ships rose from 458 in 1825 to 605 in 1850 and to 1,174 in 1870. Different types of ships brought food and furniture to the island. After 1870 there was again an increase in the number of ships that arrived in Curaçao. The well-known 'Koninklijke West-Indische Maildienst' [Royal West Indian Mail Service] or 'KWIM', established in 1882, maintained a passenger and freight service at Paramaribo (Surinam), Willemstad, and a few other Caribbean ports. This company was incorporated in 1912 by the 'KNSM' (Royal Dutch Steamship Company), founded in 1856. The 'KWIM' became financially disrupted due to the failure of banana cultivation in Surinam (Knapp 1956:122-124).

At the end of the nineteenth century, sailing ships were replaced by steamships, which further improved the communication and trade between Europe and the USA. In 1884, coal was introduced for the first time in Curacao and an attempt was made to transform the port of Curaçao into a bunker for steamships. In the early twentieth century there was a slight increase in coal imports. This helped to balance the economy, especially in those periods when trading with Venezuela was in problematic (KV 1902-1906). Because of the low port costs, cheap labor and speed of loading coal, the island was able to occupy an important position in the bunkering of coal in the Caribbean (Bakker 1962:27).

The economy of the island benefited from the fact that there was no direct link between Europe, New York, and the coastal regions of South America. Thus, staple products from Venezuela were transported via Curaçao to the USA and Europe; conversely products from those countries were also transported via Curaçao to, e.g., Venezuela and Colombia. Imported products from the USA and Europe also met local consumption needs. These goods were also sold locally to visiting merchants from Venezuela, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti (Rupert 1999:70).[4] Venezuela at that time had poor connections with her interior and even in the twentieth century this country depended on Curaçaoan schooners to transport passengers and cargo to its various ports in a quick, cheap and reliable way. Some Curaçaons were captains on the many small boats that navigated the Caribbean Sea (Rupert 1999). Curaçao also had a few shipyards where schooners were built. The better the economy fared, the larger were the number of schooners built and the work opportunities for ship carpenters.

The connections of the island with the outside world were maintained by various shipping lines. In 1906 these were the above-mentioned Dutch KWIM, the German Hamburg-Amerika Line, the Italian 'La Veloce', the Leyland Line and Harrison-line, the 'Compania Transatlantica de Barcelona', the American Red D Line, and the French 'Compagnie Generale Transatlantique' (Baker 1962:29). These steamship

companies were represented by local Curaçaoan firms (Van Soest 1977).

The opening of the Panama Canal posed a new challenge for the maritime sector of Curaçao. During the First World War (1914-1918) there was a decline in trade as the transatlantic shipping routes were at risk. However, the decline in trade between Curaçao and the Netherlands stimulated trade between Curaçao and the USA (Rupert 1999:70-71).

Beside products, people were also transported and passenger traffic increased more and more. Many passengers would arrive on the island in transit to Venezuela (Bakker 1962:27). Among the travelers were also merchants from Venezuela, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti who came to buy products on the island (Rupert 1999:70).

The activities in shipping and trade were accompanied by work on board of ships, but many people also earned their living by loading and unloading ships that were moored. Others worked as 'coastal sailors' as they were called. These were workers employed by the ships of the Red D Line and the KWIM to load and unload cargo in intermediate coastal areas in the region. These coastal sailors were dropped off in Curaçao when their ship returned (Van Soest 1977:45). The Colonial Report of 1908 relates, e.g., that the sailing traffic between Curaçao and Venezuelan and Colombian ports was tended by 44 schooners: twenty-eight Dutch, eight Venezuelan, and eight Colombian schooners (KV 1908). Each of these schooners made an average of 12 trips per year. The entire crew of 440 men was comprised of Curaçaoans.

Trade and shipping were sometimes affected by other developments in nearby countries. Countries in Latin America had to deal with many disturbances and revolutions at that time, which also had an impact on the economy of Curaçao. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century trade with Venezuela was cut briefly when German, British, and Italian warships blockaded the Venezuelan coast because of a debt disagreement (Rupert 1996). A ban by the Venezuelan government on the movement of small sailing ships, the appointment of Puerto Cabello as the transshipment port for all goods shipped to the western part of the country, and a 30% surcharge on all merchandise from Curaçao also caused a downturn in the economy of Curaçao (KV 1902-1908). Due to this banning of schooners, many coastal workers lost their work, as the ships no longer need workers to assist in the handling of cargo (KV 1909). When the ban was lifted, Curaçao recovered as an important seaport (KV 1910), which also triggered side-effects in the economy, such as the building of schooners, which gave work to carpenters. In the early twentieth century, when the USA became a major industrial power, this country delivered about half of Curaçao's imports, while the Netherlands accounted for only one-fifth.[5]

In the twenties of the twentieth century the economy of the island

came to depend on the new oil refinery. Employment rose quickly, which benefited incomes and the purchasing power on the island. All sectors of the economy were linked to the oil industry (Rupert 1999).

Afro-Curaçaoan Seafarers

As mentioned, during the period of slavery, enslaved men exercised the profession of seafarer. In times of economic downturn in Curaçao, local slave-owners would rent out their male slaves to work as sailors in order to still acquire some revenue through them. In the 18th century there were several rules and regulations published by those in power to regulate the form in which boatmen and ship-owners should place enslaved men as sailors on the muster roll (Maduro 1986:146). Enslaved were granted a pro forma freedom letter in order to sign themselves on a ship. Together with this letter, a passport was also required (Maduro 1986:146). Between 1741 and 1771, 154 enslaved received their 'freedom' in this way so that they could go out on a sailing ship. After returning from a trip they were enslaved again on land (Rupert 2006:130). This practice also existed in the rest of the Caribbean (Hall 1985; Jarvis 2002). Michael Jarvis (2002) states that the enslaved on the island of Bermuda were well aware of the fact that their owners depended on them and they were able to negotiate and obtain various social and economic benefits. For example, they received from their owners a portion of their wages earned at sea to buy clothes. This income gave them a certain sense of freedom and independence, and some of them even bought their freedom with it.

Some Curaçaoan sailors would flee during a trip abroad and never returned to the island. A list of runaway enslaved in 1775 shows that 16.6 percent of runaway enslaved were sailors (Klooster 1999:506) Among them were also enslaved who had fled the island by mustering themselves as sailors on ships without the required permission (Maduro 1986:146). Neville Hall (1985) studied this phenomenon for the rest of the Caribbean and called it 'maritime marronage.' In the case of Curaçao, the enslaved fled when they arrived in a foreign port.[6] Those without the required permission usually fled to Venezuela, where they would not be returned by the Spanish government. Those who did not flee but came back probably did so because of family ties, as was the case elsewhere in the region (Price 1966:1371).

Before Emancipation, the group of freed people of color in Curaçao was already quite large and they too would seek work on ships. However, these free black sailors were at risk as they could sometimes be sold back into slavery by unscrupulous ship captains who received money for this action.

In this study I am particularly interested in seafaring after the abolition of slavery. Both those who became free on Emancipation Day and those who had been freed beforehand remained marginalized in the Curaçaoan society. Basically, they had insufficient access to resources and employment opportunities. After Emancipation, sailing remained an important alternative to living and working on the plantations in the so-called *paga tera* system. This system—literally: paying for land—meant that the former enslaved were obligated to work for a number of days per year for free for the plantation-owner in return for a piece of land for agriculture and dwelling. Indirectly, the system enabled the plantation-owners to maintain control over the economic and social lives of former enslaved (Allen 2007).

An informant of mine, Carlos Koeiman, describes how his father was punished when he did not present himself to perform work for the landowner. He and his family were given *ora di porta* as this was called: they were chased off their plot within 24 hours, had to leave everything on it behind, and had to look urgently for a new place to live.

> Mi tata tabata biaha bordo di 'Flambechi', bordo di 'Zulia', 'Caracas', 'Maracaibo'. E ta hasi biaha pa Maracaibo, pa Caracas, pa Merka. E ta haña un ria pa ora. P'e tempu ei ta hopi. Anto ku yega tempu di aña, e shon ta bisa mi: "Bo tata, e n' t'aki." Mi tin ocho aña (a nase na 1898). Mi ta bai skol. Mi mama ta bisa: "Mi yu, bo mester bai Punda, bai mira ku bo ta haña Pachi." Mi ta sali, mi ta bai, mi n' por bai skol. Mi tabata bai Punda. M'a yega, nan ta bisami: "Bo tata a sali basta ora kaba, el a laga kos na Chinè den hanchi di Punda ei." Chinè ta bende kos ei. Mi ta bai serka Chinè i e ta bisa: "Bo tata a laga e bònder akí pa bo." El a laga tres plaka pa mi. Mi ta yega kas. Su manisé mi ta bai. Shon ta bisa: "O, Adòl n' bin?" "Nò, el a bai laman." Tur aña e (mi tata) tin ku tei, no. Tur aña e t'ei traha. Dia k'e shon ei ke, e dia ei, e tin ku keda sin bai Punda p'e keda. E ku mi wela ta traha huntu. Mi wela ta pega kandela, traha kòfi, pa kada hende trahadó ku bini. Riba e dia ei hopi hende ta traha pa shon. Dia di koba, di planta, bo ta haña hendenan ta koba, planta.[7]

> My father used to travel on board the 'Flambechi,' the 'Zulia,' the 'Caracas' and the 'Maracaibo.' He would travel to Maracaibo, Caracas, and the USA. He earned fifteen cents per hour. In those days it was a lot. When the time of year arrived, the plantation-owner would say to me: "Your father isn't here." I was eight years old then (I was born in 1898) and was going to school. My mother would tell me, "Son, you must go to town, and see if you find Daddy." I would go and I could not go to school. I went to Punda. When I got there, people told me: "Your father left hours ago, he left something for you at Chinè in the alley." Chinè was a vendor in town. I went to Chinè who told me: "Your father has left this bag for you." He left 7½ cents for me. I went home. The next

> day, I went to the plantation-owner who said: "Oh, Adòl is not coming, is he?" "No, he went out to sea." Every year he (my father) had to be ready. Every year he had to work for the owner. Whenever the owner wanted him to be there, he could not go to town but had to stay. He and my grandmother would work together. My grandmother would light the fire and make coffee for all the workers who came. On that day, many people worked for the owner. When it was time to dig holes and plant, you would find people digging and planting.

Many Afro-Curaçaoans developed a preference for overcoming dependence and insecurity by looking for work outside the plantations, either as urban workers or as independent peasants in the countryside. Some freemen left the island, emigrating to places such as Venezuela, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama and the Dominican Republic (Allen 2007). And seafaring too was an important source of livelihood for the freed black population. Living in or near the city gave one an opportunity to muster easily on a ship. Data from the Colonial Reports reveals that many who worked as sailors came from the town district and from areas near town such as Banda Riba (the eastern part of the island). Very few seafarers came from the western part of the island (Banda Bou). However, men from Banda Bou could also reside temporarily in town in search of work and would be included in the numbers.

Table 1 shows the participation of Curaçaoans in seafaring between 1905 an 1928. Seafaring offered people a certain degree of occupational stability and a fixed income (KV 1914). Some were able to save some money and to buy a piece of land afterwards.

Table 1: Number of Curaçaoan seafarers, 1905-1928

Year	Number	Year	Number
1905	1,455	1917	1,085
1906	777	1918	1,069
1907	802	1919	1,052
1908	804	1920	1,050
1909	804	1921	1,088
1910	805	1922	1,095
1911	813	1923	1,098
1912	801	1924	1,235
1913	948	1925	1,169
1914	941	1926	1,200
1915	952	1927	1,401
1916	938	1928	1,522

Source: Jeroen Dekker, *Curaçao zonder en met Shell,* 1982:152

The decrease in the number of seafarers in 1906 can be explained

as the consequence of the earlier-mentioned ban on traffic with small vessels issued by the Venezuelan government and the assignment of Puerto Cabello as the port of transit. As a result of these measures, the boats of the American Red D Line did not call on Curaçao any longer (KV 1907:25).[8] The growing numbers of men employed in seafaring after 1906 followed the shift in seafaring modes.

Black seafarers on sailing ships were mostly employed as cabin boys, servants, steward, and cooks (Cobley 2007:59). With the introduction of steam-shipping in the 1840s, new skills were required and Afro-Curaçaoans became employed as firemen and stokers to feed the furnaces, trimmers to bring coal from the bunkers, but also cooks and stewards to serve both passengers and crew (Talbott 2003:5).

Sailing via Curaçao to New York: A Case Study

In order to draw a picture of what life at sea may have been like for those travelling to New York, I examine an arbitrary instance of the arrival of a Dutch ship, the 'Prins der Nederlanden', in New York as this was registered in the Ellis Island database. At least two Amsterdam shipping companies sailed between Curacao and New York. These were the previously mentioned KNSM and KNIM. The KNSM sailed the route Amsterdam - Surinam - Demarara (British Guyana) - Trinidad - Curaçao - Port au Prince (Haiti) - New York and vice versa since 1888. Ships of both companies transported freight and passengers between New York and the Caribbean. These included the 'Prins der Nederlanden' between 1907-1924 with 42 passenger seats, the 'Nickerie' (KNIM) between 1913-1922 with 24 passenger seats, the 'Amazon' (KNSM) between 1922-1942 and the 'Astrea' (KNIM) between 1921-1924.

For a better picture of a journey I will describe a random arrival of the 'Prins der Nederlanden' in New York, namely on October 22, 1919. The manifest shows that the captain and his officers had gone on board in New York on June 16, 1919. After some wandering, the ship arrived back in New York on September 5. On October 2 the ship is in the harbor of Paramaribo (Surinam). On October 7 the ship left Curaçao for New York via Haiti. In New York, the crew was dismissed (it is not clear why) and after one month, on November 17, the ship sailed out back to Port au Prince.

With 42 passengers, all the passenger seats on the 'Prins der Nederlanden' were occupied. Among the passengers there was an American family, a few Britains and people from St. Maarten. Upon arrival in New York, the ship had 52 crew members. Using the manifest, the size of the crew can be monitored via a simple calculation:

Upon arrival, the number of crew:	52
Deserted:	- 3
Deceased or to the hospital:	0
Left the ship in New York:	-10
Registered in New York:	4
The ship continued with a crew of:	43

It appears that 3 men deserted upon arrival in New York. In such cases, their names would be crossed out in the manifest and "deserted" would be written over their names. According to oral history sources, those deserted would be met in New York by men who resided there. Some of them settled in the USA.

In the above-mentioned case, of the 52 crewmembers, 26 were from the Dutch West Indies, labeled as "African blacks" in the manifest. All 26 had gone aboard in Curaçao on October 7. Six of them worked in the kitchen as pantryman or messman, five were firemen, and six were coalpassers. There was also a ship carpenter—a middle position that was well paid according to one informant of mine who had held this function. The remainder (8) were sailors. Among the other 26 crewmembers, there were Americans and British West Indians.[9]

Further examination tells us that the six Curaçaoan males who worked in the kitchen were between 16 and 29 years old. Most of them only called twice at Ellis Island in the period between 1917 and 1924. One may cautiously conclude that these men did not navigate permanently. And it seems that most of them did not make long trips. Their second visit was not on the 'Prins der Nederlanden'.

The Curaçaoan ship carpenter on the 'Prins der Nederlanden' was called Daniel Gomez, was 33 year old, and had tattoos on both hands. He is of interest to me, because I can trace additional information about him from my oral history sources.[10] His name appears three times in the Ellis Island database. His first arrival in New York was earlier in 1919: in July, on the same 'Prins der Nederlanden'. He arrived in New York for the third time in 1922, after he had boarded in Curaçao on another boat from Amsterdam, named the 'Astrea'. It would be interesting to look at the prospects of a career at sea in those days. Daniel Gomez arrived in New York in July 1919 as a fireman on board of the 'Prins der Nederlanden', but upon his arrival three months later (October 1919) he was registered as a ship carpenter. In contrast, Antonio Petrona, a 35-year-old sailor, remained a sailor during the entire period from 1919 to 1924 when he travelled the trajectory Curaçao - New York approximately 15 times.[11]

The fact that skin color is recorded in the manifests enables one to draw a correlation between skin color and the position one held on a ship. As can be deduced from the manifests in the database, the labor

structure of ship crews tended to be two-tiered. The highest layer consisted of officers with the most senior being the captain or shipmaster. In most cases the officials and technicians on the Dutch ships were white Dutchmen. The lowest positions on board were filled by blacks, including black Curaçaoans. They mostly filled the ranks of cook, steward or common seaman. Some blacks were able to climb the shipboard hierarchy. For example, on board of the 'Prins Willem I' which arrived in New York on 22 October 1919, the 37-year-old black boatman Simon Cijntje was in charge of the sailors.

The Social Situation of Afro-Curaçaoan Seafarers

In his article *That turbulent soil: Seafarers, the 'Black Atlantic' and Afro-Caribbean identity,* Cobley describes the social situation and the ill-treatment of black seafarers on board of ships, especially those in lower positions (2007:158). The welfare of seafarers was something that was generally neglected and from its very beginning in 1919, the International Labor Organization (ILO) focused its attention on the situation of seafarers. Even though black seafarers shared the hardships and dangers of life at sea with white seafarers (which could lead to a notion of equality and collegiality), black seafarers experienced the consequences of the racism directed against them (Cobley 2007:158).

The weight of the work depended on the type of work they did. Older seafarers would talk about their lives at sea with a sense of pride, but would also recollect the fears and worries that accompanied their work. They complained that the occupations of, in particular, fireman and trimmer of coals on the steam ship were quite heavy, partly due to the enormous heat in the engine-room department. Working with coal affected their skin to a certain extent. Those who worked as steward and cook in the ministry had it relatively better, but Cobley states that they too could be the victim of brutal treatment on the part of officers and other crew members (2007:159).

The safety of coastal sailors was also very limited and in those days when little attention was paid to safety in ship workplaces, these men would experience the dangers associated with loading and discharging cargo. Oral histories recount of men killed under falling cargo without any compensation provided to their families. Venereal diseases and other contagious ones such as yellow fever and diphtheria were also among the risks of seafaring.

It should be noted that wages are not mentioned in the ship manifests in the Ellis Island database. However, some provisions existed for seafarers entering the USA in the article of law of the US Revised Statutes. According to section 4 of the Seamen's Act of March 4, 1916,

c. 153, 38 Stat. 1164, amending Rev. Stats. § 4530,

> provides that every seaman on a vessel of the United States shall be entitled to receive on demand from the master one-half of the wages which he shall then have earned at every port where such vessel, after the voyage has been commenced, shall load or deliver cargo before the voyage is ended; that all stipulations in the contract to the contrary shall be void; that such demand shall not be made before the expiration of or oftener than 5 days; that the master's failure to comply shall release the seaman from his contract and entitle him to full payment of wages earned, and (by a proviso) that the section shall apply to seamen on foreign vessels while in harbors of the United States, and that the courts of the United States shall be open to such seamen for its enforcement. *Held:*
>
> (1) The proviso makes it clear that the benefits of the section are for foreign seamen on foreign vessels as well as American seamen on such vessels, since otherwise the grant of access to federal courts—a right already enjoyed by American seamen—would have been superfluous.[12]

This was different from the provision in Dutch law, which stated that the salary to be paid out was one-third of the amount earned, and there were cases in which the Dutch Consul-General had to remind ship captains of this regulation.[13]

The Curaçaoan seafarers who worked as coast sailors received relatively good pay. The Colonial Report of 1909 relates that in 1908 the KWIM employed 75 men who together had a monthly salary of 2,500 guilders, while the Red D Line employed 35 to 40 men who together earned between 1,000 and 1,200 guilders per month. This amounted to approximately 33 guilders per month per person with the KWIM and 38 guilders with the Red D Line. This is much more than the 30 cents per day and the liter of corn-flour that one could earn while working on land for a landowner in the beginning of the twentieth century (Allen 2007).

The following song gives an indication of the manner in which those who came back from a trip to the USA were viewed on the Dutch Caribbean island, Bonaire.[14]

Alsa alsa
alsa merikano
alsa alsa
nan ta doño di plaka
alsa alsa
nan ta doño di Merka
alsa alsa
alsa merikano
ta nan ta doño di plaka. [15]

Hail hail
hail the 'Americans'
hail hail
they own money
hail hail
they own America
hail hail
hail the 'Americans'
they own money.

This song was sung to me by a lady from Bonaire, born in 1905 and who was popularly known as Chinini. The term *merikano*, literally meaning: Americans, refers in this case to the Bonairean seafarers who had gone to the USA and who upon return to their island would have the much-desired US dollar with them. In the song, Chinini compared these seamen favorably to those who went to work in nearby countries and who (according to her) would return poor and sometimes even infected with fever. I have not yet been able to collect a similar type of song about seafaring from Curaçao, but comparable ideas are present in the oral-history narratives collected from members of the older generations in Curaçao. Seamen going to places such as New York were considered the elite among seafarers. They would build bigger houses on the islands and would invest their money in land, a much desired object. Their relatives would receive nice and expensive gifts upon arrival. According to oral information about the earlier-mentioned Daniel Gomez (Djinga), it was known that he had done well financially. His house was furnished with marble and other luxury items. He owned at least three houses in the neighborhood of Willemstad and a large piece of land.

Shipping and Gender

Seafaring was also seen as a symbol of manhood. In *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in US Black Men's History and Masculinity*, the editors Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins examine the symbolic meaning of seafaring and link maritime activities to masculinity. Apart from being an option for economic and social independence in society, life at sea gave young men a sense of psychological freedom. (Cobley 2004). In oral narratives, seafaring was often portrayed by former seamen as a rite of passage. Setting out for sea on board of a ship gave a sense of independence especially to young boys who wanted to leave home. Perhaps this was the story of the fifteen-year-old Arturo Martina, born in 1904, whose name appears in the Ellis Island database and who went as junior servant on the 'Prins der Nederlanden' to Haiti and later to New York in 1919. A year later, in 1920, he worked as a kitchen helper on the

larger passenger ship the 'Philadelphia,' which sailed from Curaçao to New York. In the same year he also worked on the passenger ship the 'US Huron,' originally a German ship that was confiscated by the Americans. On this ship Arturo Martina was a waiter. In 1921-1923 he was three times on board the 'Philadelphia' where he worked as kitchen help and waiter. It is not known whether Arturo made a career in seafaring.

Working at the sea was not something for young men only. The database of Ellis Island contains men who were well into their forties and older. Men could continue sailing to provide for their families as they got older. In my conversations with women married to seamen, they particularly emphasized the fact that when their husbands were at sea, they performed tasks that their husbands normally did, such as hoeing the land for planting and seeking help for fixing the maize-roofed houses. Society on the other hand placed certain restrictions on these women. For example, the law forbade underage and married women to engage in certain legal transactions, and wives of seamen therefore had to wait for their husbands to return from sea.

Though it is generally known that Caribbean women also worked on ships, especially as cooks (Cobley 2007:159), no data to this regard has (yet) been found for Curaçao. However, Maduro (1986) writes about the fact that lower-class Curaçaoan women sometimes accompanied rich families as servants or nannies when these families went overseas on business or for an education. The Ellis Island database also provides information about those who left for New York for this purpose.

Curaçaoan seamen sometimes formed durable relationships with women whom they met in the port cities where they docked. I recall an interview with an elderly man (born in 1907) who was one of the three children of a Curaçaoan seaman with a woman in the Dominican Republic. This seaman later took his children from the Dominican Republic to Curaçao in order to give them "proper care."[16] It shows that through seafaring, kinship ties ran deep beyond the confines of society. This action can also be seen as an act of taking responsibility by a father for his children.

Willemstad's function as a seaport was facilitated and sustained by extensive linkages between male seafaring labor and female shore-side labor. Women held a range of jobs in the port economy, such as loading coals on ships, selling rum to the sailors, providing room and board, and offering prostitution services. The presence of uncontrolled prostitution and the high incidence of venereal diseases, such as gonorrhea and syphilis, became a public health concern. The colonial government attributed these diseases to the fact that ships from all sorts of places visited the Curaçaoan harbor (KV 1914). In those days venereal disease was called *malu di muhé* (illness of women), implying that men contracted these diseases by having sex with infected women (thus reflecting the male perspective).

Working Class Consciousness: The Case of Phellippi Chakutoe

As I stated in the beginning of this study, seafaring was not only a matter of macroeconomics. It could also lead to the exchange of culture and ideas between people of different nationalities. In *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaic*a Gerald Horne (2005), suggests that maritime workers from the Caribbean would get acquainted with other seamen who could introduce them to revolutionary ideas. The Curaçaoan Phelippi Chakutoe (August 26, 1891 to September 20, 1976), or Felix Chakutoe as he was popularly called, who is known for his leadership role in the famous harbor strike of 1922, was a seafarer who also travelled to New York. His name appears twice in the Ellis Island database. He arrived on December 28, 1917 in New York aboard the 'Prins der Nederlanden' and on January 17, 1919 aboard the ship 'Caracas' after he had left Curaçao on January 2, 1919. He was 27 years old at that time. He held one of the lowest positions on the ship, which was that of fireman.

On June 17, 1922, after returning from New York, he found himself involved in what was at that time the largest harbor strike in the island's history. That year, ship companies ' Red D. Line' and 'Koninklijke West-Indische Maildienst '(KWIM) lowered the salary for taking in cargo from 50 to 40 cents per hour. Gibbes, Römer-Kenepa & Scriwanek (1999:147) explain that the image created of an economic recession did not correspond with reality. When the harbor workers went on strike, they were replaced by foreign workers who were paid higher wages than the Curaçaoans. This caused the protest to escalate.

Popular struggle in the port of Willemstad was common; it seems that Curaçao manifested the same port-city radicalism that has been observed for the rest of the Caribbean (Fausette 2007:169). In most cases, protest could be easily suppressed by the police (KV 1913) as it concerned small spontaneous outbursts of anger without much structure or organization. In contrast, the 1922 strike was more intense in terms of both duration and the capacity for confrontation displayed by the strikers.

Felix Chakutoe had learnt about organizing for a common cause when he was a seafarer and would sometimes live and work in New York. In those days this city was a stronghold of various popular movements. In the Curaçaoan harbor Chakutoe was able to mobilize a large group of workers and he was accepted as a leader to confront the port authorities. Chakutoe, who could not read or write, demanded a conversation with the responsible authorities, including the inspector of the ship company the KWIM. The strike lasted several days.

In an interview which I had with Chakutoe's daughter Lucilla and

his grandson Sergio 'Papa' Leito, they confirmed this account of the facts, naming their mother and grandmother as their source of information.[17] Chakutoe was imprisoned for his role in the 1922 harbor strike and was granted a reprieve after 3 years and 2 months after his mother pleaded for him and the bishop Monsignor Verriet mediated his cause (Mauricia-Thode 2010).

Through his intervention in the strike of 1922 the first collective labor agreement in the history of the island was established (Mauricia-Thode 2010). Unfortunately his role in shaping Curaçao's working class consciousness was not properly acknowledged during his lifetime and he died poor and forgotten on September 20, 1967.

Epilogue

Seafaring has been an important source of income for the black working classes in the region including Curaçao and therefore deserves more attention. Seafaring was multifaceted. On the island of Curaçao, both during slavery and afterwards, trade and shipping played a major role in the economy, and seafaring and other maritime work were stable sources of income for the working class. Meanwhile, seafaring also contributed to the transfer of different ideas by facilitating contact with people of different nationalities and cultures.

In closing, I would like to suggest several topics for further research. A thorough analysis of the Ellis Island database could provide more and useful insight into issues of class, race, and gender, for example by focusing on the roles, relationships, and experiences of lower-class women with respect to seafaring. The interplay between class, race, and gender in the context of seafaring would seem to be a fruitful topic for research.

It is known that Curaçaoan seafarers sometimes worked and lived in New York or elsewhere in the USA for a while before returning to Curaçao. Some came back economically better off than others and built nice stone houses on the island. Other seafarers remained permanently in the USA. The interface between seafaring and migration could be another rewarding research theme.

Some former seafarers have told me that when they found themselves in trouble in the USA, they would stress the fact that they had the Dutch nationality, which often helped their cause. This suggests another interesting topic for further study, i.e., Caribbean identity formation and flexible identities.

Finally, one could look comparatively at the participation in seafaring of the people of the other islands of the Dutch Caribbean, i.e., Aruba, Bonaire, Sint Maarten, Sint Eustatius and Saba. The island of Sint Eustatius was well known for its whaling industry and its relation

with the important port of New Bedfort, Massachusetts, USA. Bonaire is well-known for its maritime history. Between 1985 and 1988, Franklin 'Boi' Antoine gathered a lot of information from former seafarers. It probably represents the most extensive body of research on seafaring in relation to any of the islands of the Dutch Caribbean. Antoine also travelled to New York and interviewed Bonaireans who had remained living there. His collection of Bonairean stories includes data on seafaring in relation to Curaçao. A comparative seafaring study of all the islands could contribute to enhanced insight into their social and economic development.

Clearly, much remains to be explored in the world of trans-Caribbean and transatlantic seafaring.

Editor's note

This article is a more extensively elaborated version of a former paper written in Dutch, "Leren hoe je man moet zijn: Curacaose zeevaarders naar New York, 1900-1924," published in *Oso: tijdschrift voor Surinaamse taalkunde, letterkunde en geschiedenis*, vol. 29 (2010), issue 1, pp. 127-141.

Notes

[1] Rose Mary Allen: allen_rm@onenet.an. I am grateful to Willem Wilmus who did some of the research in database of arrivals at Ellis Island and to Cristel Monsanto who showed me the different possibilities of the database.

[2] This article is adapted from of a presentation titled 'A Preliminary Inquiry into the Lives of Seamen Travelling from Curaçao to New York, 1900-1924', given in January 2009 at the University of the Netherlands Antilles (UNA) as part of the commemoration of 400 years of relations between the Netherlands and New York City.

[3] See also <http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/EIDB/ellisgold.htm>.

[4] KV 1908.

[5] KV 1908.

[6] Announcements about escaped slaves would therefore indicate where they had fled and what their assumed new place of residence was. It should also be mentioned that when the Spanish government

in Venezuela confiscated slave ships, they would sell all the belongings, including the slaves.

[7] Interview with Carlos Koeiman (born in 1898) by Rose Mary Allen, 6-5-1986, stored at the National Archives of Curacao(NatAr).

[8] The Red D Line navigated regularly from Curaçao to Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Havana (Cuba) and New York.

[9] This goes for the American ships too (such as the 'Zulia'). The higher-ranking crew members are white and American (although they often include other, European, nationalities), more so than on the Dutch ships. The lower functions are filled by "African blacks."

[10] Daniel Gomez, who was nicknamed Denny and whose official name was Daniel Djinga, was born on April 10, 1886. His mother was a lady named Djinga, a washerwoman who lived in the town district. Gomez was the surname of his father, who was not married to his mother. Daniel married on November 13, 1907 with Cecilia Albertus. Out this marriage was born one child named Carlito Antonio Djinga on November 24, 1907. Cecilia died on July 8, 1911. Daniel remarried on January 25, 1921 with Maria Eugenia Anita, who had been born on March 28, 1888 in Curaçao. From this marriage no children resulted (Information by Andre Rancuret Curaçao 2009).

[11] Some manifests have a column called "length of service at sea." For example, the August 7, 1923 manifest of the 'Zulia' mentions black Antilleans who had been travelling for several decades, such as Francisco Hernandez (27 years at sea), Avelino Abat (20 years) and Manuel Flores (32 years).

[12] See www.supreme.justia.com/us/252/348/case.html, retrieved July 1, 2011.

[13] ARA, Min. van Buza, Inv. 298, no. 1468, letter dated April 21, 1917.

[14] Bonaire is also a Papiamentu-speaking island situated in the southern Caribbean. Together with Curaçao and Aruba it is called the "ABC" islands.

[15] Interview with Chinini Sint Jago on Bonaire in 1983, by Rose Mary Allen during ethno-musicological field research for the Archaeological-Anthropological Institute of the Netherlands Antilles (AAINA) and for the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium, in care of Prof. Yos Gansemans.

[16] Interview with informant(born in 1907) with Rose Mary Allen, *Kas di Ansiano Uni*, Curacao 2005.

[17] See also *Bosero* of June and July 1979, which covers the harbor strike and expounds on the character of Felix Chakutoe based on an interview with the same two informants.

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Tapes Rose Mary Allen, collected by Rose Mary Allen, 1999-2011, private collection.