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A MULTI-VOICED PERSPECTIVE ON CURAÇAO'S COLONIAL HISTORY THROUGH TRADITIONAL SONGS

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore how important historical events are remembered through oral traditions, specifically songs that have been transmitted from generation to generation. By using different variants of the same song about particular historical events, and through textual analysis, I seek to discover how those whose voices are not heard in written documents, do remain part of the oral tradition and can become an important element of the shared memory that lives on across generations. I will address how oral narratives can help to expand the knowledge of history and contribute to its decolonization.

Key Terms: Oral tradition, oral history, memory, narratives, colonial history, songs

Introduction

Oral traditions have been analyzed by literary scholars as oral literature (Finnegan, 2012) and by ethnographers as representing the traditional and functional cultural values and norms of a community.¹ For many years, the historical validity of oral traditions was questioned, and their use as historical sources was viewed with skepticism. Peoples whose history was based on oral traditions were believed to have no history until historians began to value these sources as valid historical evidence, particularly for preliterate societies. In the Caribbean, oral historical data are now commonly used together with written sources that in most cases are part of the colonial archives, which were long considered to be the sole repositories of historical knowledge and sources (Allen, 2007: 33; González Echevarría, 1998: 32).

¹ See for example: <https://science.jrank.org/pages/10528/Oral-Traditions-Telling-Sharing-Modern-Study-Oral-Traditions.html>

There is now a growing awareness, however, that these archives have tended to silence the voices of marginalized peoples and moments of historical importance (Trouillot, 1995). As Brown (2010) states in his paper titled “History attends to the dead”, in colonial situations the archives have been more than just a space for preservation and memory, as written historical sources have tended to function as important ‘artifacts of power’ (1231). In line with the concept of “reparative histories” aimed at deconstructing colonial historiography, I have over the years conducted oral history interviews with people in communities beyond the scope of the dominant records so as to expand on the colonial narratives about them, obtain an insider’s view of their histories, and document their historical agency (Allen 2007; Allen, 2014). In this endeavor, my focus has been principally the histories of communities in the Dutch Caribbean whose ancestors were enslaved people and who appear, in the written sources, as powerless objects whose experiences are trivialized, ignored, or even silenced.

In my research I have sought to make a distinction between oral history and oral tradition. Both consist of oral material, in the sense that they are transmitted orally and, in many cases, are obtained through fieldwork. However, oral history refers both to a method of recording and preserving oral testimonies and personal recollections articulated by people who have experienced certain events first-hand or who were sufficiently close to those events to recall them and feel the impact of those events on their lives. Oral tradition comprises information, memories and knowledge held in common by a group of people over many generations. It refers to the recollection and transmission of a specific, preserved textual and cultural knowledge by oral means. It persists mostly through songs, proverbs, myths and stories through which people convey information and meaning to their relatives and/or other members of their community. The scenarios depicted in these oral texts are usually drawn from events, problems and successes experienced by the community, which have been passed on by word of mouth from the older generations to the younger ones, and used as a tool for organizing, teaching and raising consciousness.

While this distinction can be made in theory, in a field situation, the line is harder to draw. According to Vansina (1985: 21-23), one should not overlook the fact that: 1) over time oral history will incorporate folk elements; and 2) folkloric material such as stories, proverbs, myths and songs can also shed light on the past. The domain of oral traditions and expressions encompasses an enormous variety of spoken forms, including proverbs, riddles, tales, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, nursery rhymes, songs, and dramatic verbal performances. As vehicles for the transmission of knowledge, cultural and social values, and collective memory, oral traditions play a crucial

part in keeping cultures alive. Lawrence Levine (2007, [1977]) has explored and contextualized this phenomenon in the case of enslaved African Americans in his seminal work *Black culture and black consciousness*, which covers the rich world of folk expression through songs, stories and myths transmitted between the years just before the American Civil War up until World War II.

In this article, I focus on songs that have been transmitted across various generations which contain references to, and therefore constitute records of, two historic events on the Dutch Caribbean island of Curaçao. Songs, especially, are important exponents of communal values and norms, and are one of the oldest and most effective forms of communication through which people tell and retell their stories in Curaçao and the rest of the Caribbean (Allen, 2001). In the case of Curaçao, oral traditions are transmitted by word of mouth, principally in Papiamentu, the local Afro-Caribbean Iberian lexifier creole language. In the historical analysis and interpretation of songs, language patterns, wording, and depictions of cultural and historical context often provide important insights.

Song about the 1795 slave rebellion of Curaçao

During an oral history session in 1986, a consultant of mine named Nicolaas Petrona recalled a song which he claimed used to be sung after the slave uprising in Curaçao which took place in 1795. On August 17 of that year, plantation rule on the western part of the island was overturned by enslaved people under the leadership of Tula, Bastian Karpata, Louis Mercier and Pedro Wacao, with assistance from women and freed people. The August 1795 uprising was the largest in Curaçao's history in terms of the number of participants, its geographical spread, and the number of days that it lasted. It is also the best documented of the many uprisings that took place on the island, and the voices of the revolt's protagonists are present in the judicial documents, which are included in the compilation of all the government documents pertaining to the revolt which was published by the National Archives in 1974 (Paula, 1974).

The song recalled by Petrona goes as follows:

Papa Sewe,	Papa Sewe,
Ata Negru tribí	Look at that insolent Negro
k'a lanta ku Blanku	who stood up against the Whites
Papa Sewe,	Papa Sewe,
Ata Negru tribí	Look at that insolent Negro
k'a lanta ku Blanku	who stood up against the Whites
Hork'é	Hang him
Mat'é. ²	Kill him.

Nicolaas Petrona was born in 1898, i.e. 103 years after the uprising. One may conclude that this song belongs to the historical memory about the slave rebellion and is part of a long historicity. Petrona's mother, who taught him the song, told him that house slaves had created and sung it upon the instruction of their master after Tula, the leader of the slave revolt, had been executed by hanging in October 1795.

Petrona categorized the song as a *kantika di tambú* (song of the local tambú musical genre), which is typically accompanied by an African drum, and which nowadays is performed and danced to during tambú celebrations held mostly in the months around the end of the year.³ The lyrics of tambú songs are often wisely chosen to trigger a desired response from the drummers, singers, dancers, and onlookers. The lyrics usually comment upon controversial events that occurred over the past year. They also often refer to individuals, within or outside the community, who did not conform to social norms. The performance of tambú, one of Curaçao's persisting traditional, African-derived customs, was prohibited during slavery by the slave-owners, as Rosalia (1997) has documented. This prohibition persisted even after the abolition of slavery in 1863 and well into the 20th century (Rosalia, 1997).

Nicolaas Petrona's testimony raises a number of interesting issues. First, the fact the slave-owners instructed their enslaved workers to sing this tambú song shows that they were well aware of the role of music in the lives of the enslaved, in particular of tambú as both an on-the-spot artistic commentary upon events and a vehicle for transmitting messages.

2 Interview with Nicolaas Petrona (born 1898 in Kent U Zelf, eastern part of Curaçao), by Rose Mary Allen, 1986 and stored at the National Archives Curaçao (NatAr).

3 'Tambú' refers to the celebration, to the music performed during this event and to the corresponding dance. If no drum was available, people would improvise using a box, for example, to beat the rhythm. See NatAr (National Archives), Archief van het Gouvernement, Rol van Strafzaken 1878, Procesverbaal no. 24 for a description of how people sang while someone beat the rhythm on a box.

However, as the following analysis of the song shows, the slave-owners did not have control over the coded lyrics of the song. The text of the song in question identifies two social groups and their racial assignment by the colonial authorities, namely the *Negru* (Black) and the *Blanku* (White). At first sight, the text suggests a negative value judgement of Tula as someone who did not abide by the prevailing rules of submission, but instead revolted against them. This is certainly clear from the final two lines: *Hork'é; Mat'é* (Hang him; Kill him), which indicate the manner in which Tula and the other leaders were punished, i.e., by hanging. These lines could have been a way to indulge the owners. The negative valuation associated with the rebellion also seems to be expressed through the verb *lanta ku*, 'to stand up against', which is used mostly in the sense of a person standing up against someone in a higher or more powerful social position—for example a laborer against an employer, a child against its parents, or a woman against a man. In the song, Tula, an enslaved person of African descent who resisted his people's subjugation to slave-holding people, primarily of European descent, is called *tribí* or insolent. Petrona explained to me that the song shows the extent to which enslaved people lived both physically and mentally under the rule of their masters. However, it is noteworthy that the adjective '*tribí*' has multiple connotations: not just insolent, but also unabashed and bold, which have a more positive slant. The same holds for the verb '*lanta ku*', which can also be used more positively in the sense of rising up against an oppressive power. Finally, the object of the verbs 'to hang' and 'to kill' in the final lines of the song *Hork'é; Mat'é* (Hang him; Kill him) could also be understood as being the slave-owner, rather than the enslaved.

It is quite possible that, as the enslaved sang the song upon the instruction of their master as a song denouncing Tula, they reinterpreted it for themselves and secretively gave it a more uplifting meaning, in favor of Tula. This would be in line with the well-known practice by oppressed people of applying inflections, double entendres, innuendos and metaphors to camouflage (cover up) what they really mean. This example shows how using oral tradition as a historical source adds another dimension to the written sources and underscores the complex subjectivity of those who were enslaved.

In 1959, Paul Brenneker and Elis Juliana recorded a variant of this song about Tula (see Brenneker, 1985: 7). Both Brenneker and Juliana stand out in the Dutch Caribbean as the first researchers to systematically record Curaçaoan oral narratives on audiotape. They started at the end of the 1950s, when Curaçao's traditional society was undergoing significant change. Their recordings include songs, stories, tales, myths, legends, epic songs and poems, nursery rhymes, proverbs, riddles, charms, prayers, chants, dramatic verbal performances, and more. Their body of work has become a key source for the reconstruction of the history of the African descended working classes in particular.

Brenneker and Juliana are best known for their recordings that have been archived—and now also digitized—in what is known as the *Zikinzá*-collection, which was declared part of UNESCO’s memory of the world in 2017.

Brenneker and Juliana’s variant of the song is similar in text and value judgement to the one which I collected in 1986 but provides a little more detail about the rebellion of the enslaved person referred to in the lyrics. It mentions the name Tula, which in Petrona’s variant does not appear, although he mentioned the name to me. Perhaps the explanation of another of my consultants, named Adres (Didi) Sluis, who was born in 1904 and who lived in a community near the location where the uprising started, can shed some light on this issue.⁴ Sluis stated that merely mentioning the name Tula would be condemned at the time when he was growing up, often out of fear.

Another interesting line of the Brenneker and Juliana version of the song says “*Tula tribí ku a traha papa,*” which can be translated as: “The insolent Tula who made porridge out of mud”. Brenneker explains that, according to their consultant, the rebellious enslaved people threw hot mud in the faces of those who tried to recapture them. Even though I have not been able to trace this information back to the written sources about the 1795 revolt, the use of mud was not something unknown for the African enslaved people. They used mud as material for building houses, and it also appears in expressions such as *tira hende ku lodo* [throw mud at someone], meaning figuratively: insulting someone.

Zino papapa zinowé	<i>Zino papapa zinowé</i> [untranslated]
Negru tribi k’a lanta ku Blanku	The insolent Negro who stood up against the Whites
Zino papapa zinowé	<i>Zino papapa zinowé</i>
Tula tribí ku traha papa	The insolent Tula who made porridge out of mud
Zino papapa zinowé	<i>Zino papapa zinowé</i>
Tula tribí ta hala lechi	The insolent Tula who churns milk.

(Brenneker, 1985: 7)⁵

The fact that I was able to record this song in the 1980s while Brenneker and Juliana had collected it 30 years earlier from consultants who were older than mine shows that this song must have been quite commonly sung, was passed on from generation to generation, and apparently remained meaningful to successive singers and audiences. In addition, the

4 Interview with Adres (Didi) Sluis, born in 1904,, by Rose Mary Allen, 1984 and stored at the National Archives Curaçao (NatAr).

5. See also: *Zikinzá*-collection , no. 123.

fact that Brenneker and Juliana's consultant was from Banda 'Bou (the western part of the island where the revolt occurred), whereas my informant lived in Banda 'Riba (the eastern part of the island), shows that the song had become geographically dispersed. One explanation for the slight differences between the two versions of the song might be the fact that geography (location, dispersal and distance) informs the meaning of events and influences the manner in which events are remembered and transmitted with more or fewer details. Given the magnitude and intensity of the 1795 slave revolt and the fear of new rebellions that remained long afterwards in Curaçao's slavery-based society, it is not difficult to understand that this event remained in the memories of people and was transmitted across many generations through their oral traditions. It underscores the conclusion by Alan Lomax and John Halifax in the article "Folk songs texts as culture indicators" (1971) that for songs to be able to become part of oral tradition, the lyrics must deal with significant issues, attitudes, concerns and feelings of the community.

Songs about July 1 (Abolition of Slavery Day)

Another historic event of which oral traditions are able to provide an insider's view is the abolition of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean on July 1, 1863. Several songs attest to the significance of this event. Written documents have shown that the enslaved people anticipated freedom well before 1863 and gradually grew more anxious and impatient as the colonial administration dragged it heels. This anxiety is embodied in several traditional songs which I have been able to gather from oral tradition. It appears that the enslaved workers sang the following songs because of their discontent about having to wait for so long for abolition to finally be declared in the Dutch Caribbean.

My consultant, a woman born in 1916, whose father's mother sang the following song while doing her daily chores, explained that the enslaved felt betrayed by King William III, the monarch of the Netherlands at that time, who presumably had promised them freedom, which time and time again failed to materialize. In this song, the role of William III in the abolition of slavery is not taken for granted. It expresses feelings of anxiety and anger as freedom was being withheld. The song, which forms part of the Curaçaoan oral tradition, shows that abolition was a matter of concern long before it became a reality on 1 July 1863.

Biba biba biba biba Wilmu Dèrdu	Long live, long live William the Third
Biba biba biba biba Wilmu Dèrdu	Long live, long live William the Third
Ma parse Wilmu Dèrdu	But it seems, William the Third
Bo tin idea di frega nos	You are thinking of screwing us
Ma pa bo frega nos	But instead of screwing us
Bo bai frega bo mama. ⁶	Go screw your mother

Juliana and Brenneker collected the following similar song from their consultant, Virginia (Ma Djini) Meulens, in the 1960s. Ma Djini, who lived in Otrabanda, was born in 1869, six years after the abolition of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean.

Ta ki ora Rei ta bini	When is the King coming
Ki ora Rei ta manda libertat	When is the King sending freedom
Rei ta pompa	The King is jerking around
Rei ta pompa	The King is jerking around
Rei bai pompa rei su mama. ⁷	Let the King go jerk around his mother

The following song, sung by Mervelita Comenencia, who was born in 1903, expresses similar feelings but is formulated more as a demand.

Libertat, galité	Freedom, equality
Lareina Viktoria	Queen Victoria
Manda e kos pa nos!	Send the thing to us!
Libertat, galité	Freedom, equality
Lareina Viktoria	Queen Victoria
Manda e kos pa nos!	Send the thing to us!
Libertat, galité	Freedom, equality
Willem de Derde	William the Third
Manda e kos pa nos! ⁸	Send the thing to us!

In this song, the name of Queen Victoria of England appears. Slavery had been abolished in the British colonies in 1833, and the formerly enslaved people there considered Queen

6 Interview with a woman born in 1916 (she did not want her name stated), Rose Mary Allen, March 2001 (private collection)

7 Interview Virginia Meulens (born 1869 in Otrabanda), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 440, NatAr).

8 Interview Mervelita Comenencia (born 1903), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 611, NatAr).

Victoria to be the person responsible for their freedom. In Jamaica, she was therefore called ‘Queen Free’ (Lewin, 1984: 18). Queen Victoria is also mentioned in the following variant of this song. Martina Felipe, whom I interviewed in 1983, was born in 1893 and remembered her grandmother singing it.⁹ According to Felipe, freedom was given to the Curaçaoan enslaved workers after people had denounced the atrocities of slavery to the authorities in the Netherlands. This shows recognition of a ruling power higher than the local colonial government. For some reason, Felipe assumed that Queen Victoria was the wife of King William III.¹⁰ Naming Queen Victoria in songs related to freedom in Curaçao may be an indication that the local enslaved knew that their counterparts in the British colonies had already gained freedom under the reign of Queen Victoria. It could be interpreted as a request to this Queen to set the enslaved in the Dutch colonies free in the same manner. A demanding tone is once again manifested:

Libertat, galité	Freedom, equality
La reina Viktoria	Queen Victoria
A manda e kos	Sent the thing
La reina Viktoria	Queen Victoria
A manda e ko’	Sent the thing
Libertat, galité. ¹¹	Freedom, equality.

The words ‘*libertat*’ and ‘*galité*’ (the latter derived from the French ‘*égalité*’), both a legacy of the French Revolution, were rekindled by the formerly enslaved people after abolition of slavery to express joy about their newly found freedom. In a sense, it reflects their understanding that freedom is an important condition for equality.

Brenneker and Juliana collected at least 5 variants of the following song:¹²

Awo’ n’tin shon Henri,	Now there is no Master Henry anymore
N’tin shon de Palm	No Master De Palm either
N’tin nada mas	There is nothing more
Awo’ nos tur ta un	We are all one now
Awo’ nos tur ta un	We are all one now

9 Interview Martina Felipe (born 1893), Allen, 13-1-1983 (NatAr).

10 See also interview Henriqueta Garcia (born 1898), Brenneker/Juliana, June 1980 (Zikinzá-collection, T 75, NatAr), in which the woman relates how Emancipation in the Dutch Caribbean was due to the intervention of Queen Victoria, the mother of Wilhelmina.

11 Interview Martina Felipe (born 1893, Rose Mary Allen 13 January 1983

12 Interview with Lucia Hato (born 1886), 1959 (T 881); Cai Maduro (date of birth not registered), 1958 (T 705); Herman Peloso (born 1882), 1959 (Brenneker/Juliana, T 721, Zikinzá-collection, NatAr).

Awo' djaka lo laba tayó	Now rats will do the dishes
Awo' djaka lo frega kuchu	Now rats will clean the knives
Awo' djaka lo bari fagon	Now rats will sweep the oven
Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman	No more submission, submission no more.
	(in Martinus, 1997: 258)

The first two lines call out the names of former slave-owners to emphasize that everyone is equal now. This is reconfirmed in the sentence *Awo' nos tur ta un*. (We are all one now). The embodiment of equality is also clearly expressed in the final sentence, *Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman*, which is actually not in Papiamentu but in the related, but now extinct Curaçaoan secret language called Guene. Martinus (1997: 258), who analyzed Guene in juxtaposition to Capeverdean Creole, posits that the last sentence of the song is equivalent to the Portuguese '*Não mais jugo, jugo não mais*', meaning: no more subjugation.¹³

A similar song exists on the neighboring Dutch Caribbean island of Bonaire. W. de Barbanson, the priest of the Rincon parish, collected and documented it in 1934 in the article '*Simadan*' that appeared in the Catholic magazine *Dominicus Penning*. In the past, Bonaire was used as a settlement for the enslaved who had been convicted of crimes and had close ties to the island of Curaçao. De Barbanson categorized this song variant as a children's song, as he mistakenly understood *kaiman* to mean alligator, and according to him, Bonaire did not have alligators. This song variant mentions work performed by enslaved people and asks who will continue to do this work when subjugation (*djuku*) comes to an end. The variant documented by de Barbanson goes as follows:

Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman	<i>Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman</i> [untranslated]
Ta ken lo laba tayó	Who will wash the dishes
Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman	<i>Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman</i>
Ta pushi lo laba tayó	The cat will wash the dishes
Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman	<i>Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman</i>
Ta ken lo peña kabei	Who will comb hair
Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman	<i>Kaiman djuku djuku kaiman</i>
Ta pushi ta peña kabei	The cat will comb hair
	(de Barbanson, 1934: 25)

13 '*Ka*' in Capeverdean Creole signifies a negation, while '*mais*' means 'more'. '*djuku*', comparable to '*jugo*' in Portuguese, means subjugation. '*Kaiman djuku, djuku kaiman*' then translates as "no more subjugation, subjugation no more" (Martinus 1997: 258).

In one of the other songs about freedom collected by Brenneker and Juliana from Ma Djini, this idea is again stressed.¹⁴ It also contains some humor or sarcasm, saying that rats will do the dishes from now on.

<p>Awor ku katibu a kaba, n'tin katibu mas. Awor ku libertat a bini, awor mi no ta laba tayó. Awor ta djaka ta laba tayó [laughter].</p>	<p>Now that slavery has ended, there are no slaves anymore. Now that freedom has come, I don't wash dishes anymore. Rats will do the dishes now [laughter].</p>
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'No more punishment/subservience' is a recurrent theme in traditional songs about freedom, as the following example sung by Ma Djini demonstrates, which specifically juxtaposes freedom with enslavement.

<p>Kaiman djuku Djuku kaiman Mi n'ta laba tayó Mi n' ta laba kònchi mas Mi n' ta bari kas mas Mi no ta katibu di shon mas.¹⁵</p>	<p>No more subjugation Subjugation no more I am not doing the dishes I am not washing any bowls anymore I am not sweeping the house anymore I am not the master's slave anymore.</p>
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Several variants of this song have been collected over the years. The above variant is the oldest recorded version of the song and was also sung to Brenneker in 1958 by a woman called Ma Chichi who was 106 years old at the time.¹⁶ She was 10 when the enslaved people in the Dutch Caribbean gained their freedom.

This song is of the *tambú* genre, and the choice for *tambú* represents a manifestation of autonomy, as the singers could now express themselves freely in a musical genre that was previously prohibited by both state and church. These songs express joy regarding the end of physical punishments for the slightest transgression, and the fact that freedom embodied

14 On the day of freedom, Virginia Meulens' (Ma Djini's) mother was not enslaved and was living in town. Ma Djini strongly emphasized the free status of her mother during the interview, thus showing that she wanted to disassociate herself from enslavement. The fact, however, that her mother could remember two of these songs may indicate some ties with recently freed people. Interview: Virginia Meulens (born 1869 in Otrobanda), Brenneker/Juliana 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 440, NatAr).

15 Interview Virginia (Ma Djini) Meulens (born 1869 in Otrobanda), Brenneker/Juliana 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 440, NatAr).

16 Interview Ma Chichi (born 1853), Brenneker/Juliana, 1958 (Zikinzá-collection, T 607, NatAr).

the hope of being able to choose the work, and indeed the life, that the formerly enslaved workers desired. Below can be found another variant:

Libertat galité	Freedom, equality
Mi shon n' por bistimi heru mas	My master won't put iron bars on me anymore
Libertat galité	Freedom, equality
Mi shon n' por bistimi heru mas	My master won't put iron bars on me anymore
Libertat galité	Freedom, equality
Shon n'por suta katibu mas	The master cannot beat slaves anymore
Libertat galité	Freedom, equality
Shon n'por suta katibu mas	The master cannot beat slaves anymore
Libertat galité	Freedom, equality
Shon muhé mes lo laba tayó	The mistress herself will do the dishes
Libertat galité	Freedom, equality
Shon hòmber mes lo laba koprá. ¹⁷	The master himself will wash his chamber pot.

The following is yet another variant:

Libertat galité	Freedom, equality
Shon muhé mes lo laba tayó	The mistress herself will do the dishes
Libertat galité	Freedom, equality
Pushi mes lo laba tayó	Even the cat will wash the dishes now
Libertat galité	Freedom, equality
Shon hòmber mes lo laba koprá. ¹⁸	The master himself will wash his chamber pot.

In general, this song vents anger at what occurred during slavery and articulates aspirations regarding a new life in freedom. It reveals the trauma of the enslaved, including the physical reality of being chained in irons and being beaten. Dependence during slavery is contrasted with independence after slavery. The last verse of most of the variants ends with

17 Interviews: Pa Allee (born 1899), Brenneker/Juliana, 1958 (T 606); Marvelita Comenencia (born 1903), Brenneker/Juliana, 1959 (Zikinzá-collection, T 611, NatAr). See also Robertico (Lai) Felicia (born 1900), Brenneker/Juliana, 6-11-1986 (T 120, Fundashon Biblioteka Públika Kòrsou) and Rosalia, 1997: 101.

18 Interview Cola Susana (born 1915), project Etnomusicologie/Allen and Gansemans, 15-5-1983, NatAr.

the conviction that, with freedom, one of the most humiliating tasks of the enslaved, i.e., washing the master's chamber pot, would come to an end.

As in the case of the song about the 1795 slave revolt, the existence of several variants of songs about abolition, gathered from consultants of different ages who were geographically dispersed across the island, can be an indication of how intensely a large segment of the Curaçaoan population experienced this second landmark event. In both cases—the 1795 slave revolt and emancipation—the songs add depth to our understanding of the impact that those events had on peoples' ideas, feelings and lives.

Final remarks

In the previous paragraphs I have given two sets of examples of how oral traditions provide a framework for better understanding historical events. The songs (and their variants) which are related to two important historic events in Curaçao—the slave revolt of 1795 and the abolition of slavery in 1863—demonstrate that orality has played a central and continuous role in retaining memory on the island. Traditional songs and other oral traditions allow us to see history from a non-hegemonic perspective—a history which includes feelings, emotions, attitudes and values. They show us how people perceived the world, understood the relationships amongst themselves, and envisioned goals to be pursued and actions to be carried out.

Such oral data can be viewed as community repositories or archives that provide a window toward examining the ways in which people define and value themselves as subjects, agents, owners of their own identities, shapers of historical events and creators of their own historical records. Oral data literally and figuratively give voice to those who have been excluded from dominant historiography. They help create a 'community of records': a type of 'mirror' in which past events and performance reflect one another in constituting the collective memory of the community.

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