

Review
Gert Oostindie and Alex van Stipriaan (eds):
Antilliaans erfgoed
[Vol. 1. Toen en nu; Vol. 2. Nu en verder.]
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Reviewed by Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger



This two-volume set on Antillean heritage, edited by two well-known Dutch historians, Gert Oostindie (Leiden University) and Alex van Stipriaan (Erasmus University Rotterdam), intends to give a general overview concerning the dynamics of the creation of the cultural heritage of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, the so-called Leeward ABC islands. The volumes present the first outcome of the research project “Travelling Caribbean Heritage” (TCH), begun in 2016 with the financial support of the *Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* or *NWO* (‘Dutch research council’). The editors invited long-standing specialists on Antillean cultural issues, such as Rosemary Allen, Liesbeth Echteld, Wim Rutgers, and Ronnie Severing, all scholars working (or emeriti) at their respective local universities, and several other researchers. They also include texts written by artists and professionals of art and art history based in the Antilles and the Netherlands.

In the first volume, subtitled “Then and now,” nine essays (and an introduction), examine issues from the past up to the present. Overwhelmingly relevant is the topic of slavery, although according to the historian and activist Jeanne Henriquez in Curaçao until around 2000 “it was still extremely sensitive to talk about slavery and its heritage” (II, 48). If we accept this statement, it is understandable that slavery and the cultures of the slave-made (*‘slaaf-gemaakte’*) people are more or less the focus of the book. And, of course, this topic is related to racism, in which discussions on the indigenous, Indian, Lebanese, Haitian, Chinese, and other national and/or ethnic associations mostly remain outside the critical scope of the contributions. One could find slavery on all three islands in colonial times, officially until 1863 – that is for more than 350 years. It was different on each of the islands and culturally most impactful in Curaçao, which was traditionally a centre for (illegal) slave trade with the surrounding Latin American countries.

The second volume also includes nine essays (and an introduction, as well as an epilogue). Most important is the relatively new interest in the Antillean heritage in the museum context, which is discussed in the texts written by Dyonna Bennett, Annemarie de Wildt, Artwell Cain, and Valika Smeulders. The Maritime Museum, the Curaçaoan Museum, the Jewish Cultural Historical Museum, the Museo Kura Olanda, the Tula Museo, the Museo pas di Pal’i Maishi, and the Museo di Tambú Shon Cola are in Curaçao.¹ And the diversity of their topics regarding the museum world in Aruba draws attention: Museo Histórico Arubano, Community Museum, Industriemuseum, National Archeological Museu, and Arikok National

¹ Tula was the name of the leader of the slave revolt in 1795 and Shon Cola (Nikolaas Obispu Susana, 1016-2003) was the name of the most important *tambú*-singer ever known. The latter is an unofficial musical genre which expressed sharp critical commentary regarding society in Papiamentu in the past, while after the Second World War a revival of *tambú* took place.

Park (AMA). The volume also contains an essay on the Antillean heritage in the museum in the Netherlands, where this focus has only been introduced in the last decade.

At least as relevant is the essay “Nation building and nation branding, 1920-2000” on Papiamentu, the everyday language of the Antillean islands (135-161). Officially a Creole language and spoken by the local citizens, it developed from a negatively valued dialect into one of the three official languages (Dutch and English being the other two) in Curaçao. This essay echoes the overall tone in the two volumes, that is, to avoid too many controversial issues. Especially concerning Papiamentu this is really a void when looking at the educational system. The efforts of making this language socially acceptable have been immense. For instance, the Kolegio Erasmo Skol di Fundeshi, founded in 1987, and counting now more than three hundred pupils, however, is not even mentioned. This college has expanded from being merely a primary school to offering education at the secondary school level, that is to say, vocational education (since 1997) and a pre-university curriculum (since 2018). The school offers bilingual education (Papiamentu and English) with Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams. The three schools, each at a different location, also teach Dutch, Spanish and English as a subject matter and at the pre-university level offers a choice between French and Mandarin. Although today Papiamentu is taught at the primary and secondary level at most of the schools on the island, the Kolegio Erasmo has pioneered the way and continues to do so under much more difficult financial conditions than the public schools, making this a unique case in the Caribbean in general.

That the editors and collaborators repeatedly use the concept *postcolonial* might suggest that they elucidate the conflicts that come along with that process. The ABC islands did not experience a significant independence movement; solely Aruba managed to obtain a *status aparte* (‘special status’) and this already by 1986. Luc Alofs is the only one to touch upon some of these efforts in his essay on the UNESCO link with the strategies on cultural heritage in the Antilles. He connects these with the necessity to educate the Antillean schoolchildren by way of offering relevant projects, outlining some models.

Placed between the different contributions, the editors included a repeated section of “Eleven voices,” commenting on “Cultural sources, slavery and identity,” “Migration and identity,” “Festivals and stories,” “Relations,” “Different sorts and measures of cultural heritage,” “Ethnicity and gender,” “Language,” “Spirituality and rituals,” and the “Nation.” These voices emerge as personal underpinnings of the topics and also contain some controversial issues, besides mentioning specific information.

Notwithstanding these voices, they do little to change the impression of the general tendency to not quite fully engage with important issues in these volumes. Their overall perspective is a Dutch one, as the editors admit in the introduction. In their opinion, the pandemic has had a huge impact on the economic situation of the islands, because tourism – their most important source of income – imploded, making these countries even more dependent on the Netherlands than before.

In that way, these well-written and illustrated editions give a useful and proper overview of certain aspects of the creation of the cultural heritage, with the editors summarizing as a general conclusion that it might be deployed for nation building and nation branding without losing itself as part of a commercial process of folklorization. But they also mention that this aim meets considerable obstacles: a lack of means, vision and support from the official island institutions and an absence of a cultural awareness in the younger generation. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, the priority is to develop a broader story of the culture and history of the Transatlantic Kingdom (II, 2). Therefore, we can hardly wait for the results of the second stage in the TCH project which, as the editors announce, will focus on Caribbean relations of the Antillean heritage. They might include research published in English and Spanish, and not only in Dutch (or in Papiamentu, which is rare), and emphasize the Antillean version of Caribbean conflictive issues, so typical for the cultural history of this region, not only in the past but also today (for instance the relationship with the European Union) in a global perspective. Perhaps they could be published in English, a widely used language at the university level in the Antilles as well as in the Netherlands, so that scholars can get a glimpse of the fact that having a postcolonial approach grounds in the effort of decolonization of the cultural strategies and the mind, not only in the Antilles but equally in the Netherlands.

About the reviewer

Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger is an independent scholar affiliated with the Justus-Liebig-University of Giessen (Germany), specializing in cultural histories of Africa (Spanish and Portuguese), Latin America, and the Caribbean. She has been a university lecturer in Europe (the Netherlands and Germany), the United States (University of Maryland, College Park) and Latin America (Chile, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Costa Rica). She translated into German and introduced two poetry volumes of Nancy Morejón: *Ruhmreiche Landschaft* (2020) and *Wilde Kohlen* (2021) and edited and translated the anthology *Augen* (2020). Recent book publications include *Modern slavery and water spirituality: A critical debate in Africa and Latin America* (Peter Lang, 2017); “Asia en América Latina,” a special issue of *la Revista crítica de*

literatura Latinoamericana, co-edited with Kim Beauchesne and Koichi Hagimoto (Tufts University/Centro de Estudios Literarios Antonio Cornejo Polar, July 2018); *Caribbean worlds-Mundos Caribeños-Mondes Caribéens*, co-edited with Gabriele Knauer (Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2020); *Geografías caleidoscópicas. América Latina y sus imaginarios intercontinentales*, co-edited with Koichi Hagimoto (Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2022). Recent chapter and journal articles include “‘Holland’ in the Caribbean: Voids between the Spanish-speaking world and the Lower Countries” in *New perspectives on Hispanic Caribbean Studies*, edited by Magdalena López and María Teresa Vera-Rojas (Springer, 2020); “Papiamentu-strategies and Négritude in Curaçao: The lives and work of Cola Debrot and Frank Martinus Arion” (2021) in *PerspectivasAfro*.

