Negotiating Gender, Citizenship and Nationhood through Universal Adult Suffrage in Curaçao

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Abstract: The role of gender in (anti) colonial thought and praxis in Curaçao is a relatively unexplored area of research, and few scholars have studied the impact of the denial of citizenship to Curaçaoan women. Until 1948, women were not considered full citizens and were excluded from suffrage rights and participation in decision-making on the basis of race, ethnicity and gender. In Curaçao, similar to the rest of the Caribbean, citizenship has been gender-laden as well as class- and race-laden. This article examines the struggle for universal adult suffrage by Curaçaoan women. It explores how pioneering women in the 1940s understood citizenship and how they sought to construct new ideologies of gender within the context of the patriarchal, race- and class-based structures of Curaçaoan society. I also consider how their successful political struggle contributed in subsequent years to anti-colonialism, including both formal decolonization and popular nationalism.

Keywords: Political citizenship, gender, universal adult suffrage, Curaçao, Dutch Caribbean

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On March 17, 1948, the bill granting universal suffrage to adult men and women was adopted in Curaçao.[1] The following year, 19,601 women and 18,087 men voted for the first time in an election under universal adult suffrage. Before 1948, Curaçaoan women had been marginal to the political decision-making processes of the society, as only men over the age of 25 with a certain of level of literacy and property ownership could vote. In the 1945 election, for example, all 4,000 voters had been men (Henriquez 2002, 188).[2]

In Curaçao, as in the rest of the Caribbean, women played an important role in the struggle to obtain universal adult suffrage. They participated at various levels in the process, including in leadership positions, and served as agents of change who empowered the other members of their gender group. By mobilizing and claiming political spaces for themselves, these pioneering women questioned the dominant patriarchal norms in Curaçaoan society. Their collective activism provides for a different image of the struggle for citizenship than the male- and Western-oriented model developed by T.H. Marshall in his classic study, *Citizenship and Social Class* (1950).

Universal adult suffrage was part of several significant changes that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century in Curaçao. In 1915, the island experienced the arrival of a major oil refinery, called CPIM, which initiated Curaçao's entry into the industrial era and slowly began to disrupt the traditional patterns of social stratification of the post-emancipation, late nineteenth and early twentieth century society.[3] Industrialization led to urbanization, as Curaçaoans increasingly left the countryside to settle in the surroundings of their newly-found work in or near the capital of Willemstad. Immigrant workers likewise settled in neighborhoods surrounding the oil refinery (Römer 1979; Groenewoud 2017, 68). The substantial influx of immigrant workers of different national and ethnic origins led to notable changes in Curaçao's demographics. During the high days of the oil-refining industry, from 1925 to 1955, the island's population tripled from 37,055 to 118,858. The peak within this period was between 1940 and 1950, when the population grew from 67,317 to 102,206 or by some 35,000 people in a decade.

As historian Franklin Knight has argued, different parts of the Caribbean region have generally experienced similar stages of development, but not simultaneously (Knight 1990: xiv). When performing comparative analyses across the region, it is important to focus on the socio-historical stages in which parallel developments took place, rather than on synchronic time periods. For example, most parts of the Caribbean experienced a severe economic downturn in the 1930s because of the Great Depression. Most notably, this period was a time of significant labour unrest in the English-speaking Caribbean (Bolland 1995). In contrast, this same decade was one of economic growth and demographic expansion in Curaçao due to the development of the CPIM oil refinery. The 1930s therefore do not easily lend themselves to synchronic comparison across imperial boundaries in the Caribbean. In the context of this volume of the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, which examines how gender shaped political ferment and anti-colonial mobilization across the region, I have chosen to focus on the 1940s as a period of significant activism on the part of women in Curaçao.

My article provides an introduction to the struggle for universal adult suffrage by Curaçaoan women. It explores how these pioneering women understood citizenship and how they sought to construct new ideologies of gender within the context of the patriarchal, race- and class-based structures of Curaçao in the 1940s. In addition, I consider how their successful political struggle contributed in the subsequent years and decades to anti-colonialism – both formal decolonization (political autonomy) and popular nationalism.

Citizenship and Gender within the Complexity of Belonging and Collective Identity

As political theorist Aaron Kamugisha has argued, citizenship goes beyond the standard legal definition of the term with its fixed understanding of individual rights and also involves a wide variety of practices of belonging and identity besides relationships with institutions (Kamugisha 2007, 21). Citizenship does not

only entail a status with resulting rights and obligations, but it is also about belonging to a group or community and the social practices that enable people to participate in shaping their societies according to their own interpretations. Other scholars, too, have connected citizenship to the creation of a sense of belonging, collectiveness and general commitment: a sense of "we" that is not necessarily based only upon ethnicity and cultural identity (Kaine et al. 2016). Key questions in this literature have been: Who belongs and what does this mean in practice (Rosaldo 2003, 3)?

Historically in the Caribbean, as a result of colonialism, slavery and indentureship, large groups of people have been socially, economically and politically excluded. In the aftermath of emancipation, these groups did not enjoy the right to participate in political decision-making. An illustration of the prevailing attitude in Curaçao can be found in a publication by J.H.J. Hamelberg (1895), a civil servant during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who argued that since blacks were not equal to whites, they should not have the right to vote. Meanwhile, the socio-economic conditions of African-descended people on the island remained depressed. Such circumstances of political and socio-economic exclusion were, of course, not conducive to creating a collective sense of belonging and identity.

How was gender constructed in relation to this sense of belonging and collective identity? Answering this question means looking at what society saw as the expected, "appropriate" roles and behaviour of women and men, as well as at the colonial and post-colonial experiences that influenced gender construction. During slavery, enslaved women on the one hand performed what was typified as women's work in the house, and on the other hand worked side by side with men doing the most arduous and strenuous work in the field. The traditional distinction between the private and public spheres, assigning women to the domestic, private arena of home and family, whereas men were expected to perform in the public realms of economics, decision-making and politics, overlooks the differences in power that dictated the social lives of men and women situated at the lowest tiers of the social hierarchy. Lower-class

women in the Caribbean, who were predominantly black, continued to suffer multiple forms of oppression long after the last enslaved women became free. Curaçao shares these historical experiences with other societies that have experienced the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery (Beckles 1999; Shepherd 1995; Scully and Paton 2005).

After abolition, which occurred in Curaçao in 1863, gender remained a critical factor shaping local society. The colonial government and the Roman Catholic Church embarked upon a "civilizing" mission toward the black lower class. With regards to women, this meant promoting values of appropriate femininity that basically relegated them to the sphere of domesticity (Allen 2007). This came together in the concept of the nuclear family, in which the woman was subordinate to and dependent upon her male partner. Dependency on men, rather than independence, was the ideal norm prescribed for women. Consequently, citizenship meant something quite different for women than for men.

The first election for political office in Curaçao took place in 1937. Before that year, a governor ruled the Dutch Caribbean colonies in the name of the Dutch Crown and political decisions were taken in The Hague, in most cases by people who did not know the colonies at all (Hoefte 2014, 47).[4] The new *Staatsregeling* [Constitutional Arrangement], introduced in 1936, established the *Staten van Curaçao*: a local Legislative Council consisting of 10 elected men and 5 men appointed by the Governor (Oostindie 2003, 61, 62). The 1936 *Staatsregeling* gave men the right to vote and to be elected through limited census and capacity suffrage. In 1937 only 6% of the male population in Curaçao could vote (Cijntje 1999, 8; Oostindie and Klinkers 2003, 61). Hence a large majority of population, especially the African-descended and all women, were deprived of one of the fundamental rights of citizens, namely participation in political decision-making (Römer 1979, 153; Roe 2016, 98).

The 1936 *Staatsregeling*, perhaps surprisingly, gave women in Curaçao the right to stand for election but not to vote (Delgado 2014; Hoefte 2007). The Roman

Catholic Church and the colonial government opposed the right of women to vote. The latter argued that women's voting rights would go against the prevailing societal values and norms and that Curaçaoan society was too primitive for women's suffrage (Delgado 2014). The exclusion of women from the political process added an additional dimension to the social discrimination faced by women in a historically male-dominated society. It affected women of all races and classes in Curaçao, but in particular black, working-class women who faced multiple degrees of exploitation and marginalization based on class, race, ethnicity, gender and religion.

In this context, the struggle for women's right to vote in twentieth-century Curaçao was not at all an easy endeavour. It required challenging the gendered ideas that consigned women to an inferior status as well as the persistent racist ideology that asserted the superiority of one race over all others. However, the struggle for universal adult suffrage shows that Curaçaoan women indeed chose to contest the existing forms of inequality in their society and to demand the right to full citizenship.

Curaçaoan Women's Unified Struggle for Universal Adult Suffrage

In 1995, I conducted an interview with Imelda Valerianus-Fermina (1916-2005), a writer and storyteller who had been active in the women's suffrage movement in Curaçao in the 1940s. She stated that when she was growing up,

> you could only vote if you had a certain amount of income. And they [the upper class] wanted to continue voting in that way to maintain their power. Once, those in power told me that we should take heed to prevent that Doctor Da Costa Gomez would allow a negro to govern us. It is the same Dr. Da Costa Gomez who provided for universal adult suffrage. I was a 37-year-old woman [*sic* about 32 years] when I signed the thank-you note to Mrs. Tendeloo [the female member of Dutch Parliament] who had supported the women in Curaçao in their struggle for suffrage. Many people at that time were quite upset, because politics was something new to

> them, something they had never heard of (Interview by Allen with Valerianus 1995).

Valerianus' respect for Dr. Da Costa Gomez's role in attaining universal adult suffrage is evident and not surprising. Dr. Moises Frumencio da Costa Gomez (1907-1966), or simply "Dòktor" as he was popularly called because of his doctoral degree in Law, was the son of a coloured mother and a white Jewish father. At age 16 he was formally recognized by his father and received the Jewish surname Da Costa Gomez (Boeldak 2014). He was first a member of the Catholic Party of Curaçao (KPC), but, articulate as he was, he left because of the party's paternalistic and condescending attitude towards women and coloured people and founded the People's National Party (NVP) in 1948 (Boeldak 2014). His party was not religion-based but appealed to the large Afro-Curaçaoan, lower-class, Catholic population and won the 1949 election with a substantial margin of the vote (Groenewoud 2017).

Dòktor applied his leadership skills to reach Afro-Curaçaoans, especially those living in the countryside who, long neglected by the colonial government, remained socially marginalized. The rural areas on the western and eastern parts of the island lacked basic facilities such as good schools, running water and electricity in contrast to the urban area in the island's centre. Although rural workers no longer depended solely upon the old estate-owning and merchant elite for work, as they found employment at the oil refinery, a large group still relied on estate owners for access to land for residence or agriculture (Groenewoud 2017;Weeber and Witteveen 2010).

As mentioned previously, Curaçaoan society of the 1940s was one in transition. The Curaçaoan sociologist Rene A. Römer states that the old society of the 19th and early 20th centuries, organized strictly along racial lines, was slowly being replaced by a more open, class-based society that provided greater opportunities for socio-economic mobility. On one hand, the oil refinery replicated the old society's race-based hierarchy inside its corporate structure, as the employees with the lowest status and pay were male working-class

blacks, both Curaçaoans and labour immigrants from the British West Indies and from other Dutch Caribbean islands. On the other hand, a new middle class was emerging, consisting also of a group of black residents who, through improved jobs with a fixed income, could achieve a degree of financial security and have access to education, healthcare, telecommunications, electricity, and other prized resources (Römer 1973). Jaap Van Soest (1977), who studied the socio-economic impact of the oil refinery on Curaçaoan society in the twentieth century, likewise concludes that the refinery's arrival in 1915 generated more economic opportunities for Afro-Curaçaoans.

Paul Blanshard, an American author who compared Curaçao to other Caribbean societies in his foundational book *Democracy and Empire in the Caribbean* (1947), also provides some useful insights into the society during the interwar era. He describes the deeply racialized social, economic and political situation in which the African-descended working-class found themselves in the Dutch Caribbean colonies of Suriname, Aruba and Curaçao and which was comparable to the conditions on Caribbean islands under British rule.

Along with the economic impact, the oil refinery would also have an important impact on gender relationships in interwar Curaçao. It upheld the perceived separation between the public and private spheres and defined the proper social role of women to be that of caretaker within the nuclear family, with the male head as the breadwinner. The oil company provided certain fringe benefits for married couples and such employment-related policies helped to promote nuclear families (Abrahams-Van der Mark 1973, 17-23).

Imelda Valerianus was married to a blue-collar oil refinery worker and recalled that his position in the company was not quite as strong as one might think. He could be dismissed based on any suspicion of ill performance, as there was no labour union to protect the workers in those days. She was well aware of the race-based power differences and oppression that both she and her husband experienced in Curaçao's society. Children of the working class were still confined to a second-rate education in terms of both teachers and content.

Oral histories of people who lived in the countryside during this period relate that going to school was sometimes hindered as children had nothing to eat or had to first fetch water from a neighbourhood well, which often contained little water because of drought. In Curaçao, a uniform education programme based on modern academic requirements was not initiated until September 1954 (Römer 1977). As a working-class woman, Valerianus also faced gender inequality. When she became empowered and participated in the struggle for universal adult suffrage, she fought against the attitudes and ideologies that maintained women's subordination (Interview by Allen with Valerianus 1995).[5]

The struggle for the right to vote in Curaçao was not an affair of elite women only. Women from all classes organized against the traditional gender-based notions that kept them excluded from political participation. Valerianus was a member of the noteworthy *Damanan di Djarason* (Wednesday Ladies), a group that obtained their name from the fact that they used to meet every Wednesday in the headquarters of the People's National Party (NVP). They belonged to the Party's women's wing (Pieters-Kwiers 2013, 125-126; Henriquez 2002, 136). The social background of the Damanan di Djarason was mixed. One key member was Clarita da Costa Gomez (1890-1964), an aunt of Dòktor, who was described as a woman with *kabei na djente* (literally meaning "with hair on her teeth"), because she was quite assertive, which in those days was not commonly viewed as a positive female characteristic. Other advocates of women's suffrage in the group included Thelma Römer and Mena van West-Davelaar who were instrumental in conveying letters to the Dutch House of Representatives in support of women's suffrage in Curaçao (Henriquez 2002,135-139).

The People's Catholic Party (KVP), which came out of the Catholic Party of Curaçao (KPC) in 1948, was also politically active on behalf of women's suffrage. Adèle Rigaud founded and became the president of the party's women's division, which had the appropriate name of *Luchadónan pa Derecho di Voto pa Hende Muhé* [Champions of the Right to Vote for Women] (Henriquez 2002). She started petitions in support of women's suffrage, which

were also endorsed by the *Damanan di Djarason*. Women were thus able to transcend party lines in the interest of a common purpose (Delgado 2014). Remarkably, they were able to obtain 1,013 signatures in favour of suffrage in just four days of canvassing.

On February 26, 1948, the suffrage movement applied the (conventional) political strategy of sending a signature petition to the Dutch Prime Minister. The petition stated that "they [women] want to give their full strength to Curaçao, not only in the family relationship, but also through the ballot box, by exercising their influence on the next election for representation" (quoted in Gibbes et al. 2015, 185). They furthermore emphasized their role in the development of the state and demanded their entitlement to citizenship by stating that "their education, employment and position were similar to those of the men and that they therefore should have the same civil rights as the men" (quoted in Gibbes 2015, 185).

The suffrage documents show that women felt that they had to address and counteract the perception that their participation in politics would be a threat to the patriarchal order of things, especially the family. They therefore stressed that women's capabilities were meant to serve the well-being of not only the family but of the whole country. At the same time, however, these words strongly contested the traditional position of women in Curaçaoan society. Through these words they demanded a place in the public domain of politics, which had been dominated by upper-class white men who opposed the move toward universal adult suffrage on traditional gender as well as racial and class grounds.

The February 1948 petition does not necessarily reveal an anti-colonial attitude vis-à-vis the Netherlands as the colonial mother country. Rather, it drew upon the example of the Netherlands, where universal adult suffrage had been introduced in 1918 through the mass mobilization of women, Catholics and socialists among others. The petition does show a patriotic attachment to the island and its development, encompassing both women and men. Perhaps it could be said that in 1948 the primary concern of these pioneering women was

equality of citizenship with both voting men in Curaçao and voting women and men in the metropole within the existing constitutional framework.

In response to the combined efforts of different groups of women activists in Curaçao, the Dutch House of Representatives passed a law enfranchising all Curaçaoan women in 1948, a right which they turned to good avail in the 1949 Curaçao election. In that landmark election, 37,688 people voted, with women casting their vote for the first time and constituting 52% of the overall voters. Utilizing their new right, women had participated in large numbers in the island's political process.

As previously mentioned, Curaçaoan women already had the right to stand for election—without being able to vote—since 1937. However, it was not until 1949 that women actually began to run for elected office. In contrast, in the Dutch Caribbean colony of Suriname, the planter's daughter Grace Schneiders-Howard (1869-1968) became the first woman elected to the *Staten van Suriname* (Legislative Council) in 1938, a decade before Curaçaoan women pursued elective office (Hoefte 2007).

Why Curaçaoan women began to run for office only as of 1949 requires further study. One possible explanation may be that women became more empowered and motivated through their personal activism for suffrage. Following the attainment of universal suffrage in 1948, Angela Altagracia de Lannoy-Willems (1913-1983) ran for office in 1949 and L.C. van der Linde-Helmijr in 1951. They became the first two female members of the Island Legislative Council of Curaçao (Pieters Kwiers 2013, 125-126; Henriquez 2002; Gibbes et al. 2015). After 1949, women also moved up within political parties and took on important administrative functions. For instance, Adèle Rigaud became the first woman to hold a leadership position as vice-president of the People's Catholic Party (KVP).[6]

Conservative forces did not always favour women's full participation in the society and questioned the way in which women had chosen to fulfil their

citizenship through suffrage. It should be noted that legal equality does not automatically do away with the many forms of inequality that occur in society. Legislation and institutionalization of citizen participation do not necessarily lead to the protection or inclusion of women and, therefore, there remained issues that required further gender-conscious attention. After the attainment of universal adult suffrage, women in Curaçao still had to struggle against prejudice, in particular when they participated actively as vote-getters in the political arena. For example, A.A. de Lannoy was portrayed in a newspaper caricature as a naked Lady Godiva on a donkey, which, however, did not deter her from politics (Henriquez 2002, 160). Curaçao's pioneering women had to confront the dominant ideology that affirmed separate spheres for men and women. Women transgressing these traditional social boundaries were believed to go against their presumed "nature" (meaning they were solely suited for housework and caregiving) and to undermine the family institution. But by not adhering to these normative gender roles and values in their struggle for the equal right to vote and in their subsequent political actions, these pioneering women helped to gradually bring about different views of women's role and behaviour in Curaçaoan society.

From Suffrage to Anti-colonialism and Constitutional Autonomy

In Curaçao and most other Caribbean countries, obtaining universal adult suffrage predated obtaining greater constitutional autonomy or self-governance.[7] Equality as citizens generally came first; sovereignty (or a certain degree of it) as a nation/state would come later. In a sense, universal adult suffrage probably functioned as a pre-condition or stepping-stone for the anti-colonial ferment that in subsequent years and decades would be unleashed and lead to constitutional reform or transformation throughout the region. It appears that broadening the right to vote expanded the base for political consciousness and allowed the anti-colonial and nationalist agenda to become both popularized and galvanized.

This certainly seems to have been the case in Curaçao. As mentioned, Dòktor used a strategy of empowerment and emancipation: he sought to help his followers overcome the multi-generational effects of slavery and colonialism by making them more aware of their social position. The model that he applied was one of inclusiveness. For instance, he involved women – such as the *Damanan di Djarason* – in his political party and in government. For Dòktor, empowerment also meant first becoming more autonomous from the mother country and taking command of domestic affairs, as a stepping-stone toward standing fully on one's own feet. After universal adult suffrage was attained in 1948, his party intensified the struggle for political autonomy (internal self-governance) from the Netherlands, and this was achieved six years later in 1954. In that year, the *Statuut* [Charter] of the Kingdom of the Netherlands came into force, which granted constitutional autonomy to the Netherlands Antilles, the six-island Dutch Caribbean federation of which Curaçao formed a part. Constitutional autonomy at that time meant that the Kingdom was responsible for nationality, foreign affairs, national defense and cassation, while the Netherlands Antilles were in charge of their domestic affairs.[8] Women's role in the struggle for constitutional autonomy needs to be researched more meticulously, as it seems to be erased from the official historical record.

Various explanations have been given for the fact that anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments manifested more strongly in Curaçao after World War II than before. One plausible explanation points to a growing self-esteem among the local elites during World War II, as the island experienced an economic boom by supplying gasoline to the Allied Forces and became less dependent on the mother country, which was at war. In this way, the local elite developed a more locally grounded, creole identity separate from the Netherlands and the new Dutch expatriates who had arrived on the island since the opening of the oil refinery and had taken over many key positions (Dalhuisen et al. 2009, 95). Antoine Maduro, who had worked at the oil refinery from 1926 until 1960 and who was also an expert in the creole language Papiamentu, underscores the fact that the Dutch expatriate workers in the company had more privileges than the local/creole whites (Maduro 2015, 55-56). As a result, the refinery began to

tear away at the traditional power position of the old estate-owning elite during the interwar period. Following World War II, constitutional autonomy allowed the old elite to regain some power in the realm of politics and local governance.

Among the middle and lower classes, it is likely that the expansion of adult suffrage contributed to shifting individual discontent and resistance into collective political consciousness. Blanshard (1947) calls attention to the growing resistance to European colonial domination by coloured Curaçaoans in the 1940s. Already in the 1930s, working-class Curaçaoan authors such as Willem Kroon, Manuel Fray, Miguel Suriel and Pedro Pablo Medardo de Marchena took great pride in writing in the local creole language, Papiamentu, which can be considered a revolutionary act for that period (Broek 1989).[9] In his writings from the 1950s, the Catholic priest M.D. Latour (1953) complained that there was a growing urge to restore and preserve *tambú*, which had been outlawed in 1936 (Rosalia 1997, 147). The *tambú* is a form of Afro-Curaçaoan drumming and dancing that has been severely condemned by the Church and the state, yet was able to persist (Rosalia 1997).[10]In 1950, under the leadership of Da Costa Gomez, the Legislative Council eliminated the regulation that prohibited dance parties with *tambú* music and thenceforth such parties were allowed if a permit was formally requested (Rosalia 1997, 292). This was an important step towards the emancipation of the Curaçaoan black working class. In her recent work, historian Margo Groenewoud (2017) provides further evidence of the increasing self-awareness and resistance on the island starting in the 1940s.

One concrete example of nationalist discontent was the discourse of Pedro Pablo "Dada" Medardo de Marchena (1899-1968). He was the son of a coloured mother and a white Jewish father, and he was emotionally and financially supported in his education by his father. Medardo criticized the Roman Catholic mission and the Dutch colonial government, but he also attacked the oil company which was becoming very powerful "like a state within a state" (Soest 1977, 302-12; Broek 2011, 88).[11] In a 1929 publication, *Ignorancia o educando un pueblo* (Ignorance or educated a community), Medardo questioned the fact that 66 years after abolition, Curaçao still had not

produced a single black doctor, engineer or lawyer (Marchena 1929, 7). A growing group of young coloured intellectuals endorsed Medado's critique of the Church, the state and the oil company.[12]

It is not easy to find early anti-colonial discourse expressed by women, but the following *banderita*, dating back to the 1940s or 1950s, is worth mentioning.[13] A banderita [literally "small flag"] is a short, written verse, generally of a few lines, printed on a small coloured piece of paper. A *banderita* expresses critical feelings about a situation or person and is often based on a few lines of a popular *tambú* (Berry-Haseth 1994; Broek 1995). According to René Rosalia, women primarily made use of this form of expression, which allowed them to confront negative stereotyping if they participated in the *tambú* (Rosalia 1997, 234). Rosa Helena Koek-Bennett, who was born in the Dutch Caribbean island of St. Eustatius but at a young age came to live in Curaçao with her mother, recalled several of these *banderitas* in a 1992 interview (Interview by Rose Mary Allen and Jeanne Henriquez). One is about a man who is challenged to take down the Dutch colonial flag in Curaçao's centre of governance. The *banderita* has an anti-colonial undertone, while also questioning male authority and ridiculing male boasting. The Papiamentu text (Koek 1992) and its translation are as follows:

Bo di bo ta balente	You pretend to be brave
Ku bo tin diploma di bòksdó	And to have the diploma of a boxer
Dikon bo no por rabia drenta Fòrti	Why don't you get angry, enter the Fort [the seat of the colonial administrative offices]
Bai baha bandera ulandes	And take down the Dutch flag
Anto e ora ei t'abo ta manda.	Only then can you say that you are truly in charge.

Anti-colonialism and nationalism experienced its apex in Curaçao from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Especially after the 30th of May 1969 Revolt, appreciation and recognition of Curaçaoan culture and Afro-Curaçaoan identity in particular grew significantly, both popularly and formally. Some of the

formal milestones of this period were the institution of a new national/island anthem in 1979 and Flag Day in 1984 as well as the proclamation in 1984 of August 17, 1795 (the date of the island's largest slave revolt) as the Day of the Struggle for Freedom. In these and other instances of anti-colonialism and nationalism, the participation of Curaçaoan women – heirs to the pioneering women of the suffrage movement in the 1940s – has been visible and often prominent. From the 1970s onwards, women continued to organize themselves on larger scales and to take leadership roles in issues regarding their own development through social movements and civil-society mobilization. Moreover, they have produced several female Prime Ministers on the political level. Their activism has at times been militant, but always dedicated and crucial.

Conclusion

In this article I have chronicled the struggle for universal adult suffrage waged by women in Curaçao in the 1940s. Their activism can be seen as part of an attempt to give full shape to their citizenship and to achieve equality with both voting men in Curaçao and voting women and men in the metropole. The establishment of universal adult suffrage in 1948 would influence Curaçaoan anti-colonialism in indirect ways. It created possibilities for greater political engagement, participation, activism and social advancement of women as well as men and thereby served as an important galvanizing factor for the process that led to constitutional autonomy for the Netherlands Antilles (the federation of which Curaçao formed part) in 1954. It also laid the groundwork for increasing nationalist ferment in Curaçao from the late 1960s to early 1980s, which challenged hegemonic constructions of race, colour, culture and nationhood. Ultimately, the Curaçaoan case is an example of how Caribbean women's pioneering activism in the first half of the twentieth century has been an understated yet essential component of the region's continuing journey toward equality, freedom and justice.

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[1] Curaçao is situated in the southern Caribbean, between Aruba and Bonaire and north of Venezuela. Curaçao was one of the islands comprising the former Dutch Caribbean federation called the Netherlands Antilles (1954-2010). In 2010, this federation fell apart and Curaçao became an internally self-governing entity or "country" with direct ties to the Netherlands.

[2] "Diverse berichten," De West: Nieuwsblad uit en voor Suriname, July 26, 1948, 2.

[3] Its original name, NV Curaçaoasche Petroleum Maatschappij, was changed to Curaçaose Petroleum Industrie Maatschappij (CPIM) in 1925 (Broek 2011, 85). Locally, it was always popularly known simply as "Shell," as it was a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, the British-Dutch oil multinational.

[4] In this sense Curaçao lagged behind some British and French Caribbean colonies where certain citizens already had the right to vote in the nineteenth century.

[5] The quotation is part of an interview that I conducted with Valerianus. At the time of the interview, she was a well-known writer and storyteller. She had been a member of the group of working-class women who signed the petition for women's suffrage, and she was very much inspired by Dr. Da Costa Gomez's emancipation efforts to transform the deeply rooted self-doubt and self-rejection among the black population. In her interview, she gave a candid observation of what it meant to lack certain rights in Curaçao's post-World War II society. For a brief biographical portrait of the Dutch feminist activist N.S.C. Tendeloo, see https://www.parlement.com/id/vg09llab3yy2/n_s_c_corry_tendeloo.

[6] "Weg met 8 —8 uit meer dan 3.000 kelen," *Amigoe*, December 15, 1949, 1.

[7] The obvious exceptions are Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, which all gained independence before the twentieth century and introduced universal adult suffrage in 1934, 1942 and 1950 respectively.

[8] On October 10, 2010, new constitutional structures came into effect. Since then, the Kingdom consists of four parts: the Netherlands (including the islands of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba each as an overseas municipality) and Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten each as an autonomous "country." Autonomy for Curaçao means that it is responsible for its own domestic affairs.

[9] Although there were and still are voices in the society that view Papiamentu as a hindrance to Curaçao's development, the use of Papiamentu has historically functioned as an important indicator of Curaçaoan cultural identity.

[10] At the time, the *tambú* functioned as an expression of subaltern resistance to the dominant class and racial values in the society; it challenged notions of what was viewed as acceptable in terms of social, ethnic and national identities (Rosalia 2002, 1).

[11] It should be mentioned that the oil company was a powerful institution supported by the Dutch colonial state through laws, favourable tax regulations and other facilities (Soest 1977, 302-312; Broek 2011, 88). Van Soest, who performed research in the Shell archives – for which he was later reprimanded as he published information deemed confidential by the company – states that at a certain point in time, the company even obtained a seat in government (*Koloniale Raad* or Colonial Council) and in the Chamber of Commerce and that letters from the CPIM to government functioned more as directives than as requests (Broek 2011, 88).

[12] Because of his riotous publication, Medardo was banished from Curaçao and imprisoned on the Dutch Caribbean island of Bonaire during World War II together with Germans whom the colonial government considered enemy aliens. Medardo's state of mind was even questioned. After his internment, he married a local woman from Bonaire and did not write critical texts anymore.

[13] Jeanne Henriquez and Rose Mary Allen, *An Oral History Project of Women*, Institute of Archeology and Anthropology of the Netherlands Antilles and Centrum for the Development of Women (SEDA), July 1992.