

CUBA, LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Narratives of Curaçao men who went to Cuba and returned

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Donde Cuba adjá tin oro
Mucha mah ke aki tin piedi
Por eso pue tanta hente
ke ta yá en ke bolberá
Adjá un hardin de muchachita
dulce manera caña mes
Por la Sabado asina
si bo ta sali pa deberti
Ay ta djòdjò bo ta djòdjò.¹

INTRODUCTION

The poem "Donde Cuba" by the well-known Curaçao poet Elis Juliana with the fictive "Palu Wico" as the principal character is based on the many Curaçao men who left to Cuba at the beginning of the XXth century to go and work there, in the sugar cane fields. Although the picture in this poem is too exaggerated to generalize, it does give us some insight into the cultural influence connected with the emigration to Cuba.

This article is about people who just as Palu Wico left to Cuba at the beginning of this century to seek for a better life. It is based on interviews held in the years 1984 to 1986 with a few of these men about their stay in Cuba.

In Curaçao, during periods of economic depression, migration both as a temporary or permanent search for work, has been a well established feature; e.g. after the emancipation in 1863, in the years when the economy of the island was devas-

tated, many people left to places such as Venezuela, Colombia and Surinam to work in those countries.²

Although emigration played an important role in the history of the island, historiography has dedicated little attention to it. One seldom looked at the effects of the emigrations in the life of the emigrating workers and in those who remained behind. It is a common characteristic to deny the role of the popular class in the history of Curaçao.

Compared to previous migrations, however, the emigration to Cuba received some more attention. Dr. A. F. Paula used the vast amount of existing written documents to publish his book "Problemen rondom de emigratie van arbeiders uit de kolonie Curaçao naar Cuba 1917-1937." ("Problems around the emigration of workers from the colony of Curaçao to Cuba 1917-1937").³ From his analysis it is clearly evident that the migration to Cuba had its consequences both for the emigrants and their families. The incessant stream of bad tidings from Cuba revealed the bad situation the workers encountered themselves.⁴ Next to that, many families of these men were found themselves abandoned in distressful cir-

1 Part of the poem by Elis Juliana, "Donde Cuba". In: Flor di Anglo, Drukkerij Scherpenheuvel, 1961
Translation:

jThere is a lot of gold in Cuba
Much more than we have stone here
That's why so many people
who are there, don't want to return
There are plenty girls
as sweet as sugar cane itself
Saturdays, for example,
when you go out to enjoy yourself,
Oh, you will have a great time!

2 See J. van soest, "Olie als water", de Walburg Pers, Zutphen, 1977, page 20 and also J.H. Dekker, "Curaçao zonder/met shell". Een bijdrage tot bestudering van demografische, economische en sociale processen in de periode 1900-1929. De Walburg Pers, Zutphen, 1982, page 98.

3 Paula, A. F., "Problemen rondom de emigratie van arbeiders uit de kolonie Curaçao naar Cuba, 1917-1937". Centraal Historisch Archief, Curaçao, 1973.

4 Very significant is the anonymous letter dated March 1918 and sent to the General Prosecutor. In this letter the author, in the name of some Curaçao men recruited by Leon Prince and brought to Chaparra, denounced the bad situation they encountered themselves. Centraal Historisch Archief.

acumstances⁵. From Paula's book, one can get a picture of the problems these men faced in Cuba such as deficient housing, ill-treatment, discrimination, etc. The interviews with these men on which this article is based, were directed to find out what this movement had meant to the emigrants themselves in order to provide a broader perception of this particular movement. An attempt has been made to capture the joy and suffering concerning their adjustment to the new surrounding. It also meant to reveal their philosophy of life.

METHOD AND TECHNIQUES

It turned out to be a difficult process to trace informants who had been in Cuba and who were still alive. Eventhough the Central Historical Archives in Curaçao disposed of name-lists of Curacao men who had left to Cuba, it was not easy to find those men by means of the lists. Only the existing lists of those who had left in 1920 also contained the localities of those men. The lack of information such as date of birth and dwelling on the other lists, made it difficult to locate them. These men had also frequently occurring Curaçao names, which combined with the lack of data, made it very time-consuming and hard to establish if the names on the lists appeared in the Register of Population.

An appeal was then made on social instances such as old people's homes, daycare centers for senior citizens and those who dealt with senior citizens in their daily activities -after explaining the purpose of the project- to inquire among their people whether they had gone to Cuba at the beginning of this century. The informants obtained in this way were also asked if they still knew some people who had also gone to Cuba and who were still alive.

As a result, the names of 35 men and a woman were obtained. All the informants had to be convinced of the importance of cooperating, which sometimes was difficult. The fact that they, as poors, had never had the opportunity to express themselves, clearly played a role in this. People who had been made mute desintegrated and never taken into account, had to be convinced of

the opposite. Finally 25 of these men decided to cooperate. The rest dropped out either through insanity or they didn't want to talk about Cuba at all. Inquiries made among the relatives of these men, indicated that they had very unpleasant experiences in Cuba and didn't want to remember about it at all. The only woman found was willing to cooperate.

The informants were interviewed in their local language "Papiamentu", either at home or at the old people's homes. The questions asked to them were semi structured and they were allowed to talk freely about their life experiences in Cuba. The interviews covered subjects such as life style before leaving, motives for leaving, socio cultural conditions in Cuba with reference to working and living conditions, contact with Cubans and other emigrants, health, spiritual life, recreational-patterns and homecoming.

The interviews were taped with the men's permission and knowledge. At times, the tape recorder created a problem when the topic became too confidential, such as regarding their sexual life in Cuba. At that point I was requested to turn off the tape. The interviews were transcribed literally in order to capture specific terms and expressions which illuminated and underlined certain aspects of the emigration. The interviewees also sang some songs about Cuba, which reflected the intensity of their experiences.

This paper does not intend to generalize the acquired views of the informants' experiences for the whole group of Curaçao labourers who went to Cuba at the beginning of the XXth century. The amount of interviewees in relation to the total of more or less 2,300 men, mentioned by the written sources is too small to arrive to founded generalizations⁶. Besides that, the fact that these interviews had taken place 67 years after the beginning of the emigration meant that one had interviewed only those who had left at a young age. The rest were dead by now. Of the 25 informants only two were older than 25 when they left Curaçao, and the rest was between 17 and 25. The question remains thus whether the experiences of those who had left at an older age were similar to those who left younger.

By means of oral history, the names of women were also provided. The only woman interviewed was one of the many Curaçao women who had also left to Cuba to work. In order to avoid the bad

5 See the petitions sent to the Governor of Curaçao by wives of men who had gone to Cuba for his mediation in getting money from their men in Cuba. See also the letter of the Governor of Curaçao dated February 25th, 1920, N° 713, to the vice-consul of the Netherlands in Santiago de Cuba, in which he referred to his former letter of the July 1st, 1919, N° 3455, mentioning again the neglect of the families who had remained. A letter dated January 3rd, 1920, with similar message was sent by the Governor to Dr. Eugenio Molinet, administrator of the Chaparra Sugar Co., Chaparra, Cuba.

6 The number of about 2,300 men is based on the figures given by A. F. Paula in his book, "problemen...", page 28. The data are based on the amount of men who had left from Curaçao to Cuba. Probably their number could be larger as some had also left from Aruba to go to Cuba. See Paula, page 42.

economic situation, she had left her child with her mother and worked 16 years as a "yaya" (nanny) for a Curaçao Jewish family in Cuba. Many of the Curaçao women had done similar work for Jewish families of Curaçaos who had bought estates in Cuba at the beginning of this century and had settled there.

For this article, however, only the findings of the male population will be used. The interviews with the earlier mentioned female informant contained interesting facts, which can serve as a base for further studies of woman emigration, which is an unexplored field in the Curaçao history.

MOTIVES FOR EMIGRATION

From the interviews, it became evident that the informants intended this emigration to be a temporary one. They left to Cuba with a clearly set goal, to earn as much money as possible, then to return and achieve something. This could vary, from having their brother or sister do their first communion⁷ till buying a piece of land to build their own house.⁸

The fact (that) they could earn more in Cuba played an important role to their emigration. Before 1921, when the sugar economy in Cuba was still flourishing, they indeed could earn more in that island.⁹ In the interviews they gave an account of their previous socioeconomic condition to explain why they had eventually left to Cuba.

An informant, who had been working in the harbour at the age of 16 discharging and loading

coals, describes the situation in the harbour as follows:

"Working in the harbour is working like an animal. A very hard work. Sometimes I make 200, sometimes 250, baskets a day. You have to carry 100 baskets a day in order to earn one guilder. Go up the stairs, full your barrow, push your barrow, empty your barrow. Even if your barrow almost turns over, you may not loose any piece of coal. If you do that you are lost. There are a lot of boys waiting for work. From there I went to Cuba. They were looking for people to go".¹⁰

Another informants who had worked at the Curaçao Petroleum Company (C.P.M.) in its initial stage described the situation there as such:

"Before I left to Cuba I was working for the "Isla" (local name for the C.P.M.). We cleaned the place called Valentijn, which used to be a cemetery, for Fl. 1.50 and two cents a day. Let me make it clear to you, I do not like to work somewhere and don't see any money. Fl 1.50 and two cents. With that money I had to support my mother. How could I have done that?".¹¹

In certain areas of the countryside where it still existed the "pagatera" system¹² the following citation illustrates the dissatisfaction with the existing situation:

"Here in the countryside we worked from six in the morning until six in the afternoon. With overseers controlling us. Men stop. And what did we earn? Thirty cents and two pounds of cornmeal".¹³ Their stories form a clear contrast to the motives given by the director of the Mining Company in his letter of lit December 1920 to the then governor, concerning the emigration to Cuba. According to the director:

"We are of the emphatic opinion that the mat-

7 In Curaçao, the First Communion is still very elaborated celebrated. Much money is spent on the clothes of the child and on the party. This pattern of behavior was also mentioned by the Priest M. D. Latour who published his article in the Catholic newspaper "Amigoe di Curaçao", on Saturday, July 13th, 1940. The priest also cites another priest who in a letter of May 26, 1890 disapproves this tradition.

8 According to the local tradition a man had to built his own house before marriage.

9 Paula, A. F., 1973, op. cit, page 29 and 46 and J. Dekker, 1982, op. cit., page 103-113, indicate the wages one could earn in Curaçao in the agricultural and industrial sectors in that period. In its monthly report of November 1920, the oil company which had just established itself complaints of the fact that it is difficult to get any workers, because they can't earn 4 to 5 dollars a day cutting cane in Cuba. The report also mentions that skilled labourers such as carpenters, masons and others, are also leaving the island.

10 Oral History project, Project Cuba, No. 5 AAINA 1984.

11 Oral History Project, Project Cuba No. 39, AAINA 1986

12 Pagatera is a system in which some exslaves before the Emancipation remained living on the land of the plantation owners. For that, they had to work for the land owner, a certain time without pay. They in return would get a piece of land to build their homes and to cultivate. Some could use the water in the wells. This system existed before the Emancipation, but continued after it, because most of the cultivable lands were in hands of the plantation owners.

12 Oral History Project, Project Cuba, N° 28, AAINA 1984.

ter is not really one of wages, but that the men would rather go to Cuba even if they could obtain nearly the same money here, the attraction being the escape from their obligations to their families rather than the high wages received, or rather the combination of these circumstances. Were the question one of wages alone, then one would naturally suppose that the men would wish to gain money by working regularly and doing a proper day's work here, but, on the average, this is emphatically not the case. Were it so, we should continue raising our wages here, but we have naturally stopped at the point when increased wages result in less work being done".¹⁴ The declarations of the director clearly show the racist ideas, then current, and which ascribed to the black man characteristics such as irresponsibility towards his family, squandering and laziness.

The appeal of the higher Cuban wages was reinforced by the successful stories which circulated. Those who had left before the informants and who had returned, either to visit their families and then to go back to Cuba, or to stay home for good, had their influence on the informants. Men, who in the past dressed very poorly, returned finely dressed, with hat and leather shoes on. Some of them demonstratively placed a dollar-bill in the pocket of their shirt as handkerchief.

The exhibition of so much richness had its influence on those who had not decided to emigrate yet. One of the informants admits that:

"Everybody who came back from Cuba boasted about the money they had received. Money! Oh my God! That made me also go there".¹⁵

Another one expressed this metaphorically by saying:

"Curaçao people who went to Cuba would say that lizards rustled around with dollars".¹⁶

Their expectations of Cuba were also guided by the money received upon inscription at recruitment. Just by writing one's name or by placing a cross, as many had done because they couldn't read or write, one could get a certain amount of money: then Cuba should be the land where much money could be made. Money upon recruit-

ment was divided by the recruiting instance between the emigrant and his family.¹⁷

RECRUITMENT AND DEPARTURE

According to A.F. Paula, the emigrants weren't treated honestly at the recruitment. Promises made to them were not fulfilled. From the stories of those interviewed, it is evident that they had not the slightest idea of what was awaiting them and that during their stay in Cuba they were going to face all kind of unexpected and unthinkable situations. They were given very little information at the recruitment. For example, none of these men knew at the departure where they were going to be in Cuba. According to an informant:

"They took you wherever they wanted to take you. They didn't tell you absolutely any thing. They told you that you were going to work in Cuba. When you arrived there, they told these people stay over there and these other over there".¹⁸

The informant named Coco Cuales, a certain Henriquez, and Yutchi Prince (Leon Prince) as recruiters. About Yutchi Prince, there exists a popular song in which someone asks him for money and he replies that he only has Cuban money.²⁰ According to the informants, some men would enter their name and accept the money, but not appear on the day of departure. Money might have played a role here or also the fact that emotionally they could not depart because of their families. This phenomenon of accepting money and not appearing occurred principally when the emigration was taking place for a while and people received information about men dying of injuries and also of fever, proving that Cuba had also other aspects than only earning much money. These bad tidings had effect especially on the youngest people, coming from families of which one or more sons had either died in Cuba or nothing had been heard from them. They would not receive permission from their parents to leave. This was given as a reason by men who were of the same age of the informants, but had not gone to Cuba in those days. Informants who were under adult age and needed permission of their parents to go but did not get any, tried tricks such as having someone else than their parents to sign the recruitment contract.

¹⁴ Letter dated December 11 1920 from the Director of the Phosphate Company to the Governor of Curaçao. Central Historical Archives.

¹⁵ Oral History Project. Project Cuba, N° 18, AAINA 1984. ft

¹⁶ Oral History Project, Project Cuba, N° 40, AAINA 1986.

¹⁷ Oral sources, See also the list of 1920 concernig contracts closed in the particular year. Central Historical Archives.

¹⁸ Paula, A F., 1973, op. cit., page 29-33.

¹⁹ Oral History Project, Project Cuba, N° 18, AAINA 1984.

²⁰ Oral History Project, Project Cuba, N° 48, AAINA 1986.

The day of departure was full of emotions. The following song was sang by the departing men as farewell. The informants who sang this song remembered it as a very sad one, and tears would come out of their eyes while singing it.

"Adios mi ta bai
sin bini mas
Adios mi ta bai
sin bini mas
Perdonabo tur lokual
b'a insultami
Rosanan a bolbe
krese den mi jardin
meskos ku nos amor
a bolbe uni ku otro".²¹

Remembering this farewell songs and the emotions they brought even after all those years, may prove that these men did not leave premeditated to escape their family obligations, as the earlier mentioned letter of the director states. The fact that many of them started to neglect their family obligations was more the consequence of the unanticipated circumstances they encountered in Cuba.

ONCE IN CUBA

Although most men were recruited for the American Sugar Industry, they were spread upon arrival over several "colonias" like the Granel I, Granel II, Beton I, Beton II, Santa Maria and others.

The text is as follows:

"Ai, m'a pidi jutchi
fiami 5 dolo

Jutchi a kontestami
ta plak'i Cuba e tin

Refrain:

Jutchi Prince
ta Cuba mi kier bai

Translation:

Oh, I have asked Jutchi
to lend me 5 dollars

Jutchi answered me
that he only has Cuban money

Refrain:

Jutchi Prince
To Cuba I want to go.

Another variant of the refrain is:

Yutchi Prince
Mi si n'ta bai Cuba mas

Translation:

Yutchi Prince
I am not going to Cuba any more.

21 Oral History Project, Project Cuba, N° 54, AAINA 1986.

The "colonias" belonged to land owners who depended on this sugar industry for the refinement of their cane.²² A large part of the Cuban sugar production was financed by U.S. capital, which at that time dominated an important part of the Cuban economy.²³ The "colonias" where the Curaçons were sent to work were in the east of Cuba. These were areas recently brought under cultivation for growing sugar production.²⁴

One of the surprises these men found in Cuba was the fact that they had to pay back the money received at the recruitment. They had not been informed of this recruitment moment. The money was deducted from their first wage, together with what they owed for buying their first necessities, such as hammocks and blankets, in the store at the "colonias". Some of the men who were informed of this by men who had already experienced it could escape the payment by leaving to another "colonia", where during the period when the Cuban economy was flourishing, labourers were needed in great quantity.

WORK IN CUBA

None of those interviewed had any experience in sugar cane cutting before leaving to Cuba. Curaçao never had a plantation economy with the sugar cane as an important product. Those who came from the "kunuku", Banda Bou and Banda Riba (countryside), did know the technique of maize cutting, but this was totally different from that of sugar cane cutting.²⁵ It was very important to learn the technique, which implied holding the "wampara" (machete) with the right hand and holding the sugar cane with the other to subsequently cut it quickly. The money to be earned depended on the amount of "arowa di kaña" one could cut. ("arowa" -in Spanish arroba- means 25 pounds of weight). Also in view of one's security, it was important to have a perfect command of this technique. The informants themselves never had any accident with the "wampara" but had seen some "compañeros" injure their arms and legs

23 Guerra, Ramiro, "Azucar y poblacion en las Antillas", published by the Editorial Ciencias sociales, la Habana 1976

24 L. H. Jenks, "Our Cuban Colony"; a study in sugar. New York, Vanguard, 1970 and J. Do-minguez, Cuba; Order and Revolution, Cambridge, Mass., The Belknap Press, 1978. See also Eric Williams, From Columbus to Castro. The history of the Caribbean 1492-1969, London, 1970, page 429-442. J. H. Parry and P. M. Sherlock, A Short History of the West Indies, the Macmillan Press, 1971 page 255-258.

24 See note 23.

25 The cutting of maize was done with a small sharp knife. The machete was used to cut the maize stalk, which was used for the mud houses and also so food for animals.

with this machete, which had to be always very sharp. Such persons were handicapped for life without any welfare facilities.²⁶

After having worked as "machetero" for some time, those men knew sufficiently about the different types of sugar cane in order to distinguish between "kañakawasu", as they called the thin type, and the heavier type. The latter was preferred to the "kaha kawasu" because with this type of cane it took less effort to get more "arowa di kaña" (arrobas de caña).

Besides working as cane cutters, some of them had also loaded cane in the train wagons which took the cane to the "ingenios" (sugar factories). Some of them who had stayed longer in Cuba and who had found their way, had also worked as "karetero" (in Spanish "carretero"). The "karetero" took the sugar cane loaded in the cart drawn by oxen, to be weighted at the "grua". Then he received from the "pisado di kaña" a paper mentioning the amount for the work done. He had to share this amount with the "machetero". According to them the wage of the "karetero" could increase by taking sugar-cane from different cane cutters.

A complaint often heard was that they received less money than what they had worked for. The "pisado de kaña", who had to weight the cane and write down amount, was suspected of the less than the real weight which resulted thus in less payment. The fact that most of these men could not read or write played a big role here. This type of swindle increased after the sugar crisis of 1921.²⁷ They were paid in "bale" (vale=tickets) which were only valid in the store of the "colonia" where they worked. Sometimes they were not paid at all.

One of the aspects which made a heavy impression on the Curaçao men were the punishments one could get in Cuba. It was corporal punishment, sometimes delivered with a whip. The "colonias" had special "guardias" who were feared, because they would shoot someone at the minimal offense. One, for example, could be seriously punished when caught with matches in the cane-fields. The "guardias" would come and ask in a hypocritical way whether one had matches. Those who were as naive as to give them were pun-

nished so severely, as an informant said strikingly, "that they wished that they were never born".

SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Before Cuba experienced the sugar-crisis in 1921, the wages were very high. According to the informants, these could be 6 to 7 dollars, which dropped from 30 to 40 cents. The sugar crisis was often mentioned by these men to indicate the social situation in Cuba. Before the crisis, one could get another kind of work after the "zafra" (harvest), like cleaning the land and planting new sugar cane. When the economy declined, it became difficult to get work in the "tempu morto" (Spanish "tiempo muerto"), as the period after the harvest was called.

Cuba before the crisis was not only a country to earn much money but had also many opportunities to spend the money earned. The money would be spent on fancy clothes, parties, gambling and women.²⁸ Many Curaçao men, to quote an informant, became victims of women through their credulity and lack of discipline. Fights over women, caused by jealousy, could end in murder and man slaughter. This "pathological obsession" towards women is also mentioned by the Cuban historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals in his study of slavery in the Caribbean. According to Fraginals, this phenomenon was caused by the fact that there were more male than female slaves.²⁹ Probably factors such as living in an all-male environment and the poor recreational facilities contributed to this pattern of behaviour among the Curaçao men. Added to this was also the lack of social control of parents, family, clergy and neighborhood. In Cuba they depended on the advices of other men in the "colonias", or had to find their own way.

Their living conditions were not at all favourable. They lacked any comfort, privacy and decency. The informants related that they had to be constantly on guard of being robbed. At the beginning when they went to work, they left their valuables at the shopkeepers or the administrators of the "colonia". After being robbed by these same people they tried to carry along as much as possible their money and other valuables.

The informants criticized the fact that the barracks called "barracones" were opened at all sides and did not protect them from fever causing mosquitos. Many of them recalled countrymen,

26 Like some reported cases of Curaçao men who had returned without limbs and had appealed on others for living. See also Laurencio Emilia-no westhout's letter dated on March 4th, 1933. Having worked in Cuba and lost his right arm there, he wrote to the governor of Curaçao to get a job according to his physical condition.

27 Oral History Project, Project Cuba, No. 28, AAINA, 1984

28 They would talk about their experiences with women after several visits had been paid to them. Oral History Project, Project Cuba N° 53, AAINA 1986.

29 Moreno Fraginals, M., *África en América Latina*, México Siglo 21 editores, 1977, page 21.

who had died from fever. They had left the country with specific expectations and plans. There are no exact figures to substantiate the amount of men who died in Cuba. An informant described this situation at the "barracón":

"During the yellow fever epidemic people died like flies. Then we went to Babinei. There, we also found people dying. Everyday you could hear: "mayoral, 4 people died today". The mayoral would say: ¡Ay, caramba! Dig a big hole and throw all the bodies inside. You, who are still alive, drink your rum. We would then dig a very big hole, cut the hammocks and will throw the bodies and everything else inside the hole"³⁰

The report of October 3rd, 1919, coming from the district master of the 2nd and 3rd districts, written by request of the then governor to talk with some men who had returned from Cuba, mentioned that medical arrangements had been made in some "colonias".³¹ From the conversations of the informants this seemed to be the case, although some cases of medical negligence were also mentioned.

The Curaçao men who, together with other people from the Dutch Antilles, were called "Holandeses" by the Cubans, were absorbed by a large number of Haitians, Jamaicans and people from the rest of the Caribbean. Their number was small compared to the other nationalities present. According to Eric Williams 217.000 labourers from Haiti, Jamaica and Puerto Rico moved to Cuba in the period between 1913 and 1924. Only in 1920, almost 63,000 persons left Haiti, Jamaica and Puerto Rico to go to Cuba.³²

With respect to their relationships with the non-Antilleans, those who had stayed longer re-

plied differently from those who stayed for a short while in Cuba. The latter would mention factors such as language barriers, and the voodoo practices of the Haitians in particular, to explain the bad relationships between them and the foreigners.³³ Their relationships with the Cubans were also ambivalent. Most of the time they had builded up a good relationship with black Cubans, but complained of being discriminated by the white Cubans.³⁴

The following song points out the social relationship between them and the Cubans. According to the singer, it was one of those they used to sing when they were free and had nothing to do. The contents reveals some problems in the relationships. However, the fact that it was sang without any problem suggests some tolerance. How far this tolerance is representative for all is another question, if one trusts the testimonies about Curaçao men being murdered by Cuban "compañeros".

According to the informant, the Cuban "compañero" would begin singing:

"Esta mañana en la iglesia
yo vi una muchacha de Curazao.
Era una muchacha muy bonita
delgadita de cintura
como me da ganas de enamorarla
le fui a preguntar a su madre
y su madre me dijo
que era chica todavía
yo digo a su madre
que le deja por si misma
porque era fea".³⁵

Our informant answered to this song as follows:

"Si yo voy para Curazao
Si yo voy para Curazao
Yo no guardo en Cuba mas
Yo no guardo en Cuba mas
Yo no guardo en Cuba mas

30 Oral History Project, Project Cuva, N° 45, AAINA 1986.

31 Paula, A. F., 1973, op. cit., page 38.

32 Different authors explain why Cuba needed contract hired labourers. According to Eric Williams, op. cit., page 438, the input of foreign labourers was due to the loss of considerable manpower during the wars for independence and the abolition of slave trade. Ramiro Guerra, 1976, op. cit., 171, reveals that foreigners were brought in, not because of lack of sufficient Cuban workers but because these people were less demanding than Cuban workers. Coming from poor countries they were willing to work for less. This statement is also backed by Dumoulin, who in his book "Azúcar y lucha de clases, 1917", published in 1980 by the Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, attributed the increased importance of foreign contract labourers in Cuba to the revolt of 1917. In this revolt, Cubans were demanding better working conditions and salaries to cope with the inflation of the First World War. He quotes a member of the

"Asociacion para el Fomento de la Inmigracion", who in an interview for the paper "El Día", stated that the power of the Cuban workers was the result of the lack of sufficient manual workers in Cuba. This power could be diminished by introducing foreign labour on the Cuban labour market. Dumoulin, J., 1980, page 138.

30 One of the rumours against the Haitians was that they stole small children to use their heart in V o o d o o rituals.

34 Some informants related that when they had finished using a cup in the train, they would break this cup in the presence to show the whites that they would not get to drink out of the same cup.

35 Oral History Project, Cuba Project, N° 45, AAINA 1986.

porque en Cuba se matan gente porque en Cuba se comen gente".³⁶

Cuba had also its nice part. The informants would enthusiastically talk about their first time of travelling by train, of seeing skyscrapers and juke boxes. They would talk very lively about the parties in Cuba, which they would attend in weekends and on general feast days. Principally, the evening before Christmas, the "Noche buena", was celebrated exuberantly, with lots of drinks and food, among others the Cuban "lechón" (sucking pig). When they received their pay they would take the train and travel to cities in the neighbourhood, such as Chaparra, Manatí, Delicias, Holguín, etc. Remarkable was also the fact that a great deal of informants had learnt to play musical instruments like the "bongó", the guitar and the "tres" (a guitar with three double strings). Some continued to play these instruments after they returned and taught others to play them. The movement to Cuba influenced the musical area in Curaçao, an informant who claims to be the first to introduce the "bongó" drums in Curaçao, relates the following:

"Besides learning to play the guitar in Cuba, I was also taught to play the bongó by a black man whose name was Andrés. He had a wooden leg. Together with Wawa, another man from Curaçao, we started to play the bongó. At first, we were stopped, as they thought that it was the "tambú" (the authentic drum of Curaçao, which was prohibited for long). We however went to the countryside, where nobody stopped us. From there we went to town. We continued playing it until it became popular".³⁷

RETURN

For many people the return to their country of birth was not easy.³⁸ Half of the informants could go back because they had saved some money. Others could not return. Among them there are two men who remained longer than 30 years in Cuba. One of them because he had gone there just before the sugar crisis and had not earned enough to come back on such a short turn. To the question of why he did not make use of the possibility offered by the Dutch colonial government to transport the stranded labourers, he replied that, due to being working in the interior of the country the other countrymen and himself heard afterwards that there had been a ship to transport the

stranded Curaçao men in Cuba.

The other one only returned in 1953 after staying 34 years in Cuba. He did not want to come back as a poor beggar and to be a nuisance to his family. He had gone to Cuba to prevent this. He was even offered Cuban citizenship, which he refused, because according to him he would never "change his religion and nationality". He had always worked with the idea of returning to his homeland some day.

Of those who stayed in Cuba and never returned, the principal reason given for this was that they had created a family with Cuban ladies, which emotionally made it difficult to leave. There are no exact numbers to provide evidence of those who remained in Cuba.

Very striking is the story of one of the informants coming from the countryside, and who during the interviews had attacked the semifederal conditions in his region of birth. He did not want to come to Curaçao because, according to him, in Cuba he was treated as a human being despite of his black color:

"When you are in Cuba, you don't want to leave. You are treated very well. So is Cuba. They talk nice to you. They don't disregard you. Here in Curaçao, when you are poor, you are disregarded. When you are poor and black, you don't count. In Cuba everybody is equal. I did not want to come back. It is through my brother, with whom I had gone, that I returned."³⁹

This testimony does not correspond to the real situation in Cuba at that time. Blacks in the Cuban society also had an inferior status, against which they had revolted several times. That is why one should consider this testimony as an implicit critic on the Black-White relationship in Curaçao, which was not so harmonious as one would normally believe. It is remarkable that most informants manifested a critical outlook of the society. Most of them found that they had changed because of their stay in Cuba. According to one: "when you had gone to Cuba, you would return more independent". Principally, in the conversation of those who had stayed for a long while in Cuba, one could deduct a sense of self-awareness. They had learnt to stand on their own feet and to solve their own problems. This self-awareness was adapted in their personal and working sphere. They had, together with the Cuban "compañeros", laid down their work as a demand for better salary. Informants who had returned after 1939 were already members of the Cuban trade unions.

36 Ibid.

37 Oral History Project, Cuba Project, N° 35. AAINA 1985.

38 A. F. Paula deals elaborately with the problems these men encountered to return. See also archives, O.D. 25-10. Return of Curaçao workers to Curaçao, Central Historical Archives.

39 Oral History Project, Project Cuba No 28, AAINA 1984.

working sphere. They had, together with the Cuban "compañeros", laid down their work as a demand for better salary. Informants who had returned after 1939 were already members of the Cuban trade unions. Probably that is one of the reasons why these men were considered lazy and impertinent by the established class in Curaçao.

All informants were proud of the fact that they had gone to Cuba. Specially those who came with some funds, and not as poor tramps, who are treated with respect by the age group. Most of the informants are called "Cubanos" and in their "Pa-piamentu" (Creole language of Curaçao), they will always put in some Spanish words. Most of them still keep abreast of the situation in Cuba. Specially the present government of Fidel Castro has their attention. Among those who had worked in the same "colonias", there is a kind of group-ties. They visit each other when possible. During those conversations they would brag about their stay in Cuba and exaggerate their accomplishments. Those conversations are also very interesting as they give a view of the image those who had gone to Cuba want to portray, which is "someone who is very sturdy and who is not afraid of any danger".

FINAL REMARKS

The movement to Cuba was a way for these men to escape the all-pervading class differences of their society. Fifty years after the emancipation of slaves, they as descendants of slaves were still confined to poor social and economic conditions with hardly any possibility to transcend. Going to Cuba meant more than alleviating their poverty. It also meant enhancing one's own social status. The high wages promised at recruitment, the recruitment money and a boastful attitude characteristic of those who had gone to Cuba before, contributed to rising expectations. The dynamics of this movement were stimulated by the labour-demands in Cuba. Compared to the large amount of other foreigners brought in as contract labourers, the number of Curaçaons was very small. They are hardly mentioned in existing

literature concerning migration to Cuba. Nevertheless, this movement had its impact on the Curaçao society. This was caused partially because these men failed to attain their goal, set at emigration. The situation in Cuba proved quite different than what they had envisioned. It meant hard work under unfavourable conditions. It also meant becoming victims of chating, injustice, discrimination and aggression. Some of them were able to survive this situation, others not.

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40 Paula, A. F., 1973, op. cit., page 63.
Translation of song, Note 21: Goodbye, I am leaving
without returning
Goodbye I am leaving
without returning
I forgive you all
your insults
Roses are growing again
in my garden
Like our love
which has united again.