

# Missionary propaganda in the creole language of the Dutch Antilles

*The foundation of a Caribbean island's literature, 1920-1940*<sup>1</sup>

Aart G. Broek

NTT 73 (2): 105–115

DOI: 10.5117/NTT2019.2.003.BROE

## Abstract

The Roman Catholic Apostolic Church in Curaçao promoted the literary writing in the creole language Papiamentu in the 1920s and 1930s. The literary authors were native speakers of the language. Their prose writing was meant to promote Catholicism, both its religious creeds and, more particularly, its principles for everyday life. This creativity was unprecedented and grew in specifically demanding times for the missionary church, while Curaçao society rapidly industrialized. Missionary work was threatened by modern pleasures and comforts that loosened the bond of the people with the missionaries. This literary 'propaganda', though appreciated for being in Papiamentu, was shoved aside in the 1940s by secularized writing in the creole vernacular. Nonetheless, a firm stepping stone for writing in Papiamentu had been laid down.

**Keywords:** Curaçao, Papiamentu, Roman Catholic Church, Mission

In 1919 *de Curaçaosche Roomsche Katholieke Volksbond* [the Curaçao Roman Catholic People's Union] was founded 'under the protection of God Almighty' and in accordance with the principles of the Roman Catholic

1 Based on research incorporated in A.G. Broek, *De kleur van mijn eiland; Ideologie en schrijven in het Papiamentu sinds 1863*, Leiden 2006, see 54-71, including more recent research of my own and others, referred to hereafter. I owe a debt of gratitude to Scott Rollins for translational support of the present text.

Apostolic Church in Curaçao.<sup>2</sup> The major instigators were the Dominican priest Petrus I. Verriet and the layman Antoine J. Pijpers. They were inspired by the encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*.<sup>3</sup> The union's objective was 'to promote the moral and material interests of the people of the Colony of Curaçao'.<sup>4</sup> It strove to effectuate this by means of, among other things, founding evening schools for free education of craftsmen, uniting craftsmen into bodies resembling labor union, establishing special funds for its members in order to offer them financial support in cases of sickness or death, and the publishing of a weekly newspaper. Under the wings of this People's Union, the first issue of *La Union* [Unity] appeared on October 27, 1922, which would reserve space for stories and serialized novels in Papiamentu – the creole language of the majority of the population on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao.<sup>5</sup> The editors had to rely partially on translations, on which the older Roman Catholic weekly newspaper *La Cruz* [The Cross], founded in 1900, had depended almost exclusively. Quite soon, however, *La Union* was able to include narrative prose written originally in Papiamentu. For over a decade Willem Eligio Kroon (Curaçao, December 1, 1886-January 26, 1949) and Manuel Antonio Fray (Curaçao, December 1, 1897-December 3, 1976) contributed serialized novels to the People's Union's newspaper. Their

2 The impact of the mission on virtually every aspect of the lives of – especially Afro-Antillean – people on the Dutch Leeward Islands can hardly be overestimated; for details of the history, dating back to the decades of slavery, see contributions to B. Boudewijnse, H. Middelbrink, C. van de Woestijne (eds.), *Kerkwandel en lekenhandel; De rooms-katholieke kerk op Curaçao*, Amsterdam 1992, as well as to V. Marcha (ed.), *Gods wijngaard in de West; De grondvesting, ontwikkeling en groei van het missiewerk van de Nederlandse missionarissen op de eilanden van de Nederlandse Antillen en Aruba*, Amsterdam 2009; also see, besides various commemorative books, T. de Jong, N. Hendrikse, *De gezegende erfenis: nalatenschap van 1200 Nederlandse religieuzen op Curaçao*, Hilvarenbeek 2008; A.R. Lampe, *Yo ten ombre libertad: Iglesia y estado en la Sociedad esclavista de Curazao (1816-1863)*, Amsterdam 1988; and W. Rutgers et al., *Jacobus Putman; Godsdienst, taal en onderwijs op Curaçao in de negentiende eeuw*, Willemstad, Curaçao, 2016, and, on the early colonial decades, see: Ch.W.M. Schunck, *Intolerante tolerantie; De geschiedenis van de katholieke missionering op Curacao*, Nijmegen 2019.

3 Originally from 1891, the encyclical letter by Pope Leo XIII was translated into Papiamentu in 1931 and was serialized in *La Union*.

4 Reglement van de Curaçaosche Roomsche Katholieke Volksbond [Regulations of the Curaçao Roman Catholic People's Union], Willemstad, Curaçao 1919.

5 On history, grammar and lexicography respectively, see B. Jacobs, *Origins of a Creole: the history of Papiamentu and its African ties*, Boston 2012; F. van Putte, I. van Putte-de Windt, *Grammatica van het Papiaments; Vormen en communicatieve strategieën*, Zutphen 2014; I. van Putte-de Windt, F. van Putte, *Woordenboek Nederlands – Papiaments/Dikshonario Papiamentu – Hulandes*, Zutphen 2005 (two volumes).

combined creativity was rounded off by Miguel Suriel (Curaçao, March 24, 1890–November 27, 1963) with his novel *Muher Culpable* [Guilty Woman]. Within a decade a dozen novels were produced under missionary encouragement and thus laid a foundation for an impressive tradition of literary writing in the Creole language.<sup>6</sup>

## Virtuous Reading Matter

The arrival of a refinery in 1915 – for the processing of oil from Venezuela – changed Curaçao's society in a short space of time from an agrarian, mercantile society into a modern industrialized and capitalist society. The rapid changes this wrought in socio-cultural terms posed a considerable threat to the Roman Catholic mission.<sup>7</sup> It was in danger of losing its influence over the Afro-Curaçaoan populace and was hardly able to enlarge its influence over the labor migrants from other Caribbean islands. In order to perpetuate and preferably increase its domination, one of the means it deemed effective was a certain kind of 'virtuous' literature.

The Roman Catholic Church considered novels to have an extremely large effect on the thoughts and behavior of young people especially. Even though literature is not always intent on doing this, even so – from a Catholic point of view – literature's primary task is to persuade, convince,

6 'Giambo bieuw ta bolbe na wea' [Old love never dies] was the first novel by Willem Kroon to be serialized in *La Union*, October 30, 1924–March 26, 1925; the first lengthy novel by Manuel Fraai was his 'Un sacrificio' [A sacrifice] in *La Union*, April 2–October 22, 1925; Suriel's novel appeared in *La Union*, November 13, 1932–November 2, 1933. Decades later a Dutch translation of one of Kroon's novels was discovered by Jan Noordegraaf in the Leiden university library, viz. 'Mester a deré, promé el a dreña casa' [He had to be buried before he could marry], originally serialized in Papiamentu in *La Union*, November 25, 1926–January 27, 1927. The concept translation in manuscript was by the Dutch linguist D.C. Hessling (1859–1941) and dated from the early 1930s; on which J. Noordegraaf, 'Van classicus tot creolist; D.C. Hessling en de West', *Nieuw Letterkundig Magazijn*, 35:1 (2017), 25–29. The translation was serialized in the Dutch language daily *Antilliaans Dagblad*, Curaçao, February 4–April 19, 2016, edited by A.G. Broek.

7 On the impact see A.G. Broek, *Geboeid door macht en onmacht; De geschiedenis van de politie op de Nederlands-Caribische eilanden, 1839–2010*, Amsterdam 2011; M. Groenewoud, *Nou koest, nou kalm; De ontwikkeling van de Curaçaose samenleving, 1915–1973, van koloniaal en kerkelijk gezag naar zelfbestuur en burgerschap*, Leiden 2017; G.J. Oostindie, I. Klinkers, *Knellende koninkrijksbanden; Het Nederlandse dekolonisatiebeleid in de Caraïben, 1940–2000*, Amsterdam 2001; J. van Soest, *Olie als water*, Zutphen 1977; P. Verton, *Burgers & broeders; Goed bestuur en natievorming in Curaçao*, Volendam 2017.

make people think and act according to the moral, to the import of the text. Several articles explicitly expounding on this conviction can be found in the Roman Catholic media in the decades before World War II – in particular in *La Cruz*, *La Union* and the Dutch language newspaper *Amigoe di Curaçao* [Friend of Curaçao], such as ‘Een bisschoppelijk woord over Lectuur’ [A Word from the Bishop on Reading Matter], by Monsignor Leijten, Bishop of Breda, in the March 19, 1910 issue of *Amigoe*. The following statements from the pen of the bishop illustrate the views with regard to the supposed effects literature has, particularly novels.

Therefore beware of vicious reading matter, my Beloved Believers! Fail not to take heed: a vicious book is capable of perverting an innocent soul and devastating an entire life (...) However, Beloved Believers, what shall We tell you about the perversion and danger of these books, fully deserving the name of evil novels? Of those disgraceful pieces of writing, in which impiety vies with depravity? In which sin, preferably of the most scandalous sort, is introduced, taught, encouraged and gloried by writers – often with unmistakable talent, but always without morality and faith, without honor and good conscience – and is even presented as a sacred human right? (...) Of this there is no doubt, Beloved Believers; if indeed immorality and unbelief have been proliferated to such a shocking extent these days; if indeed we witness with each day that passes a growing number of crimes and criminals, mostly young people, if indeed so many youngsters take their own lives in moments of despair, if indeed so many a degenerated son or deeply fallen daughter brings grief and disgrace upon the parental home, then one of the main reasons for all this evil can be found in the reading of vicious novels.

Based on the supposition that literature per definition fulfills an informative and, most of all, persuasive function, the conviction logically follows that literature cannot have a primarily aesthetic function. Literature cannot have as its most important function the enjoyment of the way in which language gives shape to stocks of ideas.

In his column ‘Curaçaose Ditjes and Datjes’ [Curaçaoan Odds and Ends] in the October 24, 1925 edition of the *Amigoe di Curaçao* Father Jan Paul Delgeur makes this view more explicit. The relevant quotation is taken from a discussion between Delgeur and Rudolf Boskaljon, secretary of the Curaçaosche Schouwburg Maatschappij [Curaçao Theater Society]. The Curaçao Theater Society was attempting to raise funds for the construction of a new theater in Willemstad.

And come on, in God's name, don't give me that same old *l'art pour l'art* bromide, hollow sounding words that don't say anything. Art ought to *improve* a human being, *to elevate him*. (...) A performance such as the one given last week, for instance, to celebrate the jubilee of the St. Josephgezellen Vereniging "Triumfo di Cruz" ["Triumph of the Cross" by the Union of Saint Joseph Companions] has an ennobling, favorable effect, does a world of good, while some risqué movie, comedy or drama with perverse tendencies stifles the sublime pure innocence of a human heart, making it ripe for the coarsest excesses in the area of morals.

Delgeur's playful tone of voice expresses a serious thought, in which a distinction is put forward between what is 'virtuous' and what is 'vicious' literature. Following on from the function of informing and persuading referred to earlier, good literature is only a text with a primarily Roman Catholic didactic character.

## Papiamentu

The view that such 'virtuous' texts ought to be laid before the eyes of the Dutch Antillean – primarily Afro-Antillean – laymen and those of little faith, only provides partial insight into the breeding ground of literature written in Papiamentu in the decades before World War II.<sup>8</sup> In general the ideas and ideals referred to could just as well have been a stimulus for a Christianization of the worldly Spanish language literature that already existed on the island or for the creation of a religiously tinted Dutch language literature. After all during this period of time there was a widespread call for the development of knowledge and skills in both these languages.<sup>9</sup>

The bi-weekly liberal Protestant newspaper *Voz di Pueblo* [People's Voice] contributed its bit to the often heated discussions about how the

8 From the data in *Koloniaal Verslag* [Colonial Reports] of the respective years we learn that between 1920 and 1940 the population on the Dutch Leeward Islands grew from ca. 48.000 to 105.000 inhabitants, of which Catholic Afro-Antilleans would form a decreasing number, i.e. from ca. 93% to 80%; also see R.A. Römer, *Een volk op weg; Een sociologisch historische studie van de Curaçaose samenleving*, Zutphen 1979, 70.

9 On the writing in Spanish and other languages in the Dutch Leeward islands – Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao – in earlier decades, see W.G. Rutgers, *Schrijven is zilver, spreken is goud*, Utrecht 1994, and more particularly E.A.M. Ehteld, *Literatura en español en Curazao al cambio del siglo: en busca de textos desconocidos de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX y de las primeras décadas del siglo XX*, Utrecht 1999.

educational system should be run in the first decades of the twentieth century, among other things, by publishing two articles written by a certain Max, entitled 'Pa Moralidad' [For the Sake of Morality]. From his line of argument come the following quotations that delineate his aversion to Papiamentu and preference for Spanish.

Education in the outlying districts can never amount to anything, because the Roman Catholic sisters only teach the children in patois, in Papiamentu (...) If it is not the intention of the fathers to keep the people ignorant, why don't they put Papiamentu to one side and work principally in Spanish? But the priests do not talk about that, because if they taught these people to read Spanish, they would then go through all those books that would make them lose their faith. (...) Instilling ignorance and superstition is the task of the fathers, so that they become submissive and profitable sheep.<sup>10</sup>

This plea in favor of Spanish and against Papiamentu was not written in Spanish, but in Papiamentu, presumably to reach a wider readership. The Creole was spoken as mother tongue by virtually everyone native to the island, irrespective of social stratum and ethnic background. Max's appeal found its counterpart among the members of the Roman Catholic mission with their marked preference for Dutch and aversion to Papiamentu, viz. the Fraters van Tilburg [Friars of Tilburg]. This brotherhood had been busy providing education on the island ever since 1886. Friar W.J. Waalboomers, 'secondary school teacher of Dutch language and literature', can be considered to be their spokesman. He responded to a series of articles written by the Reverend G.J. Eybers, entitled 'Tets over Papiamentu en zijn schrijfwijze' [Some notes on Papiamentu and its spelling], in which, among other things, Papiamentu is defended as a language in its own right (rather than an inferior patois). Given the vehemence of his reaction Walboomers more than holds his own with the Max quoted above.

If someone asserts that 'Papiamentu is not a language', by which they mean to say that it's not a civilized language, that it's not the bearer of a culture of its own and a characteristic expression of a civilized and developed mentality, then such an assertion is only too true and not at all stupid. (...) Is it then so difficult to realize what a blessing is given to a people with a civilized language

<sup>10</sup> *Voz di Pueblo*, April 21, 1917; detailed on the aversion against and (mis)appraisal of Papiamentu, see F. van Putte, *Dede pikiña ku su bisiaña; Papiamentu – Nederlands en de onverwerkt verleden tijd*, Zutphen 1999.

and all the salutary benefits that lie within it? Why ought one descend to the lower sphere of an *uncivilized* language, in order to elevate people to higher regions, if one can extend to them a hand from on high? (...) In terms of structure Papiamentu is a primitive language, as a result of which it is far below every civilized language, and as such bears witness to a primitive and feeble realm of thought. That this is inconsistent with reality, at least when it comes to a rather large number of Curaçaoans, is because they have come into contact with civilized languages.<sup>11</sup>

A week later Friar Walboomers found himself confronted by Father Poiesz. In unwavering terms Poiesz articulated how the Roman Catholic mission, in this case the Dominican missionaries, views its task and the corresponding means and attitude with which the Afro-Antillean populace is valued. This attitude must have influenced the origin of literature written in Papiamentu.

Papiamentu has been chosen by the Catholic Mission as its medium of instruction in the culture which they have given to the people. It has not extended a hand from on high with an unknown language. It has followed a wise custom: *ex notis ad ignota procedere*. To uplift a people from the known to the unknown. With the help of one's own language to raise a people to a language, to a level of development it has not known. (...) And that is our wish as well. To do the one thing and not abstain from the other. To retain Dutch, develop it, perfect it. Yet at the same time not to neglect Papiamentu, since Papiamentu is such a powerful means of raising a child, to persuade it and in that way raise it to a higher level of development. With ten words spoken in flowing and fluent Papiamentu one shall exert more influence on the heart, and therefore on the formation of character in the child, than with a hundred words in Dutch, which it may understand but not *feel*.<sup>12</sup>

Poiesz's words leave no room for doubt that the nurturing task of the Roman Catholic mission, here geared toward education, can only be realized with the help of Papiamentu.<sup>13</sup>

11 *Amigoe*, October 16, 1915

12 *Amigoe di Curaçao*, October 23, 1915.

13 As such this position was likewise defended in other parts of the Caribbean region and also yielded for the first time – whether literary or not – yet certainly religiously tinted writings in such Creole languages as Haitian Créole, Sranan Tongo in Suriname, and the so-called *Negerhollands* (Negro-Dutch) of the Danish Virgin Islands. A comparative study is still waiting to be carried out. However, the case of prose writing in Papiamentu and the missionary impetus seems remarkable enough, judging from the present state of research.



On Curaçao the Catholic missionaries remained true to their views with regard to the role of Papiamentu in ‘the elevation of a people.’ – both parties in their respective areas of practice, the Friars almost exclusively in secondary education and the Fathers in all sorts of other areas, including – besides their priestly duties – the press. It is for that matter clear that they did not disagree in any other aspect. The Afro-Antillean population ought to, in both their eyes, be instilled with the Dutch colonial patterns and Roman Catholic ideology.

### Catholic Thesis Novels

What was expected of ‘virtuous’ literature was that it inculcated in the Antillean reader Christian mores and values, and serve as a convincing alternative: on the one hand to the age-old Afro-Antillean patterns of life, on the other hand to the intrusive, freer, more profane expressions that arose mainly due to the arrival of the oil refinery and formed a threat to the Roman Catholic view of life and wisdom.<sup>14</sup> The Afro-Curaçaoan writers Kroon, Fray and Suriel supported the educational and civilizing task and labor of the Roman Catholic mission especially in the form of short stories and more particularly thesis novels (*romans à thèse*).<sup>15</sup> As illustration the course of action of one such novel.

In twenty chapters Kroon’s *Giambo bieuw a bolbe na wea* [Old love never dies] relates the adventures of the Salazar family: the married couple Luisa and Antonio, their two children Matilde (daughter of seventeen) and Juan (the son who celebrates his twenty-fifth birthday in the course of the novel) and Enrique, Antonio’s brother. When the lottery ticket which Antonio has bought wins his \$20,000 US dollars, the family’s life changes radically. The enormous sum of money enables him in principle to exchange the simple and relatively poor life of a carpenter’s family for that of a well-to-do family and to take part in *e parti di sociedad cu ta considera* [in that part of society that has standing]. This possibility splits the family into two camps, on one side Luisa and Enrique, who want to continue living in the old style they are accustomed to, and on the other side Matilde and Juan, supported by their father Antonio, who can scarcely resist the temptations of prosperity,

14 On the Afro-Antillean patterns, see R.M. Allen, *Di ke manera? A social history of Afro-Curaçaoans, 1863-1917*, Amsterdam 2007.

15 An authoritative study of this particular genre as such is S. Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions. The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*, New York 1983.



status, fashion and so on. Despite constant warnings by Luisa, especially Juan and Matilde give in to such modern luxuries as the latest clothing designed in America, ballroom dancing, a vacation trip to Aruba, neglecting old friendships while entering into new ones with *hende di categoria* [people of standing]. For Matilde this results in a marriage proposal from one Gilberto Damon, a charmer whose background is obscured at first. By accepting Gilberto's advances, Matilde refuses to accept any longer her old childhood love for Balentin – a boy from a humble background. Juan too allows himself to be seduced by Alicia, a young woman 'connected with that part of society which has social standing' – that is, in Juan's eyes. However, before Juan and Matilde plunge into absolute misery through the actual fact of marriage they come to realize that both Gilberto and Alicia are only after their money, and that the old, trusted style of life which God-fearing Luisa leads, offers the right thing to hold onto. Matilde asks Balentien for forgiveness and says yes to his marriage proposal, or, in terms of the novel: *giambo bieuw a bolbe na wea*, i.e. literally: 'There is still some ochre soup left in the pot', an expression that is used especially to indicate that something is 'back on' between two old lovers after having been separated for a while: old love never dies. In Kroon's novel it not only refers to the love between Matilde and Balentin, but also the return of Juan and Matilde to Luisa's Roman Catholic way of life.

In Kroon's novel, as in the other novels and stories written in Papiamentu in the 1920s and 1930s, the characters – and with them the readers – come to learn and accept the precepts of the Catholic church, its faith and way of living, as the only true ones. The saving hand of Catholicism is posed as a solution to mistakes that are made and the extremely dire consequences they bring with them. Holding on to the mode of life and dogmas of faith of the Catholic church saves the characters – and, supposedly, the readers – from the dangers to which Juan, Matilde and Lucina have been exposed when they succumb to the supposed pleasures that the change(s) Curaçao is offering its inhabitants and the freer moral notions that are taking root.

It goes without saying that one also finds explicit, non-fictionalized expositions of all elements of Catholicism in the columns of *La Cruz* and *La Union*, both as far as daily life is concerned (which also dominates in the thesis novel) as well as more religious acts and thought. Week in week out the readers of these two Roman Catholic weekly newspapers are informed about how to act and think in such matters as going to the theater, fashion, food and beverages, parties and other forms of entertainment, the buying of lottery tickets, behavior in public, work, renting houses, sport, church attendance, confession, conjugal ethics. A novel such as *Giambo bieuw a*

*bolbe* in fact reiterates and reinforces the message which reaches the readers of the newspapers in various different ways as well. Those who could read would read out loud the instalments, which was greatly appreciated, given a still vivid oral tradition. Nevertheless this form of repetition and reinforcement disappears after more than a decade of having been at the forefront.

## Secularization

In the course of the 1930s the tension between the Roman Catholic system of values defended in the *romans à thèse* and the 'damnable' secular life styles shifted seriously, both in actual fact as well as in the perceptions of writers and readers. Society changed to such an extent that the novels involved completely overshot their mark. Ever since the arrival of the oil refinery the static, post-emancipation society, in which especially the Afro-Antillean population had taken a back seat, was forced to make way for a potentially much more dynamic society at an increasing pace.<sup>16</sup> Social mobility, based on education, profession and lifestyle began to gain greater headway, as did the Dutch language.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1920s the possibility of Afro-Antilleans improving their social position and the attendant necessary changes in the outlook on life and ways of living clashed with the paternalistic and conservative thought of the Roman Catholic mission as never before.<sup>18</sup> Yet this fostered the *raison d'être* for the thesis novel. The 1930s made clear that modes of thought based on Roman Catholic precepts and manners of acting had been robbed of their expressive power and persuasion to such a degree that this also indicated the ineffectiveness of the thesis novel. These Roman Catholic letters of resistance, written in the Papiamentu language could not prevent the feared socio-cultural and economic changes from happening.

The substantial changes that Curaçao society underwent during the 1920s and 1930s is central to the writings of Kroon and his colored

16 On the old patterns see particularly H. Hoetink, *Het patroon van de oude Curaçaose samenleving*, Amsterdam 1987 (vijfde, met een hoofdstuk en een lijst van errata vermeerderde, druk).

17 On the latter see T.F. Smeulders, *Papiamentu en onderwijs*, Utrecht 1987.

18 Criticism of the old colonial patterns, the mother country and the Roman Catholic mission could be venomous, see A.G. Broek, 'Medardo de Marchena of hoe een zelfbewuste geest werd weggesloten', *Nieuw Letterkundig Magazijn*, 35:1 (2017), 2-7.

confederates. They held on to the security of the ideology of the Roman Catholic Church – for the time being. Ties with the Western world, including presumably enduring religious bonds, would loosen and new points of reference (in the region) would emerge. As such this was very much in line with what had happened elsewhere in the Caribbean, such as in Trinidad, in the French Antilles, and in Cuba and the Dominican Republic in these very pre-war decades. In the 1940s the Dutch Antilles gradually caught up, leaving the Catholic missionaries as lookers on concerning ‘vicious’ and ‘virtuous’ reading matter. However, they had shaped a foundation that gave a young generation of authors – such as Pierre A. Lauffer, Elis Juliana and Luis Daal – confidence in their own creole language as a means of literary writing: an invaluable legacy.<sup>19</sup>

### Over de auteur



Dr. Aart G. Broek is a consultant and independent scholar, who has published extensively on Dutch Caribbean social, cultural and political matters.

Email: [agbroek@planet.nl](mailto:agbroek@planet.nl)

<sup>19</sup> On the development elsewhere in the Caribbean, see A.G. Broek, *Het zilt van de passanten; Caraïbische literatuur in de twintigste eeuw*, Haarlem 2000; on Papiamentu writing from the 1940s on, see Broek, *De kleur van mijn eiland*, and – a summary in English – A.G. Broek, *The Colour of My Island*, Haarlem 2009.