

## SUMMARY

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### **In Hope of Liberty: From Slave Society to Creole Community in Suriname, 1830-1880**

The abolition of slavery is the most outstanding event in nineteenth-century Suriname. I have demonstrated in this study how Surinamese slaves went from slavery to freedom. What was the influence of enslavement on how they rebuilt their lives after emancipation? Labor, community and family are considered here as inextricably intertwined. The first objective of this study is to demonstrate that the social life of slaves and freedmen had an important influence on their economic existence.

The existing literature about post-emancipation times in Suriname and the Caribbean discusses mainly the emergence of a Creole peasantry. The proto-peasant thesis of Sidney Mintz has been particularly influential. Mintz argues that the freedmen rebuilt their lives on the basis of crucial knowledge about the economy acquired during slavery. A critical examination of the proto-peasant thesis is the second objective of this study. A weakness of the proto-peasant thesis is that it overemphasizes the continuities between the lives of slaves and freedmen. Yet, there were many dramatic changes in the Creole community which had impact on the post-emancipation peasantry. Much attention has been paid here to the social transformation of the Creole community and the need of freedmen to explore new means of existence.

The second shortcoming of the proto-peasant thesis is that it does not distinguish sufficiently between the differential significance of production, trade and community in the lives of slaves and freedmen. A more precise appraisal of these different factors has been accomplished by introducing James Scott's moral economy argument into the proto-peasant debate. The moral economy approach argues that not income maximization but self-sufficiency is the most important concern of a peasant. The community plays a crucial role in this survival strategy: reciprocity, communal land ownership, and the exchange of labor guarantee a basic security to every household. The moral economy argument does not just provide a better understanding of the emergence of a Creole peasantry after the emancipation, but can also explain its rapid demise in large parts of Suriname.

In order to understand the transition from slavery to emancipation, a detailed study was made of the final three decades of slavery, the time of apprenticeship and the first seven years of complete freedom. Chapter one provides the general theoretical framework of the dissertation, discusses the proto-peasant thesis and reviews the literature about slave family and household.

Chapter two focuses on religious customs, the creolization process, and the socialization of children into life on the plantations. These practices gave form and content to the

slave communities. As in every society, the relations in slave communities were not only determined by feelings of solidarity, but status differences and religious proselytizing could cause serious conflicts within the community. Such problems were part of life on the plantations, but did not endanger the social unity. On the contrary, the nineteenth-century slave communities were stable and close-knit sociocultural entities.

The economic activities of slaves were under much tighter control than their sociocultural expressions. Slaves had considerable experience with agricultural techniques, and grew crops on their garden plots largely for personal consumption, in addition to the foodstuffs they received from the planter. Slaves had only a limited familiarity with the buying and selling of products. There were hardly any possibilities to generate a cash income or invest it to achieve a higher living standard. It is argued here that the basis for a moral economy was already present during slavery through the emphasis on self-sufficiency and the central role of the community in the lives of the slaves.

Chapter three studies the place of family and household in the slave communities. The plantation communities cannot be understood apart from family and household ties. The matrifocal one-parent household was common on plantations, but also nuclear families and, to a lesser extent, polygynous arrangements existed. Unlike in peasant societies, the household was not a socioeconomic unit necessary for survival because of the minimum livelihood guaranteed by the plantation system. Nevertheless, it did provide opportunities for the improvement of the living standard.

The literature and archival sources emphasize over and over again the importance of the nuclear household, while they neglect the wider family ties. These relations were however very important to the slaves. Such family ties provided assistance to households in distress. The extended family networks were most elaborate on the cotton and timber plantations because of their demographic stability. The demographic situation was most unfavorable on sugar plantations, but even there many slaves could count on the support from family members.

Chapter four discusses the decade of apprenticeship. Freed plantation slaves were obliged to continue working on the plantations for an additional ten years after emancipation. However, they received a salary for their labor and were free to choose on which plantation to work. The desire for complete freedom manifested itself strongly during this period. There were no uprisings or public disturbances, but the freedmen expressed their aversion for the plantation work by relocating frequently. Moving often from place to place, they made the plantation owners anxious about the stability of their work force. The desire for freedom and independence expressed itself also in the persistence and growing popularity of the Creole language, religion and healing practices. These themes have been elaborated in chapter four and five.

Frequent relocation disintegrated the former slave communities. New workers, among whom contract laborers from Asia and the Caribbean, replaced those who had abandoned the plantations. Few changes occurred in the *Coronie* and *Upper-Para*

districts. The freedmen in these regions did not want to exchange the relatively light work on the cotton and timber plantations for the heavy work on the sugar plantations in other parts of Suriname, parts that in addition were rather inaccessible.

Chapter five analyzes the developments between 1873 and 1880, after the end of the apprenticeship period, when the freedmen were searching for ways to establish an independent existence. In reaction to past abuses, declining numbers of ex-slaves were willing to be employed on plantations. This rejection of plantation labor was particularly strong on the sugar estates, which comprised the majority of the plantations in Suriname. Still, the move away from the plantations did not only arise out of resistance, but was also stimulated by the attraction of Paramaribo and the goldmining in the country's interior. Those who remained in the districts, worked as plantation laborers or tried to make a living in peasant agriculture. Small-scale farming was not a success in large parts of Suriname. The departure of the freedmen, the disintegration of the old plantation communities, and the limited possibilities to purchase land in the sugar areas are at the root of this failure. There was no longer a firm social foundation on which to build the farming communities. As far as the domestic life is concerned, little changed after the emancipation. The overall circumstances during slavery seemed to foster the matrifocal household, but the emancipation did not provoke radical changes in family life.

The freedmen in Coronie and the Upper-Para were successful in establishing themselves permanently as peasants. The extensive family networks in these areas, due to the more favorable demographic situation than elsewhere in Suriname, were not affected by the modest horizontal mobility. The ex-slaves had the opportunity to purchase land near their places of birth when the cotton and lumber plantations were no longer profitable. Both the extended families and the old plantation communities formed the basis for the survival of agriculture in Coronie and the Para region. The proto-peasant thesis seems to be most appropriate to explain the persistence of the peasantry in these least typical of all plantation areas. The peasants of Coronie and the Upper-Para resembled the portrait of the moral economy closely, because they produced for their own household and were strongly dependent on their family and community.

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