ISLAND STUDIES JOURNAL

Roitman, J. V., & Veenendaal, W. P. (2023). Worlds Apart: Island Identities and Colonial Configurations in the Dutch Caribbean. *Island Studies Journal*, *18*(2), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.401

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Worlds Apart: Island Identities and Colonial Configurations in the Dutch Caribbean

Jessica Vance Roitman[1a], Wouter P. Veenendaal[2b]

[1] Faculty of Religion and Theology, Texts and Traditions, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, [2] Institute of Political Science, Leiden University

Keywords: Caribbean, colonial legacies, geography, identity, regionalism, small islands

https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.401

Island Studies Journal

Vol. 18, Issue 2, 2023

Analyses of the Caribbean continue to divide the region based on colonial heritage, which is largely a result of the fact that it primarily consists of small islands. In this article, we demonstrate the inaccuracy of such categorizations on the basis of two sets of arguments. Based on historical as well as contemporary evidence from the Dutch Caribbean, we show that different islands that were artificially united into a single jurisdiction by colonial powers commonly experience intense inter-island rivalries and separatist tendencies. In addition, however, we show evidence pointing to frequent contacts and shared regional identities between neighboring islands belonging to different (post)colonial spheres of influence, both in the past and in the present. In sum, therefore, our interdisciplinary analysis – combining insights from history and political science – shows that small islands experience seemingly contradictory tendencies towards both island nationalism and inter-island cooperation, but that cooperation can only work if it is initiated on the terms of islands themselves, and not determined by colonial rulers or metropolitan states.

Introduction

To a greater extent than other world regions, the Caribbean continues to be defined by its colonial past. This is partially a result of the fact that approximately half of the Caribbean nations have a non-sovereign political status, retaining some type of constitutional relationship with a former colonial power. However, for both sovereign and non-sovereign Caribbean territories, there is also a continuing inclination to divide the region based on colonial heritage, as is shown by talk about the 'American', 'British', 'Dutch', and 'French' Caribbean (cf. Bonilla, 2015; Hinds, 2008; Sedoc-Dahlberg, 1990). By contrast, Spanish-speaking Cuba and the Dominican Republic – the demographically largest states of the region – are often included in broader Latin American analyses and are seemingly hardly ever compared to other Caribbean nations. While separate studies of 'British', 'French', or 'Portuguese' Africa since the 1960s have gradually diminished and made way for either nation-centered or continent-wide analyses and comparisons, this development does not yet appear to have reached the Caribbean region. In large part, historically determined political boundaries, rather than geographical proximity or cultural affinity, continue to drive our approach to this part of the world.

a j.v.roitman@vu.nl

b w.p.veenendaal@fsw.leidenuniv.nl; corresponding author

In this article, we argue that the exceptional colonial legacy and the enduring focus on (post)colonial structures in the Caribbean can principally be explained by two geographical factors: smallness and islandness. Due to the fact that the majority of Caribbean nations are small island territories, colonialism had a more profound and lasting impact, which continues to reverberate today (Caldwell et al., 1980). Yet, based on both historical evidence as well as contemporary data, in this analysis we demonstrate the inadequacy of such categorizations based on two sets of seemingly contradictory arguments. In the first place, we show that political unions between different islands created during colonial times often camouflage the great tensions and rivalries that exist between such islands. Due to the strong effects of islandness on the formation of group identities, populations of small islands often have a strong yearning for autonomy and a determination to be released from involuntary political bonds with other islands. However, this island centrism does not mean that no connections or shared identities exist between neighboring islands. In fact, as a second argument, we highlight that as a result of smallness, geographical proximity, and vulnerability, connections and feelings of attachment between populations of Caribbean islands with different colonial legacies have often been stronger than commonly presumed, both in the past and in the present. As a result, smallness and islandness can be seen as a double-edged sword: on the one hand stimulating island autonomy and separatism, while on the other hand inspiring close connections, shared identities, and possibly cooperation between neighboring islands.

To flesh out these arguments, we focus on the six Dutch Caribbean islands which until 1986 were united in a single non-sovereign jurisdiction (the Netherlands Antilles). In that year the island of Aruba separated from the Netherlands Antilles to become an autonomous Kingdom country of its own, while the remaining five territories continued to form the Netherlands Antilles. Even though the Netherlands Antilles was a non-sovereign territory within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Dutch word *'land'* (country) was used as a label for the jurisdiction; the word 'country' should therefore not be assumed to refer to a sovereign state. The federally organized Netherlands Antilles ultimately fragmented in 2010 due to the great geographical distance between the islands, the lack of a shared Antillean identity, and profound inter-island antagonism.

The six Dutch Caribbean islands can be divided in two geographical clusters; one consisting of the southern Caribbean (or 'Windward') islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao (colloquially referred to as the ABC islands) which are located just off the Venezuelan coast, and one consisting of the northeastern Caribbean (or 'Leeward') islands of Saba, St. Eustatius, and (Dutch) St. Maarten. These two sets of islands are separated by 900 kilometers of Caribbean Sea, and have markedly dissimilar cultural, demographic, and linguistic backgrounds. The former Netherlands Antilles was without doubt one of the most geographically peculiar countries that ever existed. As such, these islands offer us a perfect setting to contrast the linkages between islands

artificially united into a single (colonial) jurisdiction with those that are geographically adjacent but belong(ed) to different colonial spheres of influence. The recent political changes that resulted in the fragmentation of the Netherlands Antilles provide an extra motivation to focus on this particular case.

Historically, colonial rule in the Dutch West Indies was exercised from Suriname between 1828 and 1845 and then from Curaçao until the 1950s, with the other islands defined as 'subordinate.' In fact, until 1922, 'Curacao' was used as a catch-all term for both the island itself and the collectivity of all six Dutch-ruled islands. This was particularly galling for the three Dutch Leeward islands, 900 kilometers away from the seats of colonial power, English-speaking, and oriented towards the Anglo-American world. Due to the geographical proximity of the Leeward chain (some islands are as close as five miles from one another), these Dutch territories were culturally closely integrated with the British (Anguilla, Antigua, St. Kitts, and Nevis) French (St. Martin), Swedish (St. Barthélemy), and Danish (St. Thomas, St. Johns, St. Croix) colonies. There were frequent connections, long-standing familial bonds, and numerous trade relationships, licit and illicit, between these islands, making them a particularly good example of the dynamics of regional feelings of affiliation across a politically plural space, as well as a poignant illustration of the tensions inherent in multi-island governance structures.

In the present, while some Caribbean multi-island units created by European colonizers have survived in the face of strong centrifugal pressures (e.g., St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, and Trinidad and Tobago), others have collapsed or disintegrated. Whereas linguistic barriers in many ways continue to separate inhabitants of Anglophone, Francophone, and Dutch or Papiamentu-speaking territories, past and ongoing migration, trade, and international cooperation between Caribbean states and nations has meant that (post)colonial boundaries are becoming less and less relevant. In particular, there is evidence that feelings of affinity between geographically proximate islands that used to be separated by colonial demarcations are much stronger than is commonly presumed and are in fact often stronger than the bonds between distant islands that share a common colonial legacy.

In the subsequent sections of this article, we will do the following: after reviewing the literature on the effects of smallness and islandness on political identities, we will show that multi-island jurisdictions created during colonial times are often plagued by profound tensions and antagonism; we will then outline our arguments based on evidence from the Dutch Caribbean. First, we will discuss historical evidence to show that in colonial times, inhabitants of the Dutch islands, including European and African-descended peoples, often already had more affinity with geographically proximate neighboring islands that were ruled by another colonial power than with the other, more distant, Dutch Caribbean islands with which they were politically united.

It must be noted that the methodology employed for this analysis is that of empirical history. Therefore, the arguments are largely based on evidence retrieved from national archives. In turn, this means that the perspective of (colonial) administrators and local island elites is foregrounded. In the absence of written sources, much less is known about the perspectives of the islands' local non-elite populations, particularly the enslaved populations and, to a lesser extent, free people of color. Interesting insights can be drawn from complementary methodological approaches such as (osteo)archeology, oral history, and memory studies. However, for the chronological and thematic focus under consideration in this article, there were relatively few applicable works to draw upon. The work of archeologists Haviser and Fricke are exceptions (Fricke, 2019; Haviser, 2013; Haviser et al., 2010). Nevertheless, when possible, we try to tease out the strands of these people's stories from the larger fabric of the narrative woven by the colonial sources.

After this historical analysis, we will take a look at more contemporary political dynamics and trends that contributed to the break-up of the Netherlands Antilles in 2010. Based on the results of an extensive opinion survey conducted in 2015, we demonstrate that geographical proximity commonly offers better explanations for inter-island solidarity than a shared colonial heritage. The opinion survey obviously only provides a snapshot of a particular point in time, but a comparison with the historical analysis shows that the observed patterns of inter-island linkages and rivalries are remarkably durable and persistent. Our results feed into ongoing academic discussions about postcolonial structures, the influence of island geographies on socio-cultural identities, and Caribbean regionalism in a broader sense. In particular, our interdisciplinary approach, borrowing insights from both history and political science, allows us to situate current trends in a broader historical context. By demonstrating that inter-island connections and antagonisms were as pervasive in the past as they are in the present, we extend contemporary scholarship on islandness and smallness.

Island identities

In comparison to other world regions, colonial rule in the Caribbean was both lengthier and more ubiquitous. While virtually annihilating the native Amerindian populations, European colonizers imported enslaved Africans to work on their Caribbean plantations. As a result of this forced migration, new societies were created by the colonial rulers, and the native or indigenous cultural traditions that survived the imperial era were hybridized (Baldacchino, 1993, p. 31; Lewis, 2004; Roitman, 2017). Indeed, according to Baldacchino (1993, p. 31), the contemporary 'local' culture of the Caribbean islands can be described as "a non-indigenous creole variety, itself a by-product of colonialism." Various authors claim that the particular colonial experience and omnipresence of Christianity in the Caribbean has resulted in more "Westernized" societies, and the endurance of democracy in the region has often been attributed to this colonial legacy as well (Domínguez, 1993; Payne, 1993; Sutton, 1999; Veenendaal, 2015a). Decolonization of many of the

smaller Caribbean islands occurred at a relatively late point in time, with several British and Dutch colonies achieving independence only in the 1970s or 1980s. At present, approximately half of all Caribbean jurisdictions retain a non-sovereign political status, maintaining some political association with a larger European or North American metropolis (Ferdinand et al., 2020). In sum, in the Caribbean, colonial rule both had a greater impact and retreated at a later point in time, if at all, than in many other regions colonized by Europeans.

The particular colonial experience of the Caribbean can in large part be attributed to two – often mutually reinforcing – geographical factors: islandness and small size. While some Caribbean nations have a relatively large population (e.g., Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti), and some of them are located on the American continent (e.g., Belize, Guyana, and Suriname), the overwhelming majority of Caribbean polities are small island jurisdictions. The greater accessibility of islands meant that they were fully colonized at an earlier stage than continental American territories, and in the seventeenth century, many Caribbean islands were already part of the European maritime system, while mainland settlements were still in their relative infancies (Caldwell et al., 1980). The smallness of Caribbean island societies occasioned a more pervasive and intrusive sort of colonial rule, and supposedly led to a greater socializing impact on the colonized populations (Baldacchino, 1993).

The academic literature on islands and small island developing states (SIDS) reveals that islandness has a strong effect on the development of group identities (Dommen 1980; Doumenge, 1985; Srebrnik 2004). According to Malyn Newitt (1992, p. 11), "individual island populations, however small, can easily evolve a strong sense of identity." This notion is confirmed by Henry Srebrnik (2004, p. 338), who argues that "the feeling of distinctiveness which living on an island or archipelago inculcates typically facilitates the existence of an insular-based nationalism." Sociologists and political scientists have long studied the effects of geographical isolation on the formation of group identities, and it is commonly known that geographical barriers such as mountains, rivers, and oceans also have psychological effects (Baldacchino, 2006). According to many scholars, the concept of 'islandness' is therefore not only a geographical term, but also refers to a specific political, psychological, and societal context on the basis of which a variety of social phenomena may be explained and understood (Grydehøj, 2017). One of these phenomena is island nationalism, which translates both into a strong appetite for island autonomy as well as a reluctance to share sovereignty with other offshore territories, including other islands (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012; Clegg, 2012).

The small size of most Caribbean islands led colonial powers to politically unite various islands into one colonial jurisdiction, thereby supposedly facilitating economies of scale and a more efficient administration of their colonial possessions. In the run-up to decolonization and independence, the British and Dutch colonial powers commonly sought to retain these multi-island units, considering that on their own, most islands would lack the

economic opportunities to make them viable sovereign states. The British tried to unite their Caribbean islands into the West Indies Federation, which was established in 1958, but already fragmented in 1962 when Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago declared their independence. The Dutch unified their six Caribbean islands as 'Curaçao and subordinate islands' in 1845, and, subsequently, this grouping became known officially as the Netherlands Antilles. This entity existed as a non-sovereign country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands between 1954 and 2010, but ultimately disintegrated due to inter-island tensions; the second largest island of Aruba separated from the Netherlands Antilles in 1986. In the French Antilles, smaller St. Barthélemy and the French part of St. Martin were politically tied to the larger island of Guadeloupe, but during status referendums in 2003, both smaller islands voted to become overseas collectivities of France, gaining autonomy from Guadeloupe (Mrgudovic, 2012).

As the examples of the West Indies Federation as well as the French and Netherlands Antilles reveal, multi-island units are indeed often plagued by inter-island rivalries and separatist tendencies (Bishop et al., 2021). This is not only a Caribbean phenomenon but can also be observed in many African and Pacific island nations. In most of these cases, the colonial authorities decided to administer their colony from the (demographically) largest island, and in the postcolonial era the central administration of the multi-island unit remained based on this island. As a result, the largest island of these multi-island jurisdictions habitually occupies an intermediate position between the colonial or metropolitan power and the smaller islands in the archipelago; an ambiguous position of both being the colony or dependent territory of a larger power (Inniss, 1983), as well as a caretaker of one or more smaller islands. Within this framework, the larger island's obligation to pay attention to the needs of smaller islands is commonly perceived as an unwarranted and disproportionate burden. On the other hand, the smaller islands in such archipelagic units often perceive themselves as "colonies of a colony" (cf. Murrain, 1993, p. 6), complaining that all the resources and financial assistance of the metropolis remain on the larger island, while a disproportionately limited share is allocated to the smaller island(s). Since both the larger island and the smaller islands in such archipelagic jurisdictions are bound to chafe against their political and economic dependence on each other, island separatism is the unsurprising upshot of these political unions (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012; Bishop et al., 2021; Clegg, 2012).

Examples of such unhinged archipelagic configurations abound. In the Caribbean, Barbuda resents its political union with the larger sister island of Antigua, Tobago objects to its bond with larger Trinidad, and Nevis despises the federal arrangement with bigger St. Kitts. The latter island, which until 1967 was linked politically with both Nevis and the relatively distant Anguilla, did not particularly enjoy its political position either. "St. Kitts' position was

ironical. She was a colony herself but was forced to bear the responsibility and burden as a surrogate 'mother' to two other islands whose combined sizes were greater than her own!" (Inniss, 1983, p. 83).

While the unions between Antigua and Barbuda, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago have remained intact, other multi-island units have disintegrated. In these cases, the larger island typically became an independent state of its own, while the smaller island opted to retain the political association with the metropolis as a non-sovereign entity. The Cayman Islands separated from larger Jamaica to remain a British overseas territory, as did the Turks and Caicos Islands. In similar fashion, Anguilla rejected its political union with St. Kitts and Nevis and also opted for overseas territory status. In Africa, France held on to the island of Mayotte while the rest of the Comoros archipelago secured independence in 1975, although the remaining three Comorian islands continue to be rocked by inter-island tensions. In the Pacific, the Marshall Islands, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Palau all objected to political unification into a single Micronesian state; and, while the former two island groups became sovereign states on their own, the Marianas became a Commonwealth of the United States. In Polynesia, the Ellice Islands (contemporary Tuvalu) in 1974 separated from the Gilbert Islands (contemporary Kiribati) to achieve independence on its own. And while archipelagic Pacific states like the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have remained intact, since achieving independence both have been plagued by ongoing island separatism. The most recent example of island separatism is Bougainville, on which a majority of 98% of voters supported full independence – and therefore secession from Papua New Guinea – during a 2019 status referendum (Connell, 2020). Bougainville is now expected to become a fully sovereign state in 2027.

In sum, in all world regions where they can be found, multi-island units that were created by colonial powers experience profound inter-island rivalries and island separatism. While nation-building in (post)colonial societies has in general been a challenging endeavor, this is even more the case for multi-island units. In the following sections, we will discuss the particular experience of six Dutch Caribbean islands, consisting of the two-and-a-half Northeastern Caribbean islands of Saba, St. Eustatius, and the Dutch part of St. Maarten (the SSS islands), and the three southern Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao (the ABC islands). We start with a discussion of the historical background regarding the mutual relations between the Dutch Caribbean islands, as well as the connections with neighboring islands. Subsequently, we examine the contemporary relations between these islands, including the results of a recent opinion survey that included questions about people's attitudes towards other islands.

Separate but equal? Discontent in the Dutch Caribbean, 1825-1954

Dutch historiography, with a few exceptions, has overwhelmingly concentrated on studies of Suriname and, to a lesser extent, Curaçao. The Dutch Leeward islands are generally only mentioned in passing in most

Figure 1. The Leeward Islands in the Eastern Caribbean. © Jessica Vance Roitman.

volumes (Groenewoud, 2021; Oostindie & Hoefte, 1999). This relative absence of the Dutch Leeward islands is not hugely surprising, considering that for the Dutch colonial empire in the Atlantic, Suriname and Curaçao were the "darlings of empire" (Emmer, 2003, p. 22). Yet this focus on Curaçao and Suriname has contributed to a misleading picture of how the Dutch empire in the Atlantic functioned. By bringing the Dutch Leeward islands into the picture, this perspective is altered. The Leeward island chain serves as a prime example of the fact that the multi-island jurisdictions created during colonial times were often plagued by profound tensions and antagonism. Concomitantly, the many connections and feelings of attachment between the populations of the politically plural Leewards illustrate the primacy of place and space over colonial affiliation.

In 1845, Saba, St. Eustatius, and St. Maarten were brought under the administration of Curaçao, as 'subordinate' (*onderhoorige*) islands, as were the Windward islands of Bonaire and Aruba. Before then, the islands had been ruled from Suriname as separate entities. The councils (*raden*) of St. Eustatius and St. Maarten which, until then, had helped govern the islands, were abolished. In Willemstad, the capital of Curaçao, a Colonial Council (*Koloniale Raad*) was instituted to take care of all six islands including the Leeward group, though only in an advisory role. The dependent islands were granted advisory committees to assist their Lt. Governors (*gezaghebbers*), who were answerable to the Colonial Governor in Curaçao. The *gezaghebbers* were generally not particularly well-qualified and had absolutely no idea of the local circumstances on the Leeward islands as they came from the civil service corps in the Netherlands or Curaçao.

Table 1. Population figures of the Dutch Leewards and Curaçao as a point of comparison, 1860-1940.

	Curaçao	Saba	Sint Eustatius	Sint Maarten	Total Leewards
1816	*14,070*	1145	2668	3559	7372
1850	*16,798*	1663	1932	2839	6434
1860	*19,045*	1826	1927	3157	6910
1880	*24,146*	1995	2097	3142	7234
1900	*30,636*	2177	1334	3174	6685
1920	*32,709*	1661	1315	2633	5609
1929	*44,344*	1408	965	2180	4553
1940	*67,317*	ca, 1250	ca, 970	4344	6564

Table 2. Countries and islands that respondents feel most connected to.

	Aruba	Curaçao	Bonaire	Saba	St. Eustatius
Aruba	N/A	61.7%	74.9%	13.2%	23.0%
Bonaire	36.0%	60.6%	n.v.t	18.7%	17.8%
Curaçao	59.9%	N/A	80.4%	26.9%	31.6%
St. Maarten	12.2%	28.6%	12.9%	71.2%	69.1%
Saba	1.7%	3.6%	5.5%	N/A	28.9%
St. Eustatius	1.0%	3.7%	4.1%	28.8%	N/A
The Netherlands	69.3%	66.3%	64.6%	32.9%	34.9%
Dominican Republic	8.8%	6.6%	8.1%	6.8%	11.2%
Venezuela	26.8%	12.4%	6.7%	N/A	N/A
St. Kitts	N/A	N/A	N/A	5.5%	28.9%
United States	41.4%	24.7%	15.8%	22.8%	17.1%

But what were these local circumstances? And who was a local? Table 1 shows the small size of the population of these islands, especially in comparison to Curaçao. However, proportionally, before the abolition of slavery in 1863, a high percentage of the total population was enslaved, as can be seen in Table 2. Despite this high percentage of enslaved people, plantation agriculture was decidedly modest in comparison with other colonies such as Jamaica. M.D. Teenstra, a Dutch physician who visited the Dutch Leeward islands in the 1830s, remarked on the pervasive poverty. As he noted, enslaved people lived in "A miserable hut with walls made of twigs, smeared with mud, and roofs covered with leaves of sugarcane" (Teenstra, 1837, vol. 2, p. 295). This remark has been borne out by archeological excavations done on the islands (Haviser et al., 2010; Haviser, 2012). Whites certainly lived in much better circumstances, though as another travel writer, Reverend Bosch (1829, p. 73), also from the Netherlands wrote around the same time, the islands were not particularly wealthy: Describing St. Maarten, he remarked that Philipsburg, the only settlement of any size on the island, was "Nothing more than a gathering of wooden houses which for the main part looked like sheds, which appeared to me to be badly kept and painted."

Administratively, the Leeward islands were totally dependent on decisions made in Curaçao. This galling situation was aggravated by the dismal economic situation of the islands, which left them reliant on handouts from the colonial government. The population of the three islands, enslaved and, after 1863, free, black, white, and of 'mixed' descent, had no structure or institution through which to voice their complaints, except for the insignificant policy councils in which they were represented. And, of course, representation, such as it was, was largely limited to white property-owning men. These local white residents did not trust the Colonial Council (*Koloniale Raad*), which they felt was insensitive to and unfamiliar with their problems, and, therefore, they felt abandoned. As early as 1863, a planter from St. Eustatius complained that "we don't have any future." There was, according to this man, unanimous agreement that the island should be separated from Curaçao (Goslinga, 1990, p. 379, note 20). It is difficult to gauge what the enslaved and free African-descended people might have felt about this colonial representation, or lack thereof. We do know that the colonial representatives on the Leeward islands, often in the office of Lt. Governor, ruled against local white elites in favor of free people of color, from time to time (Roitman, 2017, pp. 399–400). How consistently this happened and what, if any, influence this had on African-descended people's views of colonial governance is a subject for future research.

In any case, it is not surprising that the first real 'free from Curaçao' (*los-van-Curaçao*) movement began in 1863, the year in which slavery was abolished in the Dutch territories, and enslaved people were emancipated, though discontent had been mounting over perceived neglect for some time. The former owners of enslaved people on the Dutch Leeward islands had been agitating for emancipation for close to two decades. They, as well as many local officials, knew that the end of slavery was a foregone conclusion. They were situated in a geographical space in which maintaining slavery after British emancipation in 1834 was next to impossible. Yet, the interests of the metropole and its representatives in the colonies to preserve slavery in Suriname where it was still profitable prevailed over the needs of the owners of enslaved people on the Leeward islands (Roitman, 2016b). When slavery was finally abolished, the financial settlement for slave owners, especially for St. Maarten, where slavery had been abolished *de facto,* if not *de jure,* in 1848, was not beneficial (Paula, 1993; Roitman, 2016a). The end of slavery worsened the already rather dire economic conditions on the islands, particularly for the land-owning whites, though even former slaves felt the economic pinch. The white Leeward islanders felt that the colonial government in Curaçao had no interest in helping them, and the emancipated formerly enslaved were the ones suffering disproportionally and had even less voice than did their former owners.

Thus began decades of discontent on the islands – at least among the white population – about their perceived neglect by the government in Curaçao, including a general feeling that the islands' culture and language (Creole English) were not respected. The use of English, or lack thereof, was a

perpetual bone of contention between the literate, usually but not entirely white, Leeward islanders and the government in Curaçao. Most Leeward islanders had, at best, only a rudimentary knowledge of Dutch, yet most of the government decrees were issued in Dutch. The formerly enslaved population might have had some ability to read and write in English, as the Methodist Church had been active, especially on St. Maarten, in setting up schools for the African-descended population (Roitman, 2019). In 1870, the Lt. Governor of Saba wrote to the Governor in Curaçao about registering civil acts in English and asked that all official forms be translated from Dutch into English. The Governor replied that he "is of the opinion that it should not be permitted to draw up the acts of the civil status of your island in English. There is no necessity to send the requested printed forms translated to English. You will be able to manage it in the best way possible" (AN NAC 4971). And this was hardly an isolated occurrence. Literate white Leeward islanders complained regularly that they could not read or understand the sentences passed down by the local courts. Moreover, lessons in schools were often taught in Dutch, a language few of the students spoke at home, which put the children, both white and African-descended, who sometimes attended the same schools, at a disadvantage from the moment they entered the classroom.

Due to the governance structure, the white islanders had little recourse other than to send continuous protests and petitions directly to the Governor in Curaçao and, at times, to the monarch in the Netherlands, most of which were answered in only the most perfunctory manner possible. That the white inhabitants of St. Eustatius, Saba, and St. Maarten had so little power to decide their own fates fed into their resentment at being legally 'subordinate' to Curaçao. A petitioner from St. Eustatius wrote to the Governor in 1863 proclaiming that, "The Enlightened class has become convinced that for us, as subordinate to Curaçao, we have no future [...] The population here wishes that under whatever conditions, to be separated from Curaçao, who makes every decree bitter and unbearable" (NL-HaNA, St. Eustatius en Saba na 1828, 1.05.13.02, 377). The whites on St. Eustatius were particularly dissatisfied because the island was now a sort of 'sub-dependency' of St. Maarten, as was Saba. The governance setup caused irritation amongst this 'Enlightened class' which neither the Governor in Willemstad nor the Minister in The Hague could understand, a problem that continued in the twentieth century.

White Leeward islanders did not seem to become more positively inclined towards governance from Curaçao in the following years. In 1889, G. Belinfante of St. Maarten wrote a pamphlet under the pseudonym, 'Fortis est Vertias' called *St. Martin, zijne politieke geschiedenis van het jaar 1816 tot october 1889* [*St. Martin, its political history from the year 1816 until October 1889*]. The title is misleading because the pamphlet is, at heart, a 12-page long jeremiad about the 'tyrannical' governance from Curaçao. Among the complaints made were unfairly high taxes, that there was no doctor on the Dutch side of St. Maarten, and that in the seven years Nicolaas van den Brandhof had been Governor of the Antilles, he had not once come to the

Leeward islands (Belinfante, 1889, p. 3). This absence was not unusual. Before 1880, visits from the Colonial Governors in Curaçao to the Leewards were rare to non-existent. From 1880 until the First World War – a span of 34 years – visits became more common, though by no means frequent, occurring once every three to four years, on average (Hartog, 1964, p. 402).

Interestingly, the anti-Curaçao sentiment was felt broadly across the population of the Leeward islands, including amongst the black and 'colored' populations, most of whom could not vote, as well as amongst local elites like the Van Romondts, who were virtual oligarchs (Roitman, 2017; Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016). In 1907, Lt. Governor of St. Eustatius, Van Grol pleaded for "a communal freedom and a local fatherly governance for the Leeward islands" (NL-HaNA, Collectie G.J. van Grol, 2.21.075, p. 21). In 1911, Josiah Charles Waymouth, son of the Methodist preacher Wiliam T. Waymouth, founded the weekly English-language newspaper *St. Martin, day by day* whose main purpose seemed to have been to give voice to the dissatisfaction of Dutch Leeward islanders with governance from Curaçao, and was read throughout the Dutch Leeward islands.

When the United States bought the Danish Leeward islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John in 1917, Diederik J. van Romondt, a prominent local planter and member of the Court of Policy wrote to the *New York Herald* to ask if St. Maarten could also be purchased:

> Our island is owned by the Dutch and French, both parts being dependent on the United States for all commodities necessary for our existence. English is the language of all. New York is the goal of all who emigrate or go away for pleasure. We exist under the aegis of the old regime, but our hearts are with your great republic. (van Romondt, 1917)

Whether the hearts of all the islanders were actually with the "great republic" of the United States or not, they certainly did not seem to be with The Netherlands.

The diverse population (including Portuguese Jews, African-descended peoples, and a small but growing group of migrants from other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America) of Curaçao's hearts were not necessarily with the Leeward islanders either (van der Dijs, 2011). Like many larger islands in similar archipelagic governance structures, the obligation to pay attention to the needs of the smaller islands was commonly perceived as an unwarranted and disproportionate burden. In 1920, an anonymous Curaçaoan wrote "Down with St. Martin, Curaçao for us" on the wall of the Governor's house. (Hartog, 1964, p. 414). The *Voz di Pueblo,* a newspaper that came out twice monthly, opined that Curaçao would benefit from being separated from the Leewards, as they felt they were contributing too much to the colonial coffers of the ungrateful islands (Hartog, 1964, p. 412). This view was shared in The Netherlands, and the *Koloniaal Weekblad* voiced its belief that the Leeward islands would suffer from such a separation. Nevertheless, the editor wrote

that he understood the Leeward islanders' desire to be separated from Curaçao because "the people, as well as the land, language, and history are so different from that of the Windward [*Benedenwindse*] islands, that they could not be expected to feel any spiritual unity [with them]" (*Het Koloniaal Weekblad,* 27 November 1919, 7 October 1920).

When little changed, a group of middle-class and elite Leeward islanders sent a request directly to the Queen in 1919 (Hartog, 1964, p. 410), asking that the power of the Governor in Curaçao be limited; that the taxes be re-evaluated; that there be a more efficient way of reaching judgements; that Leeward islanders be represented on the Colonial Council; and that more be done to improve the economic situation of the islands by stimulating agriculture and industry. They stated that, "As long as the Mother Country does not give them [the Leeward islands] their own Council (*Raad*), they do not cherish any expectation of a prosperous future" (*Koloniale Verslagen,* 1932, 1933). What was wanted was clear: no ties with Curaçao.

A civil servant on Curaçao was given the task of evaluating these persistent complaints. He wrote, "The various leaders [of the opposition] told me that Curaçao had no interest in St. Martin. It did not take notice of the island's needs. They complained about education: While everyone spoke English, Dutch was the language taught in school. Another complaint was the bad inter-island connection" (*Koloniale Verslagen,* 1932). This same official concluded that the islands were neglected. They were badly administered by the officials that Curaçao sent to the Leewards because of their mediocrity. Governors seldom or never visited the islands. There was no uniform monetary system. Dutch and English money circulated.

The issue came to a head in February of 1920 when it was debated in the First Chamber of the Dutch Parliament by a Member of Parliament for the Liberal Party, Jakob Kraus, who pleaded on behalf of the protesting Leeward islanders, likely largely drawn from the ruling white elites, that they should be free from Curaçao, though his suggestion was reform of the existing governmental structures rather than full independence from Curaçao and direct lines of control with the Netherlands (Hartog, 1964, p. 413, note 190). Again, nothing came of these calls for reform. This could have been because of the persistent lack of interest in the Dutch Antilles in general and the Leeward islands specifically in the metropolitan Netherlands. However, it may have also been because calls for separation from Curaçao dwindled away because around this time, 'away from Curaçao' became 'to Curaçao'.

Mass emigration from the Leeward islands to Curaçao (and Aruba) for work in the oil refineries began in the 1920s (Allen, 2013). Oil refineries had opened up on these islands and the Lago refinery on Aruba, owned by Standard Oil, an American company, was particularly eager to hire English-speaking workers (Ibid and van Soest, 1977). As a consequence of this labor migration, in 1920 there were only around 2,600 people on St. Maarten and a little under 2,200 in 1930 (See Table 1 and also van Soest, 2012). By the 1940s all three Leeward islands had become in large part dependent on remittances from migrants,

most of whom were working on Aruba, and on subsidies from the Netherlands. In 1950 the population of St. Maarten was down to a meagre 1,484, with 627 people designated 'St. Maarteners' (not including dependents) working in Aruba (Hartog, 1964, p. 419). In the 1951 elections, there were 599 qualified voters on St. Maarten, 492 of whom voted, but over 1,611 who were qualified to vote in St. Maarten were living in Curaçao and Aruba (Hartog, 1964, p. 419).

Despite these intensified contacts with the Dutch Windward islands, which led to increased familial ties throughout the six Dutch Antillean islands, the residents (white and, increasingly, African-descended) of the Leeward islands still felt disenfranchised or, at the very least, under-represented. They also felt that the complicated and unwieldy system of governance itself contributed to lackadaisical governance from afar. All of which led, in turn, to a feeling of insular autonomy and an 'us vs them' mentality. This feeling persisted until the governance of the Netherlands Antilles was definitively changed in 2010, when St. Maarten and Curaçao joined Aruba to become autonomous countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius became special municipalities, though there is some evidence that the role once occupied by Curaçao has now been taken over by Bonaire, with the ensuing resentment by the Sabans and Statians, located nearly 1,000 kilometers away.

The history of the Dutch Leeward islands raises questions about the notion of imperial sovereignty over discrete political and geographic units such as these islands. The political union between Curaçao and the Leeward islands created during colonial times in the nineteenth century and lasting until quite recently, led to great tensions and rivalries between the islands. The traditional focus of Dutch historiography which is, first and foremost, on Suriname and then on Curaçao, has privileged a view of the Netherlands Antilles as a unified whole. Instead, as this section has shown, divisiveness and disconnection between the different geographical spaces – the Leewards and the Windwards – was the order of the day. In fact, as we will show in the next section, the three Leeward islands historically had a much stronger connection with neighboring islands that were administered by different colonial powers.

"For better is a neighbor that is near than a brother far off" (Proverbs 27: 10, King James Bible)

For the Leeward islanders of Saba, St. Eustatius, and St. Maarten, their neighbors were often far more important than their 'brother' islands from the same empire hundreds of kilometers away. This is because the Leewards were, and are, connected to each other by both language and geography. Nineteenth-century traveler George Coggeshall (1858, pp. 252–265) opined that, "Creole English and Creole French are the general language of [...] all the islands in this vicinity: Nevis, St. Kitts, St. Bartholomew, St. Martin's, Santa Cruz [St. Kitts], St. Thomas and many others: – in a word, the inhabitants of these islands converse in bad French and worse English." Not only did they speak the same language, but the majority of these islands are within sight of each other, and some, like British Tortola, are, at their closest points, only eight kilometers

from Danish St. John. Coggeshall (1858, pp. 252–265) described how from St. Eustatius, "may be seen St. Christopher's, Saba, and, on a clear day, several other islands [...] From St. Martin's may be seen St. Bartholomew, Anguilla, and several other small islands." This proximity meant that travel between the islands was relatively quick. Coggeshall narrates that he "left St. Martin's in one of the packet-boats for St. Bartholomew, and in about six or eight hours got safe into St. Barts. It was less than a day from St. Barts to St. Thomas." Thus, travel between the islands was also frequent; between St. Barts and St. Martin, for instance, "sail-boats ply daily."

In contrast, connections with the seat of Dutch colonial rule in Curaçao were erratic, at best. In 1882, a mail boat from Danish St. Thomas began making a monthly trip, and, therefore, communications with the colonial government became somewhat more regular, though, ironically, by means of a foreign ship (Hartog, 1964, p. 399). The trip took four days to Curaçao and eight days back, if things went well. But often they did not. For instance, the Lt. Governor on St. Maarten received a letter on the 24th of December 1910 from the Governor in Curaçao that came via Trinidad. It was dated the 3rd of December, and, from the letter it is clear that 14 missives had been sent in between – none of which had yet arrived (Journal Gezaghebber St. Maarten 24 December 1910, Philipsburg Library). To remedy such situations, this same year the steamship *Juliana* was purchased and made its first trip in 1911. But within a year it broke down and three months went by with no contact whatsoever between the colonial government and the Dutch Leeward islands (Journal of the Lt. Governor of St. Maarten, 3 March 1912, Philipsburg Library). Thereafter, one could take a steamboat from Curaçao to Trinidad and then a smaller steamboat to St. Kitts, and, from there, a sailboat to St. Eustatius or St. Maarten (Hartog, 1964, p. 400), a laborious and time-consuming series of connections that made effective governance difficult, at best.

Thus, it is not surprising that, during times of need, the Leeward islands turned to each other first. For example, during the frequent hurricanes that strike this island chain, help always came from neighboring islands first, regardless of imperial affiliation. It was the residents of the Swedish island of St. Barthélemy who first came to the aid of St. Maarten, whose capital of Philipsburg was largely destroyed in the devastating hurricane of 1819. Their help was soon followed by that of the other nearby islands (NL-HaNA, St. Maarten, St. Eustatius en Saba tot 1828, 1.05.13.01). It took nearly three years, however, before any substantial financial aid came from the colonial government (NL-HaNA 1.05.12.01, 327). Likewise, hurricanes struck the Leewards in 1821, 1827, 1835, 1837, 1848, 1850, 1867, 1871, 1890, 1898, and 1928. In all cases, the islands came to each other's aid in as much as was possible, including taking up charitable collections. In 1867 when St. Maarten was particularly hard hit, French Guadeloupe sent 1000 francs of aid,

more than was sent by Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire (NL-HaNA 1.05.12.01, 328). In the 1898 hurricane, it was the Dutch islands that sent foodstuffs and supplies to the British islands (Colonial Office, 1899).

The same regional approach was taken during the periodic cholera outbreaks that swept through the islands, usually brought by passing ships. The various commanders on the scattered islands took matters into their own hands and formulated a region-wide policy. They wrote to each other intensively, often as many as three letters a day, and agreed upon a unified approach to containing these epidemics, generally by instituting strict quarantine measures. It was not, of course, just governmental officials who communicated intensively across the imperial boundaries of the Leewards. On these small islands – Saba, for example, is only 13 km^2 – news spread quickly, and there were frequent and intensive connections between people on the Leeward islands. Sailors on the vessels that plied the routes between the islands would have passed on information in each port they entered. Moreover, the population of the Leeward islands formed, in the words of one inhabitant of the colonies, a roaming group (*zwervende bevolking*; Veer, 1857, pp. 171–172). His testimony was borne out by the Commander of French St. Martin, who wrote to his colleague on the Dutch side in 1835 to say that he had noticed a great deal of communication between the African-descended populations of St. Martin and Anguilla. In fact, this communication was so frequent and so well-known that it had drawn the attention of his superior, the Governor of Guadeloupe, nearly 260 kilometers away.

This sort of movement was one of the integral aspects of the Leeward's system. For example, after the British abolished slavery in 1834, enslaved people from the neighboring islands where slavery was still in force (until 1848 for the Swedish, Danish, and French islands, 1863 for the Dutch territories) were quick to board small boats and escape to British colonies a few kilometers away (Roitman, 2016b). Depending on the year, anywhere from ten to more than 100 people attempted to leave their lives of enslavement and reach freedom. Once on British soil, they would not be sent back to slavery due to so-called 'free soil' principles that dictated that no person reaching free soil could be returned to a life of servitude. The fact that everyone on the islands spoke Creole English no doubt made the decision to board leaky old fishing boats and make an attempt at freedom easier, as did the long-standing family connections which transcended island and imperial boundaries (Roitman, 2016b). The proximity of the islands was key in facilitating escapes, but also helped to foster and facilitate these family connections among both the enslaved and free peoples of the islands. Many surnames were common throughout the Leewards, regardless of which island, showing that intermarriage of Leeward islanders was common. Elites such as the Van Romondt family of St. Maarten married with fellow white elites from the nearby islands of St. Barts, St. Kitts & Nevis, Anguilla, and Antigua (Johnson, 1994; Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016).

These 'foreigners' came to St. Kitts because the economies of the Leeward islands, particularly St. Kitts, both pulled people to, and pushed them away from, these same islands. For instance, in the wake of the abolition of slavery in the British territories in the later 1830s and early 1840s, Kittitians refused to work on their old plantations and instead were lured by higher wages to Trinidad and Guyana. Enslaved Dutch Leeward islanders filled the gap. Escapes to the British islands peaked between 1844 and 1852 when labor was in particular demand. Moreover, the regular availability of seasonal employment on the neighboring islands secured for these Dutch islanders a place to stay, likely with family and friends and, quite possibly fed into a sense of collective Leeward islands' social belonging. But it was not just (formerly) enslaved people who went to nearby islands to work. Leeward islanders of all classes participated in a regional labor market. Doctors for the Dutch Leeward islanders were often drawn from nearby St. Kitts (NL-HaNA, Collectie G.J. van Grol, 2.21.075). And when the economy of the Dutch islands went into free fall in the 1830s and 1840s, many of the white middle class emigrated to St. Thomas (NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 2.10.01, 4313).

Due to all these connections, the newspapers on the islands reported events on the neighboring islands vigorously, furthering a sense of regional identity and belonging. As there were no newspapers on the Dutch Leeward islands for most of the nineteenth century, inhabitants were dependent on neighboring islands' news sources for their information. For example, in 1861, the Lt. Governor of St. Maarten enclosed a newspaper from St. Kitts in his packet to the Governor in Curaçao to inform him that the lighthouse on Saba would be repaired (AN NAC 4 Gouverneur 103 RT 24). In fact, the St. Kitts newspaper dedicated a small column to each of the islands in the region. In contrast, the Dutch newspapers based in Curaçao devoted nary a word to their fellow Dutch islands.

A consultant sent by the Dutch government to visit the Leeward islands reported in 1933, "With reference to the mentality and physical energy of the people, so far as I can judge, the peasantry of these islands [Saba, St. Eustatius, St. Maarten] does not differ much, if any, in these respects from the similar peasantry in the adjoining islands in the British colonies" (NL-HaNA, 2.21.075, Collectie GJ van Grol, folder 54, p. 2). His comments illustrate the point that the Leeward islands were connected by shared ethnicity, language, economic interests, and threats to security such as slave uprisings, disease, and natural disasters. There was – and is – a porousness of the social, economic, and legal boundaries between these island colonies. Thus, they formed what might be called a regional system. For the inhabitants of the Leeward islands, geographical proximity led to inter-island solidarity. This solidarity was bolstered by the fact that most of the islands had relatively weak administrative and military infrastructures, relied on foreign trade, and had a demographic composition at odds with their colonial political affiliations (Mulich, 2013, p. 74). Most of the islanders spoke Creole English, and the non-African

descended populations on the islands were generally of Anglo-Saxon origin. Likewise, although the Dutch Reform church was the state church of the Netherlands, many of the islanders were Methodists.

In short, as this section has spelled out, division and discord were not the only aspects of Dutch Antillean history. The emphasis on (post)colonial divisions has obscured the many connections and feelings of attachment between populations of different Caribbean islands, both in the past and in the present. Indeed, this historical analysis is in line with what Caribbean post-colonial thinkers have asserted about cultural and diasporic identities for some time (Hall, 1990). As we have seen, the Leeward islands as a whole share a great cultural, linguistic, and historical affinity with one another – an affinity that transcended colonial imperial divisions, as it continues to do.

The contemporary Dutch Caribbean

As the historical overview of the relations between the Leeward islands and Curaçao reveals, the inter-island antagonism that permeates archipelagic jurisdictions around the world can also be observed in the Dutch Caribbean. In 1954 all six islands were politically united in a single non-sovereign 'country' called the Netherlands Antilles, which was administered from Curaçao, the largest island. While the other five islands all resented their dependence on Curaçao, separatist tendencies were strongest on the second-largest island of Aruba, which actively pursued a direct relationship with the Netherlands. In 1986, following a status referendum, Aruba finally obtained its long-awaited *status aparte*, which the Netherlands was willing to grant under the condition that the island would become independent within the next ten years. As soon as separation from the Netherlands Antilles had been realized, the Aruban government reneged on its pledge, and because of negative public opinion regarding independence, as well as the Dutch government's willingness to renegotiate, Aruba was able to retain its separate, non-sovereign status within the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Hintjens, 1997, p. 539).

The departure of Aruba meant that the balance between the remaining islands of the Netherlands Antilles became even more uneven, and that Curaçao's dominance within the federation was enhanced. The next largest island, St. Maarten, embarked on its own quest for separate country status, and during a status referendum in 2000, nearly 70% of St. Maarten voters cast a ballot in favor of autonomy. The outcome of this referendum can be regarded as the next step in the demise of the Netherlands Antilles, and subsequent status referendums on the other islands revealed that only St. Eustatius wanted to remain part of the multi-island entity. Having complained for years about the *bultu di buriku* (Papiamentu for 'donkey's load') posed by the smaller islands, the Curaçaoan population voted for separate country status as well. By contrast, the populations of the smaller islands of Bonaire and Saba expressed a preference for 'direct ties' with the Netherlands. The Netherlands Antilles was finally dismantled on the symbolic date of 10 October 2010 ("10-10-'10"), when Curaçao and St. Maarten both became autonomous countries within the Kingdom, while the three smallest islands of Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and

Saba were politically integrated into the metropolis as public bodies or 'special municipalities' of the Netherlands (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2012; Veenendaal, 2015b).

While the inter-island tensions stemming from the dominant position of Curaçao ultimately resulted in the break-up of the Netherlands Antilles, the Dutch administration of the three smallest islands now primarily occurs from the largest public body, Bonaire. As a result, many inhabitants of the two smallest public bodies – Saba and St. Eustatius – feel that Bonaire now occupies the position formerly assumed by Curaçao (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2012, p. 264). While each of the Caribbean municipalities has direct ties with The Hague, and no formal political association exists between these three islands, the fact that the headquarters of the Dutch administration on the islands is located on Bonaire instantly raises the familiar patterns of inter-island resentment and rivalry. So while all six Dutch Caribbean islands now have a direct relationship with the Netherlands and no longer with each other, the familiar and age-old patterns of inter-island antagonism continue to reverberate.

In the autumn of 2015, one of the authors conducted a large-scale opinion survey on all six Dutch Caribbean islands (see Veenendaal, 2016 for more details about organization and methodology). While this survey focused primarily on the islands' political status, their relationship with the Netherlands, and local politics (Veenendaal & Oostindie, 2018), it also included some questions about the relationship and affinities with other islands. Regrettably, the results of the opinion survey on St. Maarten had to be discarded due to fraud committed by the interviewers. On the other five islands, respondents provided answers to two questions about their feelings of attachment and connection to neighboring islands and countries. First, out of a predetermined list of 11 neighboring countries and territories, respondents were asked to select the three countries or islands they felt most connected to. The answers to this question have been presented in Table 2; the percentages indicate the share of respondents on the respective island(s) (in the columns) that selected each of the countries and territories (in the rows) as one of their top three cases. To give an example: out of the Aruban respondents, 36% selected Bonaire as one of the three territories with which they felt most connected.

The statistics presented in the table point to a very clear pattern. Respondents on the ABC islands primarily list their neighboring islands as territories that they feel most attached to, and these neighboring islands are selected by over 60% of respondents. The one exception is Bonaire, which is selected by fewer than 40% of Arubans as one of the three territories that they feel most connected to. In addition to the neighboring islands, the Netherlands is also selected by between 60% and 70% of respondents on all three islands. In contrast, despite the common (post)colonial heritage, the SSS islands are rarely selected by respondents on the ABC islands: while St. Maarten is mentioned by approximately 12% of Aruban and Bonairean respondents, it is mentioned

Table 3. Countries and islands that respondents feel least connected to.

	Aruba	Curaçao	Bonaire	Saba	St. Eustatius
Aruba	N/A	9.9%	5.7%	24.2%	22.4%
Bonaire	8.8%	9.9%	N/A	21.5%	32.2%
Curaçao	5.6%	N/A	7.7%	16.4%	16.4%
St. Maarten	26.3%	17.2%	30.1%	2.3%	7.2%
Saba	46.0%	44.5%	26.1%	N/A	15.1%
St. Eustatius	44.5%	41.6%	28.0%	15.5%	N/A
The Netherlands	3.9%	6.8%	6.0%	13.7%	15.8%
Dominican Republic	47.0%	57.2%	61.0%	46.1%	63.2%
Venezuela	39.2%	50.5%	58.9%	N/A	N/A
St. Kitts	N/A	N/A	N/A	44.3%	28.9%
United States	9.5%	22.6%	42.8%	26.0%	44.1%

by close to 30% of Curaçaoan respondents. The smallest islands of Saba and St. Eustatius are in fact the least selected territories and are selected by fewer than 5% of respondents on all three ABC islands. Aruban, Bonairean, and Curaçaoan respondents clearly feel more connected to the United States and nearby Venezuela than to the three SSS islands, despite the fact that the latter islands were part of the same 'country' until 2010.

On Saba and St. Eustatius, a comparable dynamic can be observed. Respondents on these two islands first and foremost select St. Maarten as the island that they feel connected to. All other jurisdictions that they could choose from are selected by fewer than 40% of respondents, and respondents on Saba and St. Eustatius also do not feel a particularly strong mutual connection. Furthermore, in contrast to the ABC islands, Sabans and Statians do not have a strong sense of attachment to the Netherlands, the former colonial power. Among respondents on these two islands, the United States (on Saba) and St. Kitts (on St. Eustatius) receive a relatively high score that is comparable to the average percentage of the ABC islands. The score for Curaçao, the seat of the government of the Netherlands Antilles until 2010, is only a bit higher than that of Aruba and Bonaire.

In addition to the question about territories and countries that respondents feel *most* connected to, the survey also included a question about which territories and countries respondents felt *least* connected to. Again, respondents were asked to list three countries and territories in answering this question. The results are presented in Table 3.

The statistics presented in Table 3 essentially offer a mirror image of those presented in Table 2. On the ABC islands, Saba and St. Eustatius are among the most often mentioned jurisdictions that respondents feel least connected to, and the score is largely comparable to that of the Dominican Republic and Venezuela, with which the populations of these islands do not share a common colonial heritage. On Saba and St. Eustatius, Aruba and Bonaire are also among the jurisdictions that respondents feel no connection with, although the score

is significantly lower than that of the Dominican Republic. On these two islands, Curaçao is significantly less often selected as a jurisdiction with which respondents feel least connected.

In sum, the answers given to the two questions about connections with other jurisdictions clearly attest to and confirm the lack of a shared identity between the population of the islands that before 2010 constituted the country of the Netherlands Antilles. Inhabitants of the ABC islands feel as much connected to the United States and Venezuela as to St. Maarten and feel completely unconnected to the smaller islands of Saba and St, Eustatius. In a similar fashion, inhabitants of Saba and St. Eustatius feel only a weak connection with Aruba and Bonaire, and a moderate connection with Curaçao. On these islands, the sense of connection with neighboring St. Maarten is much stronger, and there are also relatively strong feelings of attachment with the United States (for Sabans) and St. Kitts (for Statians). Together, these figures therefore support our argument that geographical proximity and cultural similarities trump colonial constructions and legacies when explaining the connections between various Caribbean islands. As we have seen, this was true in the past and continues to be true in the present.

Conclusion

As the foregoing analysis reveals, the Dutch Caribbean islands have a longstanding history of mutual antagonism, grievances, and rivalry. By means of our interdisciplinary approach, combining insights from history and political science, we have demonstrated that the colonial union between the three Leeward and the two-and-a-half Windward islands of the Dutch Caribbean was resented from the start, and that these dynamics have lingered until 2010, and possibly beyond. In contrast, we have shown that both in the past and in the present, the three Leeward islands have had stronger cultural, economic, linguistic, and social ties with neighboring non-Dutch islands than with the three Leeward islands that were – and to a great extent still are – part of the same empire. In fact, our analysis shows that the characteristics and dynamics of the relations between the six islands have remained remarkably similar across time. As much as in 2010, in 1850 inhabitants of the three Leeward islands felt neglected, deprived, and underprivileged by the government of Curaçao. And as much as 160 years later, in 1850 Curaçaoans primarily regarded the Leeward islands as a burden, liability, or millstone around their necks.

As we observed in the beginning of this article, the Caribbean region continues to be determined by its colonial past. Even though colonialism has (almost) receded and many colonially constructed political unions have now fragmented – most recently the Netherlands Antilles in 2010 – the Caribbean islands continue to be identified and clustered on the basis of their respective colonial legacies. On the basis of two sets of arguments, this article has sought to demonstrate the inaccuracy of such classifications. In the first place, as mentioned above, we have shown that political and administrative relationships between islands that were involuntarily united into a single

colonial jurisdiction are commonly characterized by antagonism, rivalry, and hostility. Secondly, however, we have demonstrated that the classical perspective obfuscates the strong social, cultural, and economic connections that may exist between neighboring Caribbean islands with different colonial rulers, both in the past and in the present. While two particular geographical features of the Caribbean – smallness and islandness – have on the one hand made the impact of colonialism in this part of the globe more pervasive and persistent, these characteristics are also at the root of contemporary nationalist and separatist movements that jeopardize the (post)colonial union between different islands. And while the boundaries between different island societies remain strong, the smallness of these islands increasingly creates a realization that individual islands cannot survive on their own and will benefit from cooperation with neighboring islands. Finally, while outside the scope of this article, extensive migration between the islands and to metropolitan states has created extensive diaspora communities, which obviously also impact on island identities and inter-island linkages (King, 2009).

This change of heart can be observed most clearly in the Anglophone Eastern Caribbean. While the British colonial rulers tried to create a political union between their Caribbean island possessions through the short-lived West Indies Federation (1958-1962), this construct rapidly dissipated due to logistical difficulties and a broader lack of enthusiasm. Since the early 1980s, however, the six smallest Eastern Caribbean Island states are increasingly cooperating in economic, financial, and judicial matters through the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). Due to collaboration within this supranational organization – which is sometimes described as a miniature European Union – the Eastern Caribbean islands now have a common currency (the Eastern Caribbean dollar), a common judiciary (the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court), a common central bank (the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank), and a pooled security organization (the Regional Security System). In addition, there are plans for increasing administrative and political cooperation. It remains to be seen whether a similar development can be witnessed in the post-2010 Dutch Caribbean, but there have already been some calls for increasing cooperation, especially on the three Windward islands. These developments reveal that the populations of these islands recognize the merits of inter-island cooperation yet reject the forced colonial configurations in which they were placed together before. Collaboration with other islands is possible, but only on the terms of the islands themselves.

Our findings have a number of implications for enduring debates about the influence of geographical circumstances and historical legacies on the formation of identities. In contrast to conventional wisdom, our article reveals that geographical proximity tends to have a stronger influence on the self-identification of Caribbean island populations than political affiliations, and also has a greater effect on people's sense of connection with other islands. As we discussed in the theoretical section of this article, the combination of smallness and islandness can be observed in other world regions as well,

especially in the Indian and Pacific oceans. As developments in these regions in the post-independence era demonstrate, multi-island entities that were created during colonial times experience profound centrifugal tendencies that often result in break-ups and fragmentation. In this respect, small islands around the world face a similar conundrum: their islandness and smallness creates a strong sense of national identity and a powerful yearning for autonomy, yet because of their small size, most of these islands may not be considered by their metropolitan powers or may not consider themselves to be viable as fully independent states.

Funding

Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek 858.14.011 and 858.14.012.

Submitted: March 01, 2022 CST, Accepted: September 01, 2022 CST

References

Allen, R. M. (2013). Twentieth century migration from the English-speaking Caribbean to Curaçao: Discursive inclusion and exclusion. In N. Faraclas, R. Severing, C. Weijer, & E. Echteld (Eds.), *Rethinking the Rhizome: Studies of transcultural language, literature, learning and life on the ABC islands and beyond* (pp. 13–29). University of Curaçao.

Baldacchino, G. (1993). Bursting the bubble: The pseudo-development strategies of microstates. *Development and Change*, *24*(1), 29–52. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.1993.tb00476.x

Baldacchino, G. (2006). Islands, Island Studies, Island Studies Journal. *Island Studies Journal*, *1*(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.185

Baldacchino, G., & Hepburn, E. (2012). A different appetite for sovereignty? Independence movements in subnational island jurisdictions. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, *50*(4), 555–568. https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2012.729735

Belinfante, G. (1889). *St. Martin, zijne politieke geschiedenis van het jaar 1816 tot october 1889*. Self-published.

Bishop, M. L., Byron-Reid, J., Corbett, J., & Veenendaal, W. P. (2021). Secession, territorial integrity, and (non-)sovereignty: Why do some separatist movements in the Caribbean succeed while others fail? *Ethnopolitics*, *21*(5), 538–560. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2021.1975414

Bonilla, Y. (2015). *Non-sovereign futures. French Caribbean politics in the wake of disenchantment*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12455

Bosch, G. B. (1829). *Reizen in West-Indie: Eerste deel*. Van der Monde.

Caldwell, J. C., Harrison, G. E., & Quiggin, P. (1980). The demography of micro-states. *World Development*, *8*(12), 953–962. https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750x(80)90087-x

Clegg, P. (2012). Independence movements in the Caribbean: Withering on the vine? *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, *50*(4), 422–438. https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2012.729728

Coggeshall, G. (1858). *Thirty-six voyages to various parts of the world, made between the years 1799 and 1841, selected from his MS. Journal of eighty voyages*. Putnam.

Connell, J. (2020). Bougainville: A new Pacific nation? *Small States & Territories*, *3*(2), 375–396.

Dijs, N. M. van der. (2011). *The nature of ethnic identity among the people of Curaçao*.

Domínguez, J. I. (1993). The Caribbean question. In J. I. Domínguez, R. A. Pastor, & R. D. Worrell (Eds.), *Democracy in the Caribbean: Political, economic, and social perspectives* (pp. 1–25). The Johns Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/165959

Doumenge, F. (1985). The viability of small intertropical islands. In E. Dommen & P. Hein (Eds.), *States, microstates, and islands* (pp. 70–118). Croom Helm.

Emmer, P. (2003). *De Nederlandse slavenhandel, 1500-1800* (2nd ed.). Arbeiderspers.

Ferdinand, M., Oostindie, G., & Veenendaal, W. P. (2020). A global comparison of non-sovereign island territories: The search for 'true equality.' *Island Studies Journal*, *15*(1), 43–66. https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.75

Fricke, F. J. (2019). *The lifeways of enslaved people in Curaçao, St Eustatius, and St Maarten/St Martin: A thematic analysis of archaeological, osteological, and oral historical data* [Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis]. University of Kent.

Goslinga, C. (1990). *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in Surinam, 1791/5-1942*. Van Gorcum. https://doi.org/10.2307/1006997

Groenewoud, M. (2021). Decolonization, otherness, and the neglect of the Dutch Caribbean in Caribbean studies. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, *25*(1), 102–115. https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-8912808

Grydehøj, A. (2017). A future of island studies. *Island Studies Journal*, *12*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.1

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.

Hartog, J. (1964). *De Bovenwindse eilanden*. De Wit.

Haviser, J. (2013). *Limited archaeological testing at the Rockland Plantation*. SIMARC Publications.

Haviser, J., Voges, M., & Patrick, A. (2010). The identification of an enslaved African village at the Emilio Wilson Estate, St. Maarten. In R. Ebanks (Ed.), *Proceedings of the twenty-second International Congress for Caribbean Archaeology* (pp. 44–71). Jamaica National Heritage Trust.

Hinds, D. (2008). Beyond formal democracy: The discourse on democracy and governance in the Anglophone Caribbean. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, *46*(3), 388–406. https://doi.org/10.1080/14662040802176558

Hintjens, H. M. (1997). Governance options in Europe's Caribbean dependencies: The end of independence. *The Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, *86*(344), 533–547. https://doi.org/10.1080/00358539708454387

Inniss, S. P. (1983). *Whither bound St. Kitts-Nevis?* Antigua Printing and Publishing Ltd.

Johnson, W. (1994). *For the love of St. Maarten*. Macmillan Caribbean.

King, R. (2009). Geography, islands and migration in an era of global mobility. *Island Studies Journal*, *4*(1), 53–84. https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.228

Lewis, G. (2004). *Main currents in Caribbean thought: The historical evolution of Caribbean society in its ideological aspects*. University of Nebraska Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0165115300010810

Mulich, J. (2013). Microregionalism and intercolonial relations: The case of the Danish West Indies, 1730–1830. *Journal of Global History*, *8*(1), 72–94. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1740022813000053

Murrain, D. T. (1993). *Let's look back: A synopsis of political developments in Nevis from 1625 to 1992*. ECI Publications.

Newitt, M. (1992). Introduction. In H. Hintjens & M. Newitt (Eds.), *The political economy of small tropical islands: The importance of being small* (pp. 1–17). Exeter University Press. https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.4230130216

Oostindie, G., & Hoefte, R. (1999). Historiography of Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles. In B. W. Higman (Ed.), *General history of the Caribbean: Vol. VI* (pp. 604–630). UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-73776-5_20

Oostindie, G., & Klinkers, I. (2012). *Gedeeld Koninkrijk. De ontmanteling van de Nederlandse Antillen en de vernieuwing van de trans-Atlantische relaties*. Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.4032

Paula, A. F. (1993). *'Vrije' slaven: Een sociaal-historische studie over de dualistische slavenemancipatie op Nederlands Sint Maarten, 1816-1863*. Walburg Pers. https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.4032

Payne, A. (1993). Westminster adapted: the political order of the Commonwealth Caribbean. In J. I. Domínguez, R. A. Pastor, & R. D. Worrell (Eds.), *Democracy in the Caribbean: Political, Economic, and Social Perspectives* (pp. 57–73). The Johns Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/165959

Roitman, J. V. (2016a). The price you pay. *Journal of Global Slavery*, *1*(2–3), 196–223. https://doi.org/10.1163/2405836x-00102003

Roitman, J. V. (2016b). Land of hope and dreams: Slavery and abolition in the Dutch Leeward islands, 1825–1865. *Slavery & Abolition*, *37*(2), 375–398. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039x.2016.1140457

Roitman, J. V. (2017). 'A mass of mestiezen, castiezen, and mulatten': Fear, freedom, and people of color in the Dutch Antilles, 1750-1850. *Atlantic Studies – Global Currents*, *14*(3), 399–417. https://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.10119

Roitman, J. V. (2019). "If I should fall behind". Migration in the mid-nineteenth-century Leeward Islands. Mathilda Percival's letters to her husband John Clio. *Women, Gender, History*, *50*, 171–184. https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048544257.004

Roitman, J. V., & Veenendaal, W. P. (2016). We take care of our own: The origins of oligarchic politics in St. Maarten. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, *102*, 69–88. https://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.10119

Romondt, D. J. van. (1917, May 7). Letter to the editor. *New York Daily Herald*.

Sedoc-Dahlberg, B. (Ed.). (1990). *The Dutch Caribbean: Prospects for democracy*. Gordon and Breach.

Soest, J. van. (1977). *Olie als water: de Curaçaose economie in de eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw*. De Walburg Pers.

Soest, J. van. (2012). *Curaçaose cijferreeksen 1828 - 1955*. DANS, Data Archiving and Networked Services.

Sutton, P. (1999). Democracy in the Commonwealth Caribbean. *Democratization*, *6*(1), 67–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510349908403597

Teenstra, M. D. (1837). *De Nederlandsche West-Indische eilanden*. Sulpke.

Veenendaal, W. P. (2015a). Democracy in microstates: Why smallness does not produce a democratic political system. *Democratization*, *22*(1), 92–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.820710

Veenendaal, W. P. (2015b). The Dutch Caribbean municipalities in comparative perspective. *Island Studies Journal*, *10*(1), 15–30. https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.318

Veenendaal, W. P. (2016). *Eindrapport CCC opinieonderzoek*. KITLV.

Veenendaal, W. P., & Oostindie, G. J. (2018). Head versus heart: The ambiguities of non-sovereignty in the Dutch Caribbean. *Regional & Federal Studies*, *28*(1), 25–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2017.1368018

Veer, G. S. (1857). *Iets over de emancipatie der slaven door eenen voormaligen bewoner der kolonie Suriname 1856*. de Gebroeders Max Cleef.

Archival sources

[Anonymous petitioner from St. Eustatius to the Colonial Governor]. (1863, September 8). St. Eustatius en Saba na 1828, (1.05.13.02, 377). National Archives of The Netherlands, The Hague, Netherlands (NL-HaNA).

[Anonymous Report from St. Christopher to the Colonial Office]. (1899). Colonial Office. National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, London. United Kingdom.

[Colonial Reports]. (1932-1933). Ministerie van Koloniën, (2.10.01). National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, Netherlands (NL-HaNA).

[General Government Documentation and Reports]. (1819). St. Maarten, St. Eustatius en Saba tot 1828 (1.05.13.01). National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, Netherlands (NL-HaNA).

[Letter from Governor of Curacao to Lt. Governor of St. Maarten]. (1870. November 29). Letters from St. Maarten, (4971). National Archives of Curaçao, Willemstad, Curacao, Netherlands Antilles (AN NAC).

[Letter from the Governor of Curacao to the Lt. Governor of St. Maarten]. (1910. 3 December). Journal of the Lt. Governor of St. Maarten. Philipsburg Library, Philipsburg, St. Maarten, Netherlands Antilles.

[Letter from the Lt. Governor of St. Maarten to the Governor of Curacao]. (1867). St. Eustatius en Saba na 1828, (1.05.13.02, 328). National Archives of The Netherlands, The Hague, Netherlands (NL-HaNA).

[Letter from the Lt. Governor of St. Maarten to the Governor of Curacao]. (1912. 3 March). Journal of the Lt. Governor of St. Maarten. Philipsburg Library, Philipsburg, St. Maarten, Netherlands Antilles.

[Reports to the Dutch Colonial Government]. (1835-18450) Ministerie van Koloniën, (2.10.01, 4313). National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, Netherlands (NL-HaNA).

[Reports to the Dutch Colonial Government]. (1844-1852). Collectie G.J. van Grol (2.21.075). National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, Netherlands (NL-HaNA).

Het Koloniaal Weekblad orgaan der Vereeniging Oost en West. Editorial. (1919. November 27). Den Haag: Het Algemeen Belang.

Het Koloniaal Weekblad orgaan der Vereeniging Oost en West. Editorial. (1920.

October 7). Den Haag: Het Algemeen Belang.

The New York Herald. Editorial "We Belong With You". (1917. May 7).