

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM & THE POLICY OF LANGUAGE ON SINT MAARTEN

By

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Today when talking about cultural imperialism within the Caribbean we are likely to think about our big neighbour and its policy of “cocacola-nization”. Culture covers a vast range of topics, yet I only want to single out one and that is language. Language has been the colonial instrument *par excellence* that has contributed to the present fragmentation and balkanisation of the Caribbean region.

On our small island of Sint Maarten/Saint Martin language has been made into an instrument of cultural imperialism. By imposing and maintaining Dutch and French as the official languages, the language of the people, and their culture is relegated to a second place. As you might have heard yesterday during the singing of the national anthem of Sint Maarten one of its characteristics is “...with people French and Dutch, though talking English much...”

In my presentation today, I want to demonstrate how the official language policy of Dutch St. Maarten (although many of the arguments will apply to the French side as well) is a political tool used to include or exclude certain groups of people in/from the democratic process of preparing for our future. The age-old adage of *divida et impera* – divide and rule – could not have been better demonstrated than by the language policies of this island, specifically in the fields of education and politics.

To better understand the position of our island and its struggle to find its proper place within the Caribbean region, I will first look at the meaning and explanation of ‘cultural imperialism’ as expounded on by various scholars familiar with the colonial experience. Next I will give you a short overview of the colonial and constitutional history of SXM, so you will get an impression of our unique situation. After that I will explain how language has become a political tool of inclusion and exclusion, and as such an instrument of cultural imperialism.

I. LANGUAGE AND IMPERIALISM

Language has a dual character. It is not only a means of communication but also a carrier of culture. Colonial powers, by imposing their languages: French, Dutch, English, Spanish, etc. on the subjugated peoples took control of those peoples mind. Ngugi Wa Thiongo referred to the imperial European languages as “...the vehicle that held the soul prisoner”. He saw language as a means of spiritual subjugation and decided to no longer write in English but in Kikuyu, the language of his ancestors. Within the Caribbean the situation is more complex because there is not one single language we can fall back on as our ancestral language. Yet we have made the masters language our own as is demonstrated in the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* published in 1996 by Richard Allsopp. Yes, Caliban has mastered Prospero’s language. Rass Man! Ah tell yuh so!

The connection between language and culture has been illustrated by many other writers, as well as anti-imperial activists and scholars. In 1956 at the *First Congress for Black*

Writers and Artists in Paris both Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire spoke about culture and imperialism and expressed the need for “cultural nationalism” if a people wanted to obtain true liberation. According to Fanon:

True liberation is not that pseudo independence in which ministers, having a limited responsibility hobnob with an economy dominated by the colonial past.

Liberation is the total destruction of the colonial system, from the pre-eminence of the language of the oppressor and ““departimentalization”” to the customs unions that in reality maintain the former colonized in the meshes of the culture, of the fashion and the images of the colonialist

[Towards the African Revolution, p.105]

Those words written in 1958 still apply to SXM today.

In order to obliterate these colonial images we have to establish our own identity. Identity is an understanding, or the sense, a person has of who she/he is, which is distinct from, though related to, what others may think she/he is. The matter of identity is a matter of culture, and culture, as was mentioned above is shaped by language. Edouard Glissant. in his *Caribbean Discourse, Selected Essays* [1981, translated by Michael Dash in 1989] observes our Caribbean identity endangered by the following:

We know what threatens Caribbeanness: the historical balkanisation of the islands, the inculcation of different and often “opposed” major languages (the quarrel between French and Anglo-American English), the umbilical cords that maintain, in a rigid or inflexible way, many of these islands within the sphere of influence of a particular metropolitan power, the presence of frightening and powerful neighbours, Canada and especially the United States. -
Glissant [1989:222]

More recently Rex Nettleford addressed these same issues in his book *Inward Stretch, Outward Reach* [1995]. He talks about cultural and national identity; about culture and education as “weapons of war” and how the colonial legacy of language barriers has led to a communication gap between the various linguistic territories of the Caribbean.

II. COLONIAL HISTORY OF SINT MAARTEN

Now lets take a look at SXM. What is SXM?

SXM is the smallest split island in the world with a surface of 37 square miles, of which 16 square miles (or 34 km²) form part of the Netherlands Antilles, which at present consists of five islands: Curaçao, Bonaire (called the Leeward Islands by the Dutch, although the British call that part of the Caribbean the Windward Islands) and SXM, Saba and St. Eustatius, which the Dutch call the Windward islands and the British the Leewards.. Aruba was also part of the Netherlands Antilles until 1986 when it became a separate country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Presently the Kingdom consists of three partners: the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba and the Netherlands. SXM would like to change this and is trying to obtain a separate status within the Kingdom as well.

The so-called French part is a département of France along with the islands Guadeloupe, Martinique and Marie Galante. The island was colonised by the French in 1629 and two

years later by the Dutch. From 1633 –1648 the Spanish occupied the island. When they left the French and Dutch signed a Partition Treaty at Morne Des Accors.

Sint Maarten, better known as the Dutch side, or in more politically correct terms the South side, has never been submerged in the Dutch culture, nor its language until the middle of the twentieth century. Between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century the control over the island changed hands at least ten times between the French, Dutch and English respectively. Until 1848 there existed no legal nor administrative relationship between the Windward and the Leeward Islands. In that year the 'Colony of Curaçao was created, linking all six islands together administratively under one governor. The name the Netherlands Antilles was not used until a hundred years later in 1948.

The Dutch have never been interested in settling their colonies in the West Indies. And the people that did settle in the Dutch Caribbean were often, according to Cornelis Goslinga, illiterate mercenary soldiers recruited from other European countries. Contrary to the British and even more so the French, the Dutch never left their cultural imprint on the Caribbean, at least not on the Windward Islands, where until 1923 the language of communication and the language of instruction in education was English.

Furthermore as Franklin Knight has demonstrated in his article *Pluralism, creolization and culture*, published in 1997 in UNESCO's General History of the Caribbean series, vol. III, the influence of African culture on the culture of the Caribbean has been far greater than is usually acknowledged.

After the abolition of slavery, by the French in 1848 and by the Dutch in 1863, both the French and Dutch lost interest in the island and practically abandoned it. This made one of its inhabitants, Diederik von Romondt, advocate that the United States annex the island after the US had purchased the Virgin Islands from Denmark in 1917

[Had that happened, you probably would not be here today, nor would this island have become the interesting laboratory for social scientists it is at present.]

In 1954 the Dutch created the Netherlands Antilles, which was their answer to the growing demand of sovereignty and independence by colonial territories. The Netherlands would have preferred to maintain all their colonial possessions within the orbit of the Kingdom. However, hampered by their war in Indonesia (the Dutch refused to acknowledge the independent Republic of Indonesia) it was decided to go ahead and make a change in the constitutional status of Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles.

In 1948 the Netherlands Antilles had not only received its name but also universal franchise. A year later the Antillean people for the first time elected their Parliament or Staten as it was called. Two years after that, in 1951, each territory of the N.A. conducted its first Island Council elections. During this period the Dutch conducted ongoing talks in the Netherlands with representatives from Suriname and the N.A. However, not many of the people knew what exactly was going on. As a matter of fact they were never consulted on the future constitutional status of their country. Even today it is not a well known fact that the Surinamese delegation wanted to have the right of self-determination included in the STATUTE or Kingdom Charter, which was refused by the Dutch. Instead the preamble to the Charter mentioned that the new legal order between the three partners had been agreed upon by their own free will, but could never be terminated unilaterally. This still has many consequences for SXM today while it is seeking to establish a new constitutional status within the Kingdom. At the time nobody raised a voice except a

small group of Surinamese independistas residing in the Netherlands. They felt that the persons who had signed the Charter were “civil servants of the old colonial regime, who had always said ‘yes’ to the Hague.” According to the group education and culture were used to further the interests of the colonial powers, instead of serving the people:

Education is directly aimed against the history of the people; historical facts are falsified and the history of the people is totally substituted by the history of the colonizer or quite simply suppressed. National heroes become criminals and terrorists, while the colonizers are represented as a paternal, philanthropic and superior developed people, who are sometimes proclaimed as the national heroes of the colonized. ...The policy of the falsification of History goes hand in hand with the suppression of own language or languages.

III. LANGUAGE AS POLICY OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

After this digression on the colonial history of the Netherlands Antilles we are back at our starting point and my thesis that language is used as a policy of inclusion and exclusion.

The following arguments and explanations are offered in support of that thesis.

- Dutch never was and never will be the language of the people of Sint Maarten. Yet in order to participate in the ‘democratic’ process of governing this island one has to be able to speak, read and comprehend Dutch.
- Over the past twenty years many newcomers have settled on SXM. It is estimated that at present only some 20 % of St.Maarten’s inhabitants [approx. 40.000 without counting the illegals] were locally born. Even when these people obtain the Dutch nationality, this does not mean that they will master the Dutch sufficiently to participate in the governing of this island.
- That most people do not speak Dutch is reflected in our educational institutions. We have five schools offering academic and vocational training at secondary level. Only one school has Dutch as their language of instruction, at least at the academic level. The vocational level switched to English a couple of years ago. Somehow this reminds me of the American invasion of Haiti in the first quarter of the 20th century and their discussion on the educational policy, which according to the Americans was too academic and not enough vocational training. Or we could go back further still...was not the Black race at some point in time designated as the “fetchers of water and the hewers of wood”?
Mainly those that follow the Dutch educational system, and preferably continue their tertiary education in the Netherlands will later on be secured of a position in Government.
- In a recent report by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], commissioned by the Central Government of the N.A. for the IMF, our own university USM was put down as attaining no higher than tertiary vocational level. While the ‘official’ University of the Netherlands Antilles, which still has as its main language of instruction the Dutch language, was pushed to a spearhead position in education. The feeling of unease when reading the above mentioned report was further enhanced during the recently held Commencement ceremony of USM, while listening to the Commissioner of Education. In her address she seemed to suggest that

USM – adapting to the prevalent education policy of the island territory – concentrate on vocational instead of academic training.

If SXM wants to develop its own identity it should destroy the dependency complex perpetuated by Euro-centric education.

If SXM wants to integrate into the Caribbean region it is imperative to go beyond this delightfully Dutch and fantastically French thing and accept the fact that we share a common history and culture with the rest of the Caribbean

If SXM wants to contribute to a greater degree of awareness of Caribbean unity it should start by making its history and culture, and the history and culture of the N.A., accessible to the region.

English and Spanish, and not Dutch and French, are the most common languages of the Caribbean region. However, for us it does not matter for we speak them all.

Closing I would like to share with you a poem by the Cuban poet Nicolas Guillén that accurately renders the problem of cultural, or should I say, educational imperialism

Monsieur Dupont calls you uneducated
 Because you don't know which was
 The favourite grandchild of Victor Hugo
 Herr Müller has started shouting
 Because you don't know the day
 (the exact one) when Bismarck died.
 Your friend Mr. Smith.
 English or Yankee, I don't know
 Becomes incensed when you write *Shell*
 (it seems that you hold back an "l"
 and that besides you pronounce it *chel*.)
 O.K. So what?
 When it's your turn
 Have them say *cacarajicara*
 And where is the Aconcagua
 And who was Sucre,
 And where on this planet
 Did Martí die
 And please
 Make them always talk to you in Spanish.