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The Repercussions of Rumor: An adultery case from 18th century Curaçao*

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This chapter will examine the dynamics the Jewish community of late 18th century Curaçao through the prism of the court records resulting from a case of alleged adultery, with a particular emphasis on the role of gossip and rumor within and beyond the community. As in any small, densely packed community, gossip was an important feature of eighteenth century urban life in Willemstad. Gossip –the exchange of information about the personal lives of third parties– was not merely “tattling” or idle talk, as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it. This chapter will argue that within the Jewish community of Curaçao, just as in other societies with few other means of exchanging information, gossip functioned as a crucial means of transmitting vital data about others. If it involved sexual conduct, as it did in the case study to be examined in this chapter, it could also prove titillating and diversionary.

This reinforces what F. G. Bailey has described as the “quality of intimacy” in small communities and what Max Gluckman famously argued when he asserted that gossip helps to maintain the unity and the morality of the groups involved in

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it.¹ Gossip, in short, can be a positive force in communities. While it can damage social unity, it can help reinforce bonds of belonging and identity. It can also act as a mechanism for social control and buttress community norms. Robert Paine, conversely, saw gossip as a "genre of informal communication" and also "a device intended to forward and protect individual interests." This was especially the case, in Paine's view, for members of minority groups living inside larger "host" societies.² These anthropological observations apply well to eighteenth-century Curaçao. This chapter will incorporate Bailey's, Gluckman's and Paine's perspectives on the function of gossip in societies and show that they were not mutually exclusive. Rather, they could work in tandem to both reinforce community norms while also bolstering individuals' statuses. Ultimately, this chapter will show how gossip highlights tensions in social relationships, flourishes in certain circumstances and, in turn, gives further impetus to these circumstances.

This chapter will also show that gossip did not appear to be a particularly female activity, in contrast to studies that do center gossip in the female sphere. In fact, as the case discussed below will show, men were the most garrulous. This is not surprising given the vital role rumors played in the realm of business and government. Historian Han Jordaan details how rumors of involvement in illicit trade led to a major problem on the island of Curaçao between Governor Faesch and colonial official Johannes Heijliger.³ If men were at least as eager to spread rumors and speculate upon people's behavior, it is possible that reputed sexual conduct was intertwined with

¹ Frederick G. Bailey, "Gift and Poison," in: idem (ed.), *Gift and Poison: The Politics of Reputation*. Oxford 1971, and Max Gluckman, "Gossip and scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4,3 (1963), pp. 307-316.

² Robert Paine, "What is gossip about? An alternative hypothesis," *Man* n.s., 2,2 (1967), pp. 278-285.

³ Han Jordaan, "Samuel Fahlberg (1758-1834): de biografische contouren van een veelzijdig man," in: Maritza Coomans-Eustatia, et al. (eds.), *De horen en zijn echo: verzameling essays opgedragen aan Dr. Henny E. Coomans ter gelegenheid van zijn afscheid van de Universiteit van Amsterdam op 9 september 1994*. Bloemendaal, et al. 1994, pp. 231-235.

commerce and politics, and that these spheres were not as separate as historians have heretofore thought. In any case, one deponent in the case discussed below testified that gossip related to sexual conduct had always circulated in Curaçao. In a community where many or most families were intermarried, gossip and rumors must have created personal distress and divided loyalties that could not but impact trade and governance.

Every once in a while, a well-documented case provides us with a framework through which to view issues shaping the dynamics of a community or even of a society as a whole. Such a case occurred in 1775, when the Portuguese Jewish community of Curaçao was rocked by a bitter dispute involving allegations of sexual misconduct. The witnesses included a broad swathe of colonial society: housewives, merchants, doctors, colonial officials, slaves, and free people of color. Witnesses were asked to reveal their personal knowledge of the situation and also to repeat hearsay. The case threatened the social cohesion of the community and reminds us that close-knit communities could be rife with suspicions and simmering conflicts. It is also an example of how relatively clear-cut cases of adultery in the Dutch colonies could be manipulated in the defendants' favor.

The charges were dramatic and highly salacious by any standard. Sarah de Isaac Pardo was pregnant, but the paternity of her unborn child was the subject of much speculation in the Portuguese Jewish community, among its slaves and servants, and even among the white Protestants on the island. In more than ten years of marriage, Sarah had never before been known to be pregnant.⁴ Her much older husband, Selomoh Vaz Farro, was now gravely ill and had been for some time – so ill that the couple had twice been granted a conditional divorce in the preceding year by Haham da Fonseca in expectation of Vaz Farro's imminent demise.⁵ How was it,

⁴ National Archives of The Netherlands, henceforth NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, inv. nr. 223.

⁵ This divorce would have freed Sarah of the obligation to contract a levirate marriage to her brother-in-law. Apparently, Vaz Farro had recovered sufficiently enough for Fonseca to revoke the first conditional divorce decree. When Vaz Farro's condition worsened

then, that an elderly man on his deathbed –whom two doctors had declared impotent– could impregnate his wife?

Vaz Farro claimed in a sworn statement that, one evening several months earlier, he had “found the strength” to have relations with his wife.⁶ But this seemed unlikely to many within and outside the Portuguese Jewish community. Instead, suspicion immediately fell on Abraham de David da Costa Andrade, Jr. After all, Sarah and Abraham had frequently been spotted in each other’s company. This in itself was not particularly shocking. A certain degree of intimacy between married people of opposite genders was permitted in a closely-knit community in which nearly everyone was related by blood or marriage.⁷ But Sarah and Abraham seem to have pushed the limits of what was allowable by community standards. They were observed talking together on the porches of houses, exchanging small tokens such as flowers. Many witnesses had regularly spotted the pair strolling together outside the city gates. According to a few testimonies, Sarah and Abraham had even arranged rendezvous during the small hours of the morning. Gossip about their relationship was rife and there was plenty of material to work with.⁸

The frequency with which the two were sighted together, their obvious familiarity with one another, and Sarah’s suspicious pregnancy, flouted community norms and eventually incited censure. Sexual conduct was perhaps the single most important piece of information about a third party, as one deponent testified. Anthropologists acknowledge that a group’s moral values are constantly reinforced, indeed policed, by gossip, for gossip stories almost always have a moral edge to

again, Fonseca issued a second divorce decree. Conditional divorce decrees in the Portuguese Jewish communities of both Curaçao and Suriname had mandatory expiration dates; hence the necessity for two decrees in Vaz Farro’s case.

⁶ NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, inv. nr. 223:1, 10, 30v; 26:1.

⁷ For more discussion of this, see the other cases discussed in Ben-Ur; Roitman, “Adultery Here and There.”

⁸ NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, inv. nr. 223:1, 11, 42, 50; 2:1, 4l; 29, 1; 30, 1.

them.⁹ Thus it is not particularly surprising that gossip related to intimate behavior, as the deponent asserted, had always circulated in Curaçao, whether among men or women, or between Jews, Protestants, slaves, or free people of color.¹⁰

In the Pardo/Andrade scandal, free people of color played a central role in information transmission. Even those unrelated to the families in question enjoyed a detailed familiarity with the case.¹¹ In fact, Samuel da Costa Andrade learned of his brother's suspected adultery when he overheard two black women gossiping in a narrow Willemstad passageway.¹² Other deponents admitted that they had listened in on conversations about the scandal from blacks circulating in the marketplace and on the streets.¹³ This could be evidence that, as Robert Paine has argued, gossip was conducted by individuals seeking to forward their own interests and was, therefore, an integral part of social processes of (attempted) advancement by minority groups.¹⁴

In any case, all of this brings to the fore one of the main features of this case: the entanglement of enslaved and manumitted peoples in the daily life of whites. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the geographical situation. Willemstad was a small walled city barely containing upwards of 11,500 inhabitants, who by the mid-eighteenth century had begun to spill beyond its gates and into neighborhoods such as Otrabanda.¹⁵

⁹ Chris Wickham, "Gossip and Resistance Among the Medieval Peasantry," *Past & Present* 160 (1998), pp. 3-24.

¹⁰ NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, 223:2, 32.

¹¹ Ibid., 223:1, 29; 2, 4-8, 10; 4, 1; 5, 102; 15, 3; 29, 1-2; 30, 1-2.

¹² Ibid., 223:29, 1-2.

¹³ Ibid., 223:15, 4-5; 30, 1-2.

¹⁴ Paine, "What is gossip about?"

¹⁵ Wim Klooster, "Curaçao as a Transit Center to the Spanish Main and the French West Indies," in: Gert Oostindie; Jessica Vance Roitman (eds.), *Dutch Atlantic Connections*. Leiden 2014, pp. 25-51. Klooster estimates that by the middle of the eighteenth century, the number of Jewish families in Willemstad was nearly half that of white non-Jews. Based on WIC tax records, Klooster believes that by 1789 there were about 6,000 free residents in Willemstad, which included free blacks and "coloureds" –most of whom were Catholics–, as well as

In the testimony, people of color emerge as major actors and information transmitters. Informally, they absorbed and spread gossip across communal boundaries. White Portuguese Jews sometimes called on them to transmit messengers between the lovers. Sarah Pardo, for example, gave a letter to Antonia, a free black girl, to deliver to Abraham, who returned his own response via a slave girl. Clearly, these individuals occupied a central role in the Pardo and Andrade families, indicating not just intimacy and trust, but also influence. This idea is further bolstered by the fact that, on other occasions, enslaved and free people of color played advisory roles to the parties involved, as we shall see. These roles could also point to the validity of Gluckman's claims that gossip contributes to the unity of the group, with these enslaved and free people of color clearly considering themselves, and considered by the Portuguese Jewish community, as part of the community, playing a vital role in reinforcing its norms.

After her second conditional divorce from her dying husband, Sarah Pinto moved back to her father's house. However, Isaac Pardo's ploy of putting an end to his daughter's "shameless" conduct failed, for Sarah continued to visit with Abraham Andrade *sub rosa*.¹⁶ This he learned during the humiliating visit of Mrs. Clements, a prominent Protestant widow, who told him of his daughter's inappropriate conduct on the streets of Willemstad, a visit that illustrates how racial solidarity amongst whites overcame religious divides, and also illustrates the idea that rumor and gossip tend to form networks of communication in which fears and uncertainties emerge and challenges to existing power structures can be covertly made or, as would seem to be the case with Mrs. Clements' visit, overtly suppressed.¹⁷

2,469 Protestants and 1,095 Jews. See Wim Klooster, "Jews in Suriname and Curaçao," in: Paolo Bernardini; Norman Fiering (eds.), *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450 to 1800*. New York 2001, pp. 350-368, 353, 355.

¹⁶ NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, 223:2, 7-10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 223: 2, 14-16. And Paine, "What is gossip about?"

Similar embarrassing social calls caused the situation at home to deteriorate; Sarah and her father were heard arguing loudly and frequently. Both friends and the family's domestic slaves attempted to broker a peaceful solution to this untenable situation. At last, Isaac Pardo's good friend Dr. Joseph Capriles, seconded by Pardo's "house slaves," persuaded Sarah to move in with her father, who owned a residence outside the city gates.¹⁸ The house slaves, although nameless, are listed alongside Capriles –Isaac Pardo's long-time family friend, business partner, and prominent fellow Portuguese Jew– as key participants in persuading Sarah to change her domicile.¹⁹

Free people of color, referred to as *mulatos*, also appear in positions of intimacy or even friendship with Sarah Pardo and Abraham Andrade and other Portuguese Jews. Sarah was well enough acquainted with an unidentified mulatto woman whom she met on the streets to declare:

Everyone says I'm pregnant... I'm going to walk the streets now to show them that I'm not!"²⁰ Sarah also discussed with this woman her feelings for her ailing husband. She had "been hoping for two or three years for her husband to die... or for lightening to strike him."²¹

That these statements were made to a *mulato* woman and that no one in the ensuing civil and religious litigation seemed surprised is again indicative of a level of familiarity between the free colored and Portuguese Jewish populations that has

¹⁸ Ibid., 223: 2, 9-10.

¹⁹ Dr. Joseph Capriles was a prominent member of the Portuguese Jewish community on Curaçao. He was listed as one of the wealthiest members of the community in 1769. Emmanuel; Emmanuel, *Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, 255. He owned at least one ship, *La Dorada*, valued at 800 pesos. NL-HANA, Curaçao, Bonaire en Aruba tot 1828, 1.05.12.01, inv. nr. 891, 395.

²⁰ NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, 223:4, 1.

²¹ Ibid.

not heretofore been explored for Curaçao's Jewish community.²² For the purposes of this chapter, it may also show that Sarah was well aware of the important role of the free colored people in information transmission either as sustainers of communal unity or as individuals seeking to forward their own interests and, therefore, she sought to influence them.

It was a slave girl who transmitted to Isaac Pardo the two love letters that would become centerpieces in the trial against Sara Pardo and Abraham Andrade. According to Pardo père, these letters "came into my hands...from a black girl I came across."²³ These two incriminating love letters were written in the island's Creole language, commonly known today as Papiamentu, but in the sources referred to as *neger spraak* (Negro speech). They were especially damning, for they provided actual evidence of an extra-marital affair and compelled the *parnassim* of the synagogue to act, in part because the contents of the letters had become so widely known to both Jews and non-Jews in the city. These letters—the oldest known documents written in Papiamentu—formed the lynchpin of the various accusations against the couple. It was in these letters that both the pregnancy and the attempt to abort the fetus were acknowledged.²⁴

²² There is obviously secondary literature that discusses sexual liaisons between white Portuguese Jewish fathers and non-Jewish women of color, but these sources highlight the sexual and financial utility of such relations and do not consider friendship or trust. See, for example, Eva Abraham-Van der Mark, "Marriage and Concubinage among the Sephardic Merchant Elite of Curaçao," in: Janet Henshall Momsen (ed.), *Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective*. London 1993, pp. 38-49.

²³ This chain of transmission is related in NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, 223:2, 7-10.

²⁴ Sarah wrote that she had sent her slave, a woman called Xica, to a Spanish doctor named Manuel de Estrada to procure an abortifacient. NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, 223:11, 1-2; 13, 1. Estrada later declared under oath that he was surprised that Sarah "trusted a black woman in business of such importance." Ibid., 223:11, 1-2. When Estrada refused Xica, Abraham paid him a visit himself and was given certain herbs to end the pregnancy. NL-HANA, *ibid.*, 223: 11, 1-2; 12, 1. Andrade's attempt

After these compromising epistles were made public, one of Sarah's brothers threw Andrade out of the synagogue.²⁵ In fact, feelings against him were running so high that Andrade had to request an armed escort from the Governor in order to arrive home safely.²⁶ Sarah and Abraham claimed that they were innocent of the charges and that the adultery accusation was a conspiracy against them. They initially attempted to evade the *parnassim* when called to answer for their suspected crimes. Sarah Pardo disingenuously claimed several times that she did not realize she had been charged with a crime. Andrade's family also avoided appearing before the *Ma'amad*. His father feigned illness, while his brothers suddenly found pressing business to attend to off the island. When Sarah and Abraham eventually came before the *Ma'amad* and were confronted with the letters they had sent to one another, they claimed them forgeries. Shortly thereafter, the *haham* and *parnassim* formally accused Andrade of committing adultery with Sarah and excommunicated both parties. Andrade was ordered to ask for forgiveness at the synagogue altar, grow out his beard for six weeks, sit on a special bench in the synagogue, pay a fine of 200 guilders, and have no form of communication with Sarah Pardo. Sarah was not required to make the public penances in the synagogue like Andrade, but she did have to pay an equal amount to the charity fund, and it was Sarah that congregation president David Morales sought to have banished from the island, not Andrade.²⁷

The reason for this harsher treatment could possibly be rooted in the family history.²⁸ Isaac Pardo had been one of the first community members excommunicated by Haham de Sola in the community-wide conflict that rocked the island two

to procure abortifacients for his lover was a common response to an unplanned and possibly incriminating pregnancy.

²⁵ NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, 223: 23, 1-2 (October 1, 1775).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ These events are detailed in NL-HANA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), 1.05.01.02, 223:1, 1-25.

²⁸ For a similar interpretation of underlying causes of interpersonal disputes see Dennis Sullivan, *The Punishment of Crime in Colonial New York*. New York 1997, pp. 112-113.

decades earlier. This could show how gossip may find its way into long-lasting networks or group contexts where it can result in the storage of information that can lie unused for years but is a resource that can be pulled out in subsequent contexts of change and conflict.²⁹ This dispute was, in many ways, a continuation of other, long-running, conflicts within the Curaçaoan community. Like so many of the quarrels that plagued eighteenth century Portuguese Jews in Curaçao, the case of twenty years before centered on delimiting the powers of the *haham* and *parnassim*. Disagreement arose when there was talk of building a new synagogue that would compete with the pioneering Mikvé Israel. Two "opposition" leaders, Moses Penso and David Aboab, and those who supported them, including Isaac Pardo, were excommunicated.³⁰ In any case it also shows that talking about shared memories, what is sometimes termed social memory, especially what in a given context is the socially relevant past, legitimates or gives meaning to the present for the group that commemorates it.

Abraham and Sarah resorted to civil authorities to find in their favor. Andrade hired the lawyer Petrus Bernardus van Starckenborgh, who would later become interim Governor of Curaçao, to defend him against the charges. On July 3, 1776, the Governor and Council acquitted Andrade and Sarah and ordered the *parnassim* to remove the excommunications, annul the fines, and have the son who was born to Sarah circumcised without discrimination (without the omission of certain words

²⁹ Pamela J. Stewart; Andrew Strathern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*. Cambridge 2004, p. 39.

³⁰ For discussion of the case see, NL-HANA, Old Archive of Curaçao, 1.05.12.01, inv. nr. 825, 863/139; 1528; 818/47; 863/423; 867/79, 211; 180/132; 183/27; 821; NL-HANA, 1.05.01.02 (Second West India Company), inv. nr. 243/53-61; 70-83; 135-136; 180-182; 316; 596/1261; 597/584; 765a-68; 596/1261; 403; 357/15; Jessica Vance Roitman, "A flock of wolves instead of sheep: The Dutch West India Company, Conflict Resolution, and the Jewish Community of Curaçao in the Eighteenth Century," in: Jane S. Gerber (ed.), *The Jewish Diaspora in the Caribbean*. Oxford 2014, pp. 85-105; and Emmanuel; Emmanuel, *History*, vol. 1, pp. 183-212.

pronounced for sons of fathers leading moral lives).³¹ The *parnassim* were ordered to seal all papers referring to Sarah and Andrade.³²

Centuries later, the guilt of Abraham de David da Costa Andrade, Jr. and Sarah Pardo hardly matters. What makes the case interesting today is the vivid light it throws on the social dynamics among the island's various population groups and politics. The Dutch colonial authorities' involvement in the case magnified long-standing tensions between Jewish communal autonomy and colonial hegemony, which illustrates a few important points, including the fact that it is the ideological and historical context rather than the words themselves that ultimately produces the effects from gossip. It also shows gossip tends to emerge in conflicts over power. We may also perceive how information was transmitted within the Portuguese Jewish community and contemplate the far-reaching and decisive role of gossip. And we get a glimpse of the pivotal role of the colored

³¹ NL-HANA, Curaçao, Bonaire en Aruba tot 1828, 1.05.12.01, inv. nr. 916, 20; inv. nr. 918, 206, 208-210; inv. nr. 920, 315-316, 471; inv. nr. 921, 150-151, 164, 226.

³² Nevertheless, the *parnassim* let the excommunication stand. In fact, David Morales, president of the community, tried to have Sarah banished from Curaçao, but the Governor refused to comply. Public prosecutor Hubertus Coerman, who had been chief of police since 1773, also disagreed with the Governor and the island Council and took the case to the States General of Holland. But the States General found for Sarah and Andrade on January 13, 1778. Prosecutor Coerman demanded a reversal. Andrade won again. The Amsterdam *parnassim* removed the excommunication immediately. On July 31, 1780, the Curaçao *parnassim* were ordered to circumcise the child—who was now nearly five year old—like all legitimate Jewish sons. They were also ordered to pay Andrade's costs to the enormous sum of 60,493:2 Dutch guilders. The argument over the payment of the costs dragged on until 1794. Abraham Andrade eventually moved to Jamaica and Sarah Pardo remarried and left for St. Thomas. See SAA, 1156 (Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente Curaçao), inv. nr. 44, unpaginated; SAA, 334 (Archief van de Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente), inv. nr. 95 ("copiador de cartas" – copies of outgoing letters, 1773-1784), 184, 237, 286, 323; 22 ("Compendio de escamoth" – Resolutions, 1728-1814), 171, 199, 229-230, 254, 268.

population, whether enslaved or free, in one of the island's major scandals.

For the purposes of this chapter, though, one of the most important aspects of this case is to show vividly how rumors and gossip help in the production and outcomes of accusations that hit on fundamental but often badly defined areas of morality. Gossip, in and of itself, is simply talking about other people behind their backs. It is not gendered, though men and women often gossip according to different narrative strategies. It is not necessarily idle or arbitrary (much gossip is self-interested or manipulative, or else essential information exchange); it is not necessarily about secret behavior. As this chapter has shown, the feature that makes gossip interesting to historians is the way that it defines group identity. Groups construct themselves by talking. Some of it is gossip: indeed, in this respect, the group is actually constituted by who has the right to gossip about outsiders – or even absent insiders.

Gossip helps to maintain the unity and the morality of the groups involved in it. Sarah and Abraham were gossiped about and sanctioned for their behavior – a behavior that transgressed community norms. Gossip, in short, can be a positive force in communities. While it can damage social unity, as it also did in the case, causing conflict and fights within the community it can help reinforce bonds of belonging and identity. Community showed they belonged by transmitting information to each other about the case. Thus it acts as a mechanism for social control and buttress community norms. But none of what has been seen in the case contradicts Robert Paine's view that gossip served to forward and protect individual interests, especially in the case of members of minority groups living inside larger "host" societies. In fact, the clear entanglement of enslaved people and free blacks in the case and their transmission of information confirms that they were advancing their own interests while also showing that they belonged to the larger (white) community. So community norms were reinforced while individuals' statuses were also bolstered. Ultimately, this chapter has shown how gossip highlights tensions in social relationships, flourishes in certain circumstances and, in turn, gives further impetus to these circumstances.

