# Marriage and the Family in a White Caribbean Elite

## The Impact of Descent for the Ethnic Persistence of the Sephardic Jews in Curacao

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RÉSUMÉ

Les juifs sepharad de Curacao forment une petite élite exclusive qui a préservé son identité ethnique beaucoup plus longtemps que les groupes comparables en Amérique. L'article montre comment le critère de filiation a été actif chez ce groupe et comment il a marqué le mariage et la famille.

The present paper is another example of the increasing interest in white minority groups in the Caribbean which developed in the late sixties and the seventies. Some of those whose work shows evidence of this interest are: Hoetink, 1967; Holzberg, 1977; Karner, 1969; Kovats-Beaudoux, 1969; Mintz, 1965; Patterson, 1975; and Sheppard, 1977.

Although the number of Sephardic Jews in Curacao is decreasing dramatically, they still occupy high status positions completely out of proportion to their numbers. It is a small elite that has preserved its ethnic identity longer than comparable groups in the Americas. In this paper I will try to sketch how *descent* has greatly contributed to this ethnic persistence and how it has, largely, shaped marriage and the family.

In the plural societies of the Caribbean economic goods are not primarily distributed according to a process of competition, but largely through membership in an ethnic or privileged status group,

or by violent expropriation by such groups of others. Theories that view ethnicity as a major factor in the acquisition or maintenance of power, status, and income seem especially relevant for an understanding of these societies (see Cohen, 1974 and 1974a; Nisbet, 1975; Daniel Bell in Glazer and Monihan, 1975: 141-174; Young, 1976; Despres, 1975).

In these societies a system of ascribed statuses exists along with a separate status system in which individuals are socially differentiated according to their particular achievements. These two status systems are interwoven but not coterminous. Hoetink has focused on the differences between socioeconomic and ascriptive stratifications. He states (1973: 50) that

> The members of the dominant racial group owe their position, of course, to the economic, social, and cultural power that, as a group, they already possessed at the moment of the inception of the multiracial society and that they have preserved since. But this observation, which often is taken as the explanation of socioracial structure and mobility in such a society, is not that at all. It is neigher more nor less than an a priori condition for the formation of a horizontally layered, multiracial structure. To state that such a structure (or for that matter, any hierarchical stratification) can be explained by a difference in power is a tautological exercise since the definition of such a structure already presupposes a power differentiation.

Without denying that the dominance of one socioracial or sociocultural group in a society is ultimately based on economic power, Hoetink focuses on the ascriptive criteria which foster or hinder such power. The four criteria which he discusses (1975: 9-25) are: 1. territoriality (or nationality), 2. notions of common descent (of which somatic traits are attributes), 3. language, and 4. religion. He points out that the presence of only one of these four ascriptive criteria is necessary in order to create what Barth terms an "ethnic group".

Of these four ascriptive criteria, at least three apply to the Sephardic Jews of Curacao.

The first Sephardim settled on the island in the 1650's. It was a very clear notion of common descent that created a community from people who had come from various countries and different backgrounds. Their sense of ethnic distinctiveness was based primarily on the idea that the individual was linked to the larger chain of Jewry through descent in the female line, but they were not religiously homogeneous; Some had received a thorough religious

education in families where Jewish scholarship was held in high regard, while others had been Marranos who still had to learn the most basic things of Judaism. Through the terror and confusion of the Inquisition, the two formal criteria of Jewish identity, matrilineal descent and Jewish faith had been separated.

Nevertheless, a strong and vigorous religious organization emerged, with the synagogue as the center of the group's religious and social life. While Portuguese was the group's official language, Hebrew was retained for religious use.

Hoetink points out that the ascriptive criteria of descent, language, and religion may not only emerge through geographical isolation but in a situation of social isolation as well, where such isolation — voluntary or otherwise — is imposed through a rigid stratification of society. This was indeed the case in Curacao, which until the 1920's was characterized by caste-like relations between its three populations, the Dutch Protestants, the Sephardic Jews, and the Blacks.

Group membership was accorded at birth, and each group had a distinctive conception of its own place in the social structure, as well as a clear conception of the characteristics of the other group (see Sofer, 1954). The isolation of the Sephardim can thus be ascribed to both the ritualistic segregation characteristic of Judaism (Weber, 1952: 336-343), and the rigid stratification of Curacaon colonial society.

In the social hierarchy of the island, the Dutch planters and bureaucrats, representatives of Dutch authority and culture, occupied a higher place than did the Sephardic merchants, who were considered foreigners (and called "members of the Portuguese nation") until in the 19th century. But these merchants soon acquired the monopoly of the large-scale international trade and shipping, cornerstones of the island's economy (agriculture never flourished, and plantations were often only a status symbol). The Jews were quite aware of their economic superiority. As early as 1721, when some problems with greedy and jealous island officials arose, they directed a letter to the authorities in Holland pointing out that, "It is we who keep the business going with our vessels, as among the Christians there are hardly any who engage in shipping; heaven help the land (Curacao) if we are not here." (Emmanuel, 1970: 112)

One of the factors contributing to the group's striking economic success was their vast, extended commercial networks and connections with other equally successful Jewish merchants (many of them being kinsmen) in Europe and the Americas, as well as the information circulating within these networks. What formed the basis for these international networks was a combination of descent and the particular economic ethos associated with Judaism. The mutually strategic position of Jewish commercial communities has been described by historians such as, for instance, De Sola Pool, Marcus, Freund, and Sombart.

While Portuguese is no longer used, and the importance of religion has greatly declined, descent as interpreted by economic interests still plays an important role. I shall now deal with the ascriptive criterion of descent that has largely shaped marriage and the family of the Sephardic Jews of Curacao.

*Endogamy*

Hoetink points out that the idea of common descent in a geographically isolated system is only the consequence of such isolation. In a rigid horizontally stratified system, however, it is both cause and consequence; there is a functional relation between the monopoly of power allocation and endogamy, as well as between the rigid outcaste-like exclusion from certain positions and endogamy (1975: 22).

The Sephardic Jews, who, because of religious law *and* the caste-like Curacaon society, had to marry within their own group, recognized the importance of endogamy for the group's survival as a religious and ethnic unit from the beginning of their settlement on the island. Marriage and the founding of a family have always been regarded as a religious social obligation among Jews, and the significance of this duty was strongly emphasized in Curacao. The great value placed on private property encouraged a high esteem for the family (see Ariès, 1962), and Judaism reinforced the importance of the institution by making it a center of religious observance.

As the originally ascriptive group also became a group with well-defined economic interests, with a monopoly in international trade and shipping, the materialistic aspects of the marriage contract acquired increasing importance. Clements (1975: 35) observes

that "kindship acts as a mechanism of class continuity whereby families are able to pass on their accumulated advantages intergenerationally..." and Banton points out: "it is much easier for a group to preserve its identity if it enjoys a monopoly and can reward successive generations for making endogamous marriages, thereby resisting assimilation in the most critical respect." (1970: 53).

Marriage was not considered a union between two individuals, but rather an alliance between two families. The partners in a marriage formed a pact in which love and companionship were not required, and heads of families who carried primary responsibility for marriage arrangements tried deliberately to serve the interests of their family by seeking an optimal combination, i.e., one in which an alliance between bride and groom would unite the largest possible amounts of property, power, and social esteem. Thus, in addition to the religious dictates of endogamy excluding non-Jews as potential marriage partners, the isolation of the Curacaon Sephardim also acted to promote marriage within their own community. Moreover, by further restricting the ideal of a good marriage to one between cousins or other relatives, most parents severely limited the already narrow range of acceptable partners. Karner observes the development of two patterns:

> The first one is cross as well as parallel cousin marriage within one's famiya[1], the second is marriage between members of the extended families. The former consolidated the family position and at the same time safeguarded its material possessions from dispersal. The latter solidified the entire group. ...most of these Sephardic families were linked to one another at least once, several many more times, and yet others exhibited a definite criss-crossing tendency with another family. It is not surprising, then, that during the period from the late seventeenth through the nineteenth century, extremely few new family names appear, while the original surnames keep recurring over and over again. ...the whole Sephardic segment might be considered to be one family. (1969: 11-12)

Endogamy resulted in a social cohesiveness that promoted a strong group identity, yet the group was highly stratified according to wealth, power and status. With each family trying to bring together the greatest possible combination of capital, business information,

[1] Famiya. "Under this term we understand all recognized relatives on one's mother's and on one's father's side, along with the kinsmen of one's spouse. The anthropological term is "kindred", the expression used in Brazil to denote such a group is Parentela." Karner, Frances, 1969: 11.

and commercial networks through marriage alliances, family ties became a most valuable resource in itself. The wealthiest families were obviously the most demanding in the selection of marriage partners for their children, and it was especially among these families that cousin marriage flourished.

*Demography and the state of business*

Describing economic life at the end of the 19th century, Gomez Casseres (1976: 109-111), points out that in international trade capital was highly concentrated in the hands of a small number of family-firms: "The type of commerce upon which the island depended... promoted an oligarchical organization... international commerce was carried out by relatively large, multi-faceted firms, with significant capital endowments and exclusive international ties." This is the case for the centuries preceding the nineteenth as well; it is evidenced in tax lists, estate holdings, lists of ship owners, dowries, etc...

The Jewish community was thus highly differentiated according to wealth and the power and status that went with it. Besides those who have been described as "merchant princes" and "the Rothschilds of the Caribbean", there were always some who depended for their survival on financial support from the community. Whenever this group grew too large (especially in proportion to economic conditions), some of these individuals or families were encouraged to leave the island and try their luck elsewhere.

The oligarchical commercial organization put limits on the group's size through migration and careful control over the age of marriage and the marriage rate. Family relationships (associated with the family-owned firm that had spanned generations) predominated over all other relationships. Within the community, the rich families formed the ruling elite, often dominating religious as well as non-religious affairs. As a consequence, emigration was not always completely voluntarily: pressure might be put on those receiving funds from the community chest. This is illustrated by the following example revealing problems of marriage as well as emigration.

> In 1737 Rachel, the orphan daughter of Abraham Aboab, wanted to marry Isaac Salas. Her widowed mother applied for the amount customarily bestowed upon an orphan as her marriage portion. The parnassim forbade the wedding,

> because they did not approve of a young man who had no means to earn a living.

Salas left for Surinam and Rachel never married. (Emmanuel, 1970: 117).

Because dowries depended on the state of business, marriage rates and the economy were closely related. The effects of economic ups and downs on the group's numbers are clearly indicated by Emmanuel's studies. An economic depression resulted in a decline in the number of Jews in Curacao, from 1500 in 1750, to 1200 in 1775. With the onset of the American Revolution, Curacao became a supplier of arms and amunition for the American armies. The island became "a small paradise of terrestial abundance" and family life flourished. "Men bestowed on their children and sisters dowries running sometimes as high as nine, ten and fourteen thousand pesos, colossal figures in an age when a married couple could live comfortably on 300 pesos a year." (Emmanuel, 1970: 262) During this period the marriage age went down, and the average number of children per family increased. Emmanuel exults that "It was not rare to see grandmothers at thirty five." But lean years followed after 1781. Men emigrated, and the existing surplus of women increased. In 1810, for example, there were 386 females and 263 males (children and adolescents are omitted in this account). Fifteen years later there was another wave of emigration which the parnassim encouraged by paying for passage and a sum equal to the relief which the indigent would have received from the community over a six-month period. "This exodus continued until 1850, and is confirmed by the total absence of marriages in the community from August 24, 1847, to January 17, 1849." (Emmanuel, 1970: 347) After 1850, another period of great affluence occurred, which was later also to be followed by material losses and emigration. And thus the cycle continued.

### *The value of women*

In his study of the ethnic allegiance of the Chinese in Jamaica and Guyana, Patterson (1975: 338-339) observes that "choice of mate has become of vital importance for the maintenance of the continued congruence of the sets of social and economic networks which constitute the sociological raison d'être of the group..." and "Women have become the means whereby wealth is exchanged, shared,

consolidated, and kept within the group. As such they have become highly valued and jealously guarded."

Among the Curacaon Sephardim, women were highly valued both for their dowries and as perpetuators of the group. The family whose function was to transmit property, life, and 'names', depended on them. They preserved the purity of blood lines and the dignity of the male patriarchy; they were, as Pescatello expresses it, "sacred vessels". A woman's virtue was closely associated with the honor of her family, and as Wolf (1968: 8) points out rank in society "refers back to the ways in which people handle their domestic affairs."

It is obvious that women were not valued in their own right, but rather as objects of genetic, social and economic transmission. The heated conflicts and lawsuits about dowries in this small community support the assumption that in some cases women themselves were being considered as economic goods.

During socialization they were rigidly trained to maintain the facade of perfect adjustment by accepting and acting out the role which was defined for them. Saffioti (1978: 227) notes that

> women's socialization is guided by values which invest her with the role of upholder of the status quo and defender of a family structure and moral order in which a boy is expected to grow up like his father and a girl like her mother. Brought up in this way, it is not surprising that domestic life represents a woman's major aspiration...

Two serious obstacles to marriage, however, were the indispensable dowry and the very low sex ratio.[2] As men travelled extensively, and occasionally emigrated and married abroad, there was always a considerable surplus of women. Emmanuel repeatedly refers to this problem (1970: 234, 268, 182): "Marriageability of a girl depended on her dowry", "...finding suitors for the girls has always posed a serious problem...", "...the untold sacrifices and privations endured by parents in raising dowries for their daughters", etc. etc.

Their isolation, dependency, and total lack of options made Sephardic women the embodiment of conservatism. Karner has shown the striking continuity in marriage patterns and in the naming of children over the centuries. Moreover, there was a perpetuation of

[2] Sex ratio is depicted by presenting the number of males per 100 females.

the same life-style. Social life and the family were preserved without significant changes until in the 20th century.

*Concubinage and Illegitimacy*

Arranged marriages promoted the double standard, concubinage and illegitimacy, which were in any case encouraged by colonial conditions. Men sought love and sexuality outside marriage. While wives were socialized to pretend complete ignorance about their husband's sexual affairs, male peers were not only tolerant, but encouraged such behavior. Sexual activities were believed to be highly beneficial for a man's mental and physical well-being, and having a reputation as an irresistable seducer would add to his status among his peers.

It appears that a wide scale of relations existed, from a single fleeting, exclusively physical contact to more enduring forms of concubinage. It was customary for mature and older men of means to install one or more women in their own separate houses. This practice, which was institutionalized under the name of "companá" (see Abraham-Van der Mark, 1973: 68-73), was much more prevalent among the Sephardim than among the Dutch Protestants (the other white elite on the island). The rigid endogamy of the Jews, their greater affluence, and the accepted maintenance of mistresses and illegitimate children — institutions which they had known for ages in Portugal and Spain — may have contributed to the popularity of companá among them. The term companá means companionship, and the partners in it are called "companions", which suggests that the role of the mistress may be seen as contrasting with that of the wife, of whom companionship and sex for pleasure instead of prorecreation seem to have been expected to a much lesser degree.

It seems that for many Sephardic men the companá served as a second family, a more emotional unit in which different needs and desires were fulfilled than in the legal marriage. Thus, the upper-class family was definitely polygynous.

In this caste-like society one of the very few ways for a black woman to acquire upward mobility was through having a sexual relationship with a white man. But only a small minority of those who were sexually exploited ever reached the status of compana or mistress; and for most of these, life was rather difficult. They often

became relatively isolated from their own group, at the same time that it was necessary for them to remain "invisible" with regard to their lover's social group. The male role in the relationship often seemed more that of a patron and benevolent protector than that of a partner. Moreover, the same absolute faithfulness expected of a legal wife was also demanded of the compana. Nevertheless, these women were envied by their sisters because of their more comfortable material existence and their light coloured children. For indeed, the children of these unions might receive more education and acquire better positions in society, and this would have served as the mother's reward.

In general, the mistresses of wealthy Sephardim were raised above the social stratun to which they had belonged before the companá had started. And if such a relationship was discontinued because the women was later rejected by her white lover, she often made considerable sacrifices to keep up a life-style that accorded with middle class values of morality and respectability in order to promote the social mobility of her children.

Generally, illegitimate children of Jewish fathers got much better treatment than those of Dutch Protestants. Hoetink points out that one of the reasons for this was the fact that bright sons were most useful as reliable employees in the Sephardic family businesses. Quite often they were given their father's name, which is attested by even the most superficial inspection of the current telephone directory of Curacao. Because of the principle of matrilineal descent, together with the ruling that black people could not become members of the Jewish religious congregation (a practice that has only recently been changed), these illegitimate children were never perceived as a threat. Because the rules of descent defined by Judaism served to protect the legitimate heirs, the illegal descendants of Jewish males could never inherit; they might, however, contribute to the accumulation of their father's capital by working for him.

According to the degree of relatedness to a Sephardic male, the black population refers to the illegitimate offspring as Yu di Judio (child of a Jew) or Nieto di Judio (grandchild of a Jew). Someone who is related to the Sephardic segment, but neither as child or grandchild, is characterized as "e tin sanger di judio" (he or she has Jewish blood). This is an expression that can also be applied to

someone who is not related to the Sephardim but is conspicuously successful in business.

From among the numerous illegitimate children of Sephardic fathers, a group has come into being, the *Yu di Judio,* who used to socialize and marry among themselves. They lived together in a particular area of town, and even in the beginning of the 18th century a number of them reached remarkable prosperity Hoetink, 1958: 83). Hoetink emphasizes the importance of the combination of a light skin and a Sephardic father, who might help a promising son to set up his own business and / or give him agencies.

The Yu di Judio are all Roman Catholics (as their mothers) and because of their higher socioeconomic status they have always been in demand as godparents by the black population (which is over 90% Roman Catholic). Even today some of the older Yu di Judio have over hundred godchildren. Thus, through compadrazgo (godparentage) they built up large networks of personal relations with black families.

Through industrialization and modernization the 20th century has brought radical changes in all spheres of life. These changes are felt not only on the political level of international dependencies, but they also influence the position of women and the family structure. Thus, by the 1930's companá as an institutionalized form of concubinage with its particular characteristics among the white elites was on its way out. The main reason behind the disappearance of this form of concubinage between white men and black women together with the hypergenation (see Van Den Berghe, 1970: 56) which was associated with it, is the economic prosperity and full employment for black males following industrialization. Since then, it is no longer per se "better" to be the concubine or illegitimate child of a white man than the wife or legitimate child of a black man. (see Slater, 1977: 224-249)

The youngest and last generation of the Yu di Judio born in this century are now in their fourties. Although some of them are businessmen and women, more have attained high positions in politics, the bureaucracy and in the cultural sector, where they are disproportionately represented. This relatively privileged group has been quite conservative, supporting the status quo rather than radical social change. Although some of them are sincerely concerned about the fate of the black lower strata, whatever they have

done for people in this category has occurred in the context of a highly personal, often rather paternalistic relationship.

Through their extensive networks within the black population the Yu di Judio have functioned as intermediaries helping to prolong and safeguard the interests of their fathers' group. As the stratification system of the island has undergone considerable change — entailing a reinterpretation of ascribed and achieved statuses — the Yu di Judio as a group have also been reevaluated and in a sense adopted by the Sephardim, who lacked sufficient legitimate children to occupy the positions to which they have access.

*Intermarriage and hypogamy*

Despite the fact that the most affluent families consistently married within their own, small clique because of the scarcity of males, some men did marry upwards (hypogamy). Emmanuel mentions cases of hypogamy that caused problems, such as a husband taking off with his wife's dowry, or one who squandered a good part of his father-in-law's fortune, which was considered a valid reason for divorce. It was only in the 20th century, however, when intermarriage had become common, that hypogamy became a striking phenomena. The seeds of change within the Sephardic community had already been planted in the last three decades of the 19th century, even if changes in the family itself did not become manifest until the 20th. By this time several steamship companies connected Curacao with Europe and the USA (companies which were nearly exclusively represented in Curacao by the Sephardim), and the women started accompanying their husbands on long trips abroad. Although these voyages were still "programmed" by the group (whether in Paris, London or New York, Sephardic families stayed in the same hotels, ate at the same restaurants and saw the same shows), these trips represented a break from the omnipresent social control of the island community.

In the very beginning of the 20th century the age-old custom of giving children biblical names was broken and, more important for the group's continuity, the birth rate declined drastically (see Karner, 1969: 45) as Sephardic women practiced birth control. Moreover, it was now felt that the cousin marriages which had previously been customary were not without danger: children born

from such unions might be sick and weakly. It seems plausible that this sudden disapproval of the long preferred cousin marriage was actually a rationalization for the rebellion against the stifling custom of endogamy. In the beginning of the century several people remained unmarried because of a lack of suitable partners. But as change occurred, some married women insisted on getting a divorce, while some men made it clear that they were hardly interested in the other sex, and alliances which had earlier seemed "impossible" now took place. As more men emigrated and married abroad, many of the remaining women married foreigners who had come to Curacao. This was especially true in the thirties and fourties, during and after the Second World War. The foreigners were mostly non-Jewish, Dutch professionals and naval officers.

If one evaluates all 20th-century marriages in the Sephardic community, it becomes obvious that the vast majority are typical cases of hypogamy. Moreover, a scarcity of sons resulting from the low birth rate led to women inheriting the fortunes of several families. Generally speaking, hypogamy increases the power and authority of the wife, because it is she who brings status and wealth. In the case of the Curacaon Sephardic community this is obvious. And because in this group it is not customary to marry in community of property, it is the men of these hypogamous marriages who are in a vulnerable position: divorce may threaten their status and high standard of living.

The offspring of these unions bear non-Jewish names, but nevertheless belong to the Sephardic group and the Jewish community through descent in the female line. As members of this group they also have access to its privileges and they will largely determine the group's fate in the coming decades.

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