

Monthly Letter November 2012

An old Papiamentu text found in a confiscated Dutch letter



View of Curaçao's harbor

Creolist Bart Jacobs (Universiteit Konstanz) could not hide his enthusiasm when he read the little Papiamentu note that the *Letters as Loot* team had discovered in one of the Dutch eighteenth-century letters that were confiscated by the English. The Papiamentu language, currently spoken on the islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, was primarily a communication tool among slaves and freed slaves from the second half of the seventeenth century on. The earliest written attestations date from the late eighteenth century: a love letter of about 150 words, written in 1775, and a 60-word conversation between two female slaves recorded in a court testimony of 1776. The newly discovered letter of about 80 words, written by Anna Elisabeth Schermer-Charje on behalf of her son Jantje and sent to her husband Dirk Cornelis Schermer, is therefore a considerable contribution to the Papiamentu heritage.

Intriguing questions



A historical map of the Caribbean region

The little note raises intriguing questions about the command of Papiamentu among the Dutch settlers on the island of Curaçao and among sailors such as mate, later captain, Dirk Schermer. Characteristics of the early Papiamentu texts may also play a role in the current discussion about the origin of this creole. The Dutch letters discussed here provide an answer to some of these questions and reveal a hitherto unknown writing practice.

Dirk Schermer between Rotterdam and Curaçao

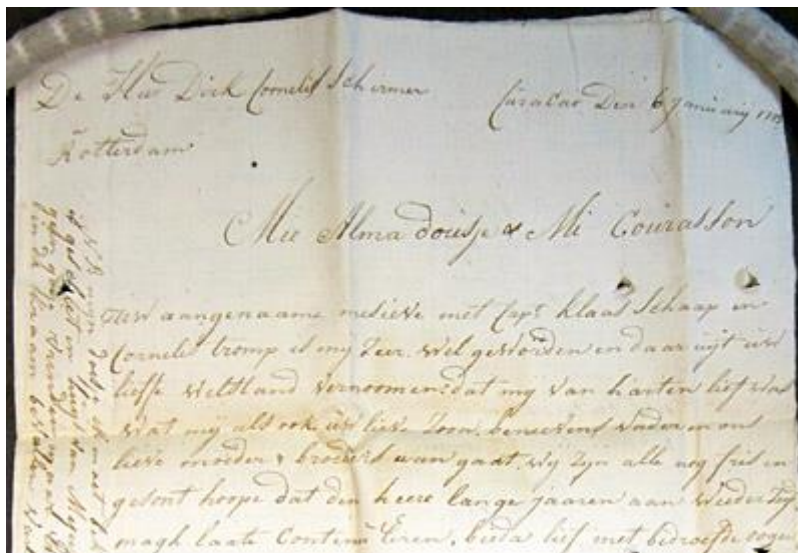
Our letter corpus comprises nine letters dating from 1781 and 1783 which are written by members of the Charje family, Dutch settlers on the island of Curaçao: the couple Jacob and Anna Sophie Charje, their son Pieter Andries and their daughter Anna Elisabeth. Another letter was written by Dirk Schermer who originated from Rotterdam and had married Anna Elisabeth Charje. Their marriage clearly was a love marriage according to Anna Elisabeth who wrote two letters to her husband and one to her mother-in-law Elisabeth Schermer-Pipardus, who was living in the town of Rotterdam. She tells her mother-in-law, who was surprised by her son's unexpected marriage, that she herself did not have the intention to marry so soon, but that her beloved Dirk did not want to wait so long. Dirk appears to ply between Curaçao and The Netherlands, regularly sending trading goods from Rotterdam to Curaçao.



A historical map of Rotterdam

Affectionate names in Papiamentu

Comparing the letters sent by members of the Charje family, the three letters by Anna Elisabeth dating from January 1783 stand out remarkably by their Papiamentu words and phrases. For instance, in the letter to her mother-in-law, Anna Elisabeth refers to her husband Dirk with the affectionate name *mijn* (*lieve*) *doesje* ‘my sweetheart’.

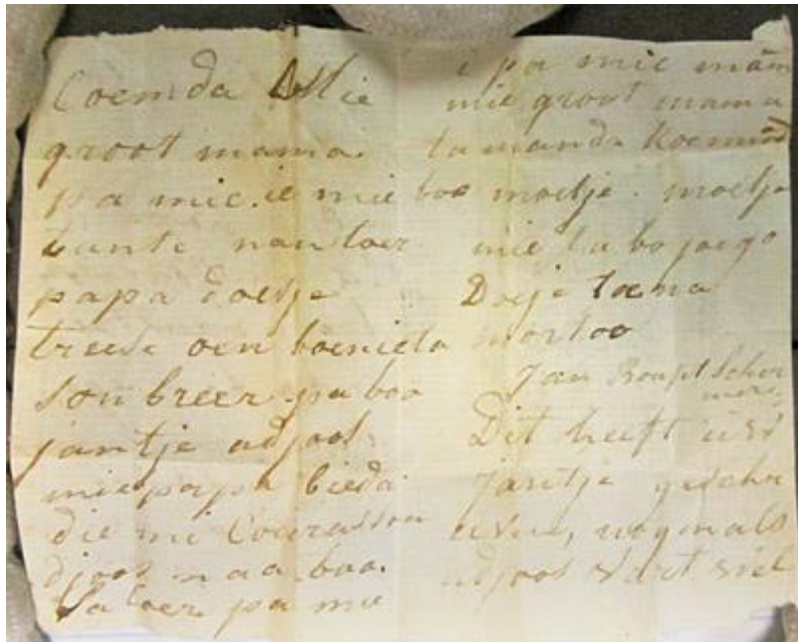


Letter by Anna Elisabeth Schermer-Charje

Her mother-in-law may have guessed what the Papiamentu *doesje* meant. Was there only one Papiamentu term of endearment in that letter, in her two letters to her husband Anna Elisabeth employs a more elaborate repertoire of Papiamentu words and phrases. On 6 January her letter begins with *Mie Alma dousje & Mi Courasson* ‘my soul, darling & my heart’ and ends with *Mi alma dousje die mi Courasson* ‘my soul, darling of my heart’ and on 8 January her letter both begins and ends with *Mi dousje, Mi bieda & Mi courasson* ‘my darling, my life & my heart’. In the longest letter, dating from 6 January, two other instances of (*mij*) *bieda lief* ‘my beloved life’ and four instances of *doesje* occur alongside Dutch names of endearment such as *mijn hartje lief* (twice), *mijn lief*, *mijn ziele lief* (twice), *mijn tweede ziel*, *mijn (lieve) ziel(tje)* (eight instances). Dirk must have understood them, whether they were Dutch or Papiamentu, just as he must have grasped the meaning of the New Year’s greeting at the end of the letter: *boon anja nobo* ‘happy new year’. There is even a strong indication that he was familiar with Papiamentu beyond a few words and phrases. Why would Anna Elisabeth otherwise include a letter almost fully written in Papiamentu and express her affection towards Dirk in that same language?

The Papiamentu letter

The enclosed Papiamentu letter is presented as being written by Dirk’s son Jan Boufet Schermer who was born during his absence and who must have been a few months old at the time of writing. He undoubtedly was named after uncle Jan Boufet at mother’s side and grandfather Jan Schermer at father’s side. *Dit heeft uw Jantje geschreven* ‘Your Jantje has written this’ features at the end of the Papiamentu letter in Anna Elisabeth’s handwriting. The child’s letter thus offers us a new 80-words long Papiamentu text from the late eighteenth century.



The second and third pages of the Papiamentu letter

Implications?

From the perspective of communication and command of foreign languages, we may often wonder how people in the past communicated in various circumstances abroad. Anna Elisabeth's letters provide us with a view on the function of Papiamentu for Dutch-Curacaoan writers and their addressees. They show us that the Papiamentu creole was used in the Dutch-Curacaoan community, in any case among women. Her husband must also have had a reasonable passive command of Papiamentu in order to be able to understand the remarkable letter from his son. What remains a bit of a mystery, however, is the precise function of the Papiamentu letter in the Dutch correspondence between spouses. Are the expression of longing and the transfer of greetings in Papiamentu an example of playful writing that was appreciated by husband Dirk Schermer? Whatever its intended function was, the early Papiamentu letter now figures as a precious heritage document from the past that survived due to Anglo-Dutch warfare and privateering.

The Papiamentu letter is kept in HCA 30-370. A first translation was made by Buty Isabella and Ingmar Valpoort; further information was provided by Willem Adelaar. Marijke van der Wal is the author of the present comment on this monthly letter. Previously she published 'Mie alma dousje & mi courasson'. Creools tussen Curaçao en Rotterdam (In: Daer wij ul hoogelijck voor bedancken. Brieven belicht voor Wikiscripta Neerlandica, Leiden 2011, 31-37). She expresses her thanks to Bart Jacobs who established the value of the newly discovered Papiamentu letter for Papiamentu studies and who also clarified a text problem. Jacobs and Van der Wal will publish more elaborately about this topic elsewhere.