

Museum Square, which marks the entrance to the Kurá Hulanda Museum, is dominated by a replica of the city gate of Djenné, Mali, above far left, an ancient Islamite trade center for gold, slaves, and salt. In front of the gate is a sculpture called Mama Afrika, by Nel Simon, revealing a woman's face in the topographical contour of Africa. Other sculptures in this plaza also hold symbolic meaning, such as the soapstone figure of a woman holding a snake, opposite, by Mali Ali of Zimbabwe. Inside the museum, a display contains shackles from Suriname dating from 1600 to 1800, left. Secured around the slave's neck, this tortuous collar with protruding spikes ensured that an escapee would be entangled in any bushes where he sought cover



Most businesspeople opening a luxury hotel do their best to create a fantasy world of the beautiful and pleasant. But when Dutch businessman Jacob Gelt Dekker opened the Kurá Hulanda hotel in 1999 alongside Curaçao's harbor in the historic capital of Willemstad, he included a chamber of horrors: Rusted shackles hang from the walls. Colonial- and postcolonial-era prints show African men, women, and children being whipped, hung, and tossed into the sea to drown. A visitor imagines he can hear wails from the very walls and earth.

That's because, while digging the swimming pool for the hotel, located in an historic but then run-down neighborhood, workers discovered that the site had been a landing place and depot used by slave traders for their human merchandise. From the early 1600s to the late 1700s, Curaçao served as a transshipment port where enslaved Africans were landed, restored to health from the horrific Middle Passage, and then shipped on to the plantation economies of the Caribbean and North and South America.

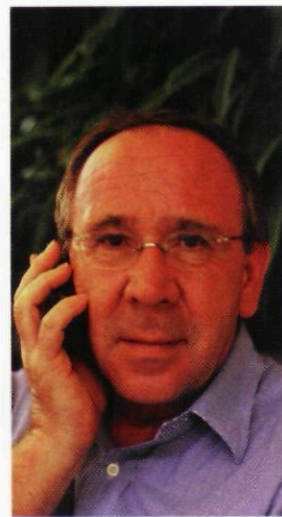
Dekker, a Dutchman who had made a fortune through chains of one-hour

Revisiting Chains of

SLAVERY

A museum in Curaçao opens a window on the horrors of the African slave trade and reflects on current human rights abuses

by Mike Ceaser



Leo Helms, museum director, left, shares a passion for African art and culture with the museum's founder. The Dogon Room, below, displays musical instruments and masks from the early 1900s still used by this Mali tribe. This collection also features two stunning Dogon iron cast sculptures, opposite. The West Indian Company Room reveals the history of the Dutch enterprise that profited from the slave trade until 1863, far left. A room duplicating the hold of a slave ship evokes powerful emotions among visitors, opposite top

photo shops, car rental agencies, and auto repair shops, had traveled widely in Africa and felt an affinity for African peoples and cultures, says Leo Helms, the museum's director. "It was a simple decision," to create the museum, he says. Dekker, now semi-retired, has homes in Curaçao, the United States, and Holland.

The result is a modest but wide-ranging museum near the entrance to the hotel complex, above the spot where slave ships once docked and cruise ships do now. While slavery provides the central theme, the museum also includes displays about the evolution of man and the rise of civilization, with emphasis on Africa's fundamental role in both processes. It also contains exhibits on African art, a section about the history of writing, and displays about slavery's long shadow, including racism and poverty. The museum's centerpiece, dominating the courtyard, is a large bronze sculpture of a woman's head formed in the shape of the African continent.

While the hotel museum may be unique in focusing on such a horrific theme, it also stands out in Curaçao's mellow, sun-soaked capital of nightclubs, sidewalk cafés, and souvenir shops. A visitor can walk about Willemstad for days without encountering another reminder that the island was once a mart where Europeans grew wealthy from the suffering, exploitation, and death of kidnapped Africans. About 100,000 slaves passed through Curaçao between 1634 and 1790, according to Han Jordaán, a Dutch researcher in Holland who has examined historical records for his own project about the colonial Dutch and the Atlantic trade.

"The Curaçao slave trade reached its heyday during the last quarter of the seventeenth century, when the Dutch were



directly involved in the so-called *asiento* trade, which regulated the import of slaves in the Spanish colonies," says Jordaán. "The Dutch slave trade was abolished in 1814, but the last slave ship reached Curaçao decades earlier."

The Kurá Hulanda Museum shows that slavery was more than a black and white issue. In the Western world, slavery has become almost synonymous with the ownership of black people by whites. But, according to museum texts, this was actually a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the Greeks, Europeans enslaved other Europeans, and the word *slave* itself comes from the Slavic peoples who were for centuries enslaved in Europe. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century wars between Muslim and Christian kingdoms, according to museum exhibits, some 600,000 Europeans were captured by North Africans and sold in the slave markets of Libya, Tunisia, Algiers, and Morocco. But

African slavery, which continued long after constitutions and philosophers had sanctified "The Rights of Man," has come to represent the institution's horrors.

Mercedes del Castillo Van Egten, a Venezuelan tourist visiting the museum with her Dutch husband, Simon, was contemplating a stark painting of a black man burdened with a heavy iron collar with long hooks extending from it, used to punish slaves and to prevent escape.

"It's as if they thought of ways to make them suffer more," she says. "I can't believe how human beings can be so cruel."

Other paintings show sailors hurling Africans overboard to sharks. There are also period artifacts like branding irons used to mark slaves. And the museum even has a collection of bear traps. Helms says slave hunters set these near African villages. When a person got trapped, his or her cries attracted others, all of whom were kidnapped en masse, he says.

Museum visitors' most dramatic moment is likely to be their descent into the hold of a slave ship, complete with manacles on lengths of chain and slave decks too close together for captives to even sit upright. A reproduction the size of a walk-in closet, the slave hold is clean and air-conditioned, but one still can sense the panic, asphyxiation, and helplessness Africans would have felt when crowded into a dirty, sweltering ship on a forced migration to an unknown fate.

In chilling contrast to those horrors is a painting hung in a hall nearby showing the Dutch West Indies Company's handsome headquarters, with dignified-looking gentlemen strolling back and forth, seemingly unconcerned about (or unaware of) the death and suffering that built their fortunes.

Other museum exhibits portray slavery's aftermath, including racial segregation and the civil rights struggle in the United States through inspiring displays of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speeches and African-American newspapers, as well as chilling ones of Ku Klux Klan propaganda. A section about African cultures contains original artworks ranging from carved wooden face masks and elaborate anthropomorphic drums. A bronze "queen mother" from Cameroon almost seems to dance to the rhythms from the drums down the hall. A warrior's head from Benin looks stoically across the room. A large display documents the fascinating culture of the Dogon people of Mali, legendary because their traditions and cosmology seem to anticipate recent discoveries about outer space. A young white man appears in several of the photographs from Africa—Jacob Gelt Dekker during his youthful travels.

Ethnic persecution is also a personal issue for Dekker, whose father lost his first wife and children in the Holocaust and only survived the war himself thanks to the protection of a Dutch family. To show another dimension of persecution, the Kurá Hulanda Museum also includes displays about Anne Frank, the Jewish Dutch girl who hid with her family from the Nazis and perished in a concentration camp just weeks before it was liberated in April 1945.

However, not all Curaçaoans, who are overwhelmingly of African descent, with small populations of whites, East Indians, Chinese, and Arabs, give the museum rave reviews. On a recent weekend all of the museum's visitors were tourists, and while schoolchildren receive half-price admission, the entrance fee of US\$6 (ten guilders) is steep for many locals.

Mike Ceaser is a previous contributor to Américas. He lives in Bogotá, Colombia.



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Corin, who with her mother, Salome, runs a small grocery store in one of the capital's working-class neighborhoods, wonders why the African experience has not been incorporated into Curaçao's schools.

"In school we learn how great Holland is, how great Christopher Columbus was," she says, declining to give her last name. "Now a Dutchman comes to our island and makes a museum about the African experience."

An education ministry official says that today the schools teach much more about slavery than they did ten or twenty years ago, when Corin studied.

If the museum has one weakness it is its lack of material about Curaçao itself, despite the island's prominent role in the slave trade. Australian adventurer William Dampier, who visited Curaçao near the end of the seventeenth century, wrote that ships from Cartagena, Colombia, and Porto Bello, Panama "did use to buy of the Dutch 1,000 or 1,500 Negroes at once."

Yet, about the only Curaçao-related documents concern the island's emancipation, which took place in 1863. A proclamation from the colony's governor to the newly freed slaves praises them for their "orderly

behavior and obedience" as slaves and calls on them to "perform your duty . . . working regularly for fair wages."

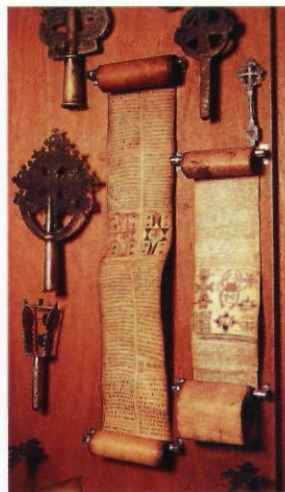
Museum director Helms says the lack of Curaçao material is partly because many black Curaçaoans feel shame about the fact that some slaves cooperated with the slave owners by over-seeing newly arrived Africans. As a result, he says, while he has obtained much slavery-related material from Africa, he has found few original items from Curaçao. He has collected enough objects so that he plans to create a room about Curaçao.

On the island "most children think they are originally from Curaçao," says Helms. "They know where Amsterdam is, but not Africa."

The long-ago Dutch governor who urged the newly freed slaves to continue toiling humbly likely could not have conceived of the day when the government of Curaçao would be dominated by people of

African descent—although not necessarily descendants of enslaved Curaçaoans. In recent years Curaçao, with income levels far higher than other Caribbean nations, has attracted immigrants from Colombia, Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

But if slavery is a distant specter in Curaçao today, it is not so in many other parts of the world. In such times, the Kurá Hulanda Museum provides a valuable reminder of how far we have come, but should not provide an excuse for thinking we've come far enough. ■



Parchment scrolls and iron, copper, and tin crosses attest to the devotion of a Christian group ruled by King Lalibe Ila in northern Ethiopia around 400 A.D., left. These "Black amooors," standing guard in the museum, below, represent enslaved Moors and were used in Italy as decoration for offices and homes. Bronze cocks from Benin, dating from the 1850s, were used as ornaments for the king's throne, opposite top. The streetscape of Willemstad's Handelskade neighborhood near the museum recalls the colors and architecture of Amsterdam, opposite



The Caribbean: a European Slave-making factory

The training or 'seasoning' period lasted 3-4 years. Spirits were broken in order to transform the Africans into American Slaves. They were trained by other slaves or by whites who had experience in 'breaking in' even the most rebellious captives.

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