

JACOBUS JOSEPHUS PUTMAN (1812-1883): MISSIONARY OR SCHOLAR?

ELISABETH ECHELD

UNIVERSITY OF THE NETHERLANDS ANTILLES

Introduction

Missionaries played a considerable role in the early history of Curaçao, not only in the spreading of the gospel, but also the development of the people. Besides the colonial language Dutch, missionaries of diverse background all made appreciable use of the more popular language Papiamentu in their work. After studying Theology, missionary Jacobus Josephus Putman first worked in his home country of the Netherlands for a short period before leaving for Curaçao in 1837 (Brada, 1987). During Putman's stay on Curaçao, which lasted until 1853, he used to Papiamentu to spread the gospel and Dutch to educate the people.

Before Putman's arrival, many missionaries had already attempted to 'civilize' the inhabitants of the island, with varying degrees of success. Initially missionaries came to Curaçao primarily from the Spanish-speaking world. This was partly a consequence of the fact that from as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century, the bishops of Coro and Caracas considered the Leeward Islands as belonging to their diocese (Palm, 1985).

In 1677 the bishop of Caracas determined that every residing priest on Curaçao *ipso facto* would receive religious jurisdiction on the island from him, and for the next sixty years, the island was deluged by a number of priests of a variety of nationalities and belonging to different orders. The length of their stay was variable. These priests, also called priest-transients, did not only come to the island for religious reasons, but also for political reasons. Well-known cases of men of the cloth who ended up in Curaçao for political reasons include Victor de Dole, Michael Schabel, Augustinus de Caybedo, and father Ten Oever who is remembered in part for helping slaves who wanted to escape. From 1776 until 1820, the mission was assigned to the Dutch Franciscans, such as Schink, Brands, Pirovano and Stöppel. In the years 1820-1824, there was another influx of highly educated priests, who spiritually enriched the island. In 1768, the Leeward Islands officially became an apostolic prefecture followed by the Windward Islands in 1827. The six islands became a vicariate apostolic in 1842 with the appointment of M.J. Niewindt (1796-1860) as vicar

apostolic. Niewindt was succeeded in 1860 by J.F. Kistemaker (1813-1883) who remained in that position until 1866 (Palm, 1985). These two vicars apostolic, both originally secular priests were no strangers to Putman during his stay on Curaçao.

Putman as missionary

Various documents mention the practical and social skills of the “father of (the district) Santa Rosa”, as Putman was also known. After only one year on Curaçao, Putman had already expended great effort to begin the construction of a church. He also established a school for less-fortunate boys and girls, which the government of the time praised in official documents. Putman did not only teach, but also developed educational materials in Dutch and prayer booklets in Papiamentu, which he subsequently printed (often on his own printing press). Putman sent for assistance from the Netherlands to carry out these activities. Putman employed a certain Mr. Kock as teacher and his sister supported him with his activities at his school, before she passed away after a few years on Curaçao. Unfortunately, it appears that little to nothing is left of Putman’s original school materials, readers etc. (Brada, 1987; Rutgers, 2010).

Fortunately, a facsimile edition exists of his *Kamiena di Kroes, koe historia, meditasyon i orasyon kortiekoe* on the occasion of the departure in 2001 of the Dutch Dominicans of the Santa Rosa Parish on Curaçao (Putman, 2001 [1850]). Putman himself printed this prayer booklet in Papiamentu in 1850. The preface of this facsimile edition does not only make reference to Putman’s activities mentioned above, but also underscores the fact that Putman upon his return to the Netherlands “devoted himself to the abolition of the slavery” (Putman, 2001 [1850]). A facsimile edition from 1859 is also available of a *Woordenlijst der in de landstaal van Curaçao meest gebruikelijke woorden* [Wordlist of the most used words in the national language of Curaçao], by Bernardus Th. J. Frederiks, with *Zamenspraken* [Dialogues] by Putman, which he also printed on his own printing press in 1853 (Frederiks & Putman, 2004 [1859]). Putman’s facsimile editions, while not of historic importance, reveal information on the early historical development of Papiamentu. In the recent past, Maritza Coomans-Eustatia used sources from Curaçao, the Netherlands and Rome to conduct a thorough study of Putman and was working on a biography of this versatile man until she passed away. In connection with Putman’s publications, Coomans-Eustatia mentions “various publications in Papiamentu and Dutch”, which were sometimes published and printed by Putman himself (Frederiks & Putman, 2004 [1859]).

Putman as Hispanist

After his departure from Curaçao in 1853, Putman remained active in many fields, in particular as a scholar of Spanish literature. One wonders, what could have possessed

this, from all appearances, practical missionary to occupy himself at a later stage in his life with, for example a comprehensive study on the work and life of Spanish Golden Age playwright Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681)?

In the bulky *Studies on Calderón and his documents*, with a foreword by Putman himself, he indicates that a few of his studies were already published in the period 1875-1879 in the magazine *Onze Wachter*, and then bundled together and subsequently published in Utrecht in 1880, three years before he passed away. On the front-page of the publication, Putman was presented as Canon, Dean of Utrecht, member of the society of Dutch literature at Leiden and of the Utrecht Provincial Society of Arts and Sciences (Putman, 1880, viii). It is almost certain he gathered these titles and positions as a consequence of achievements that took place after the period of his stay on Curaçao.

Putman appears to have been a man of wide reading and informed on the most important scientific studies of his time on Calderón de la Barca. He appears to have followed the literary debates closely, judging by the numerous quotes in his study from renowned Spanish, French, German and English sources. The continuous thread of Putman's studies, which are very detailed and of which only a few aspects will be dealt with in this article, was to promote public recognition and appreciation in the Netherlands for Calderón de la Barca. In poetic and ornate language, he expresses his sincere surprise with the fact that this Spanish writer was reviled and misunderstood in the Netherlands:

“Welk verstandig student toch zal zich aangetrokken gevoelen, ernstige en vooral in het begin moeielijke studie te maken van Calderon's tooneel-poëzie, als hij zich stellig overtuigd houdt, met een dichter te doen te hebben *waar mede een steeds toenemend getal lezers slechts weinig kan sympathiseeren; dat er zeer veel in hem is, waarmede zij zelfs in het geheel niet kunnen instemmen; ja dat er in hem genoeg voorhanden is, waartegen zij met geheel hun zien en zedelijk bewustzijn zich verzetten en in opstand komen.*” (Putman, 1880: viii)

[Which sensible student would feel attracted in making a serious and particularly in the beginning difficult study of Calderón's theatrical poetry, if he is strongly convinced he is dealing with a poet *with whom an increasing number of readers can hardly sympathize; that there is very much about him, with which they cannot agree at all; yes that there is much in him, against which they object and revolt with their whole view and moral awareness.*]

Putman indicates that Calderón was not popular in the Netherlands, and even misjudged:

“... den Almachtigen God *als den oppersten Toovenaar*” onder de Toovenaars te laten optreden, waarbij men dan “*een gansche mirakelkraam*” ziet “*uitgestald, waarbij de oogen schemeren, maar het hart tot den einde toe koud*

blijft”? miskenningen, die volstrekt niet worden goedge maakt door dat men hier en daar eens de loftrumpet steekt” (Putman, 1880, viii)

[...To have the Almighty God *as the Supreme Magician*” perform amidst the Magicians, whereby one thus sees “*an entire miracle stall displayed, in which the eyes gleam, but the hart remains cold until the end*”? Misunderstandings that absolutely cannot be amended by one sounding his praises here and there once in a while.]

Putman goes on to explain his mission to rehabilitate Calderón de la Barca in the Netherlands:

“ Ik heb getracht, zulk een onwaar en onwaardig oordeel te wederleggen en daarbij mijne beweringen te staven, ook met het gezag van de bevoegste schrijvers. Zelfs bij min of meer ondergeschikte bijzonderheden stond ik terechtwijzend stil; de onheuse, averechtsche voorstelling van Calderon als mensch en Christen, buiten aanmerking dan zijner geschriften, liet ik in geen deele onwedersproken; het een en ander deed ik ter gewisser bereiking van mijn hoofddoel, namelijk: Calderon en zijner werken in ons vaderland naar waarheid te doen kennen, liefhebben en beoefenen.” (Putman, 1880, viii).

[I have tried to refute such an untrue and unworthy judgment and to substantiate my assertions – also with the authority of the most competent writers. I even considered carefully more or less minor particulars; the discourteous misrepresentation of Calderón as human being and Christian, excluding criticism of his writings, I did not leave unchallenged in any part; I did a thing or two for certain realization of my principal aim, namely to truthfully make know, cherish and study Calderón and his works in our fatherland.]

Putman’s first study briefly describes Calderón’s life. He first mentions that Calderón underwent his schooling with the Jesuits in Madrid and Salamanca, and then adds that Calderón wrote his first drama *El carro del cielo* at the age of 19 years and won prizes for a some of his odes, for example, to Saint Teresa and to the Jesuits Ignatius of Loyola and Franciscus Xaverius. In ornate language, Putman mentions the fact that Calderón joined the military from 1625 to 1635 and experienced the Siege of Breda, which served as his inspiration to write *El sitio (the siege) de Bredá*. Finally, Putman indicates that for thirty years, Calderón wrote Autos Sacramentales for the solemn celebration of Holy Sacrament Day (el día de Corpus Christi).

In his second study, *Calderón’s documents*, Putman extensively describes the drama *El sitio de Bredá*, that according to Putman was not always included in the collected works of Calderón, but was worthwhile reading for the Dutch public. In his commentaries on this drama, Putman uses his first hand knowledge of the siege to contextualize Calderón’s treatment of it.

Putman's substantial command of the scientific literature comes to the fore in his third study, in which Calderón's *La vida es sueño* is made accessible to the Dutch reading public. Putman refers to an article in *De Gids* of 1842, in which he praises A. S. Kok's 1871 "splendid" translation of *La vida es sueño* from Spanish (Putman, 1880: 66). Putman also tries to give a plausible explanation for the considerable popularity in the Netherlands of this drama in particular. He speculates that it was Calderón's development of the main character, Segismundo, that attracted Dutch audiences to *La vida es sueño* (Putman, 1880: 59). The dramas *El Alcalde de Zalamea* and *La Banda y la Flor* are also discussed in Putman's third study, where Putman pays special attention to the issue of corruption in both plays. Did Putman cherish these pieces because he had also fought against social injustice on Curaçao? (Lampe, 1988; Rutgers, 2010)

In a fourth study, Putman discusses *La Devoción de la Cruz* (Comedia divina) that according to him, was first attributed to Lope de Vega under the title *La Cruz en la Sepultura*. Putman firstly provides a wealth of philological background information and interesting facts connected to this play. He then makes a fascinating summary of the work with annotations, while comparing different existing translations with one another. In the clarity with which Putman organizes and presents his data for the reader, we catch a glimpse of the expert schoolteacher, which he undoubtedly was on Curaçao (Putman, 1880: 154-261).

The *El mágico prodigioso* is discussed in the same accessible, yet extensive and competent manner in a fifth study. Putman states that the reading of the original poses difficulties for various reasons:

“Hij toch die Calderón in het oorspronkelijke kan verstaan en genieten, moet (anders kan hij het niet) genoegzaam bekend zijn met de zeden, gewoonten en gebruiken van het Spaansche volk dier dagen, de taal zelfs in hare eigenaardigheden begrijpen, en beseffen, dat de Spanjaard zaken, handelingen en gebeurtenissen, in het fatsoenlijkst gezelschap, zonder den minsten aanstoot, met den juiststen naam noemen en zóó vertellen kon gelijk Calderon dat deed, maar die wij, zullen we fatsoenlijk man blijven heeten, niet zonder eene omschrijving noemen of slechts in bedekte termen en kiesch gekozen woorden verhalen durven.” (Putman, 1880: 265)

[Whoever can understand and enjoy Calderón in the original, should be adequately known with the morals, customs and habits of the Spanish people in those days, even understand the language in its peculiarities, and realize that Spaniards call things, actions and events, in the most decent company – without the least umbrage, by the correct name, and tell in such a manner as Calderón did, but which we – if we are to remain decent men – do not even describe or only dare to narrate in guarded terms and considerably chosen words.]

This article elucidates a few aspects of Putman's voluminous *oeuvre*, with the purpose of shedding some light on this exceptional person's life and work, both as a dedicated and socially engaged missionary on Curaçao and as an inspired and well read scholar. Another goal of this article is to make readers aware of how much more there is to know about this intellectual jack-of-all-trades and his work in Curaçao and elsewhere. It is therefore very timely that Prof. Dr. Wim Rutgers has committed himself to continue the work of Maritza Coomans-Eustatia and will soon publish a comprehensive biographical study of Putman.

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