

# WILL PAPIAMENTU SURVIVE ON BONAIRE?

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## Introduction

Bonaire currently finds itself in a period of historic transformation. In this article, I will discuss a number of the changes afoot and try to answer the question as to whether the Papiamentu language has a chance of survival on Bonaire despite these changes. First, I will give a brief sketch of the most important transformations experienced thus far as a result of Bonaire's shift in political status. Second, I will discuss the status of Papiamentu. Subsequently, I will explore why Papiamentu has already survived 300 years and what this means for the future of Papiamentu.

## Bonaire in a time of change

One can easily tell that everything is changing on Bonaire. There are more Dutch, Spanish and English newspapers and magazines on the island<sup>1</sup>. Newspapers now contain more articles that discuss local language issues and there are more Papiamentu and Dutch-speaking radio stations than five years ago<sup>2</sup>. In politics, there is considerable ambivalence about current plans to become a municipality of the Netherlands. In all probability, however, as a result of the recent referendum on its political status, Bonaire will become an exceptional municipality of the Netherlands in October 2010 – just like the other 'BES'-Islands (Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba). Within the civil service, various experts from the Netherlands have been deployed, the so-called 'Quartermasters', who – together with local officials – are to realize the integration of Bonaire on both a policy and implementation level into the body politic of the Netherlands. The media discuss the considerable tensions that have accompanied this process, due to the deployment of mainly European Dutch citizens, rather than Bonaireans or Antilleans. One is aware of this in the Netherlands as well. Much is going on in the field of education; Dutch-dominant schools are being established and there are discussions on changing the relative position and status of Papiamentu and Dutch.

The street scene is also changing. There are many more people around, especially tourists. Three or more cruise ships visit the island on a weekly basis during the cruise

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<sup>1</sup> Such as the *Amigoe*, the *Antilliaans Dagblad*, *De Telegraaf*, *El Periódico*, *Xpedition*.

<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, Bonaire has an additional TV-channel, namely 'MiTv'.

season. There is much more traffic in the streets, also more cyclists, although there are hardly any cycle paths and no traffic lights<sup>3</sup>. Suddenly, on a traditional market day in the town Rincon, there is a Dutch stand with secondhand items – in the midst all kinds of traditional merchandise. Private properties are up for sale all over the island at very high prices. Increasingly more South Americans and European Dutch citizens are being seen everywhere from the dentist's office to a game of dominoes under a tree.

### **The position and status of the Papiamentu**

One of the themes currently preoccupying many minds on the island is the question as to what will happen to the Papiamentu language when Bonaire becomes an exceptional municipality of the Netherlands. Within a short period, numerous organizations have been established with amongst others the objective of protecting the Papiamentu. A conference was held recently with the title 'Papiamentu na kandela' [Papiamentu under fire]. Speakers at this conference presented papers on themes such as 'Papiamentu within the Dutch Kingdom' (R. Seferina), 'Terminology in the Papiamentu language' (R. Todd-Dandaré) and 'The Dutch language within the constitution and the consequences thereof for the Papiamentu language' (M. Dijkhoff).

42 E. Carolina and M. Ramirez-Silberie presented the results of a survey of opinions amongst the teachers and the management of a large secondary school as to whether children of Dutch-speaking parents, who have only been on Bonaire for a few years, should be exempted from the taking Papiamentu as a subject. Papiamentu is a compulsory (examination) subject on the ABC-Islands – just as the Dutch language is in the Netherlands. At the school in question, there are students with different language backgrounds: Spanish, Chinese, English, Papiamentu, Dutch, Hindi, Sranantongo, Portuguese, etc. However, according to the researchers, the proposed exemption (sponsored by Dutch-speaking parents and a number of Dutch-speaking teachers) would actually apply mainly to the children of Dutch-speaking parents and not to the other non-Papiamentu-speaking pupils at the school. The Dutch-speaking parents based their demands on a sentence in the law that was introduced in 2007 by the Minister of Education, which states that when youngsters stay on Bonaire for only a short period of time, they should be allowed to choose subjects like German and French instead of Papiamentu.

The same Minister attempted to establish a more favorable status for Papiamentu and English in the Netherlands, just as has been recently achieved for the Frisian language. However, this attempt has failed for the time being, and it appears that it will take at least eight more years before there is clarity on whether Papiamentu will become part

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<sup>3</sup> The lack of traffic lights should not be seen as a deficiency. It is a conscious policy in the framework of nature conservation. Everything is organized around traffic circles and rotary intersections. The many cyclists on the highways cause much less hindrance than the donkeys and goats walking on the streets.

of the constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, or in any case enjoy the protection that Frisian presently enjoys. Could Papiamentu remain – just like the Frisian language – a second tier official language, used in some localities as a language of instruction at school and an official administrative language within the Kingdom? Will similar financial resources to those now available for the development of Frisian also become available for the development of Papiamentu?

The language situation still causes considerable controversy within the community and overall, opinions on the language issue and on that of the integration of Bonaire into the Netherlands threaten to split along ethnic dividing lines. As suggested above, there currently exist areas of tension between the ‘original inhabitants’ of Bonaire and recently arrived European Dutch citizens. Claims of ‘Re-colonization of the island by the Dutch’ and ‘Dominance from the side of the Dutch’ are being made more and more frequently. Many people fear that Papiamentu will be subjected to great pressure and eventually disappear in Bonaire, due to the large influx of Dutch citizens and the integration of the island into the Netherlands.

However, is this a reasonable fear? It is not difficult to arrive at the conclusion that the main language spoken on Bonaire will soon shift from Papiamentu to Dutch. Almost all of the present 15,000 inhabitants on the island command the Dutch language to some extent, and the legal and educational systems are based largely on those of the Netherlands. A 50-percent growth in the population is predicted within ten years – from 15,000 inhabitants to 22,500 (Antilliaans Dagblad, February 2010). It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that within some 15 years’ time, half or more of the inhabitants of Bonaire may consist of European Dutch citizens or their descendants, whose political, cultural, and economic interests will need to be catered to. However, does this automatically imply that Papiamentu will disappear in Bonaire?

### **Papiamentu: A language that has survived despite the odds**

Many languages vanish in the world on an annual basis, and Papiamentu is by no means among the world’s most widely spoken languages. Is it therefore not astonishing that a language such as Papiamentu has succeeded in maintaining itself for more than 300 years, in close contact with such widely spoken languages as English, Spanish and Dutch? What could possibly be the reason? I have listed a few below:

- 1 Many Dutch people have embraced Papiamentu and adopted it as their own language in the past and continue to do so. For Papiamentu speakers, such Dutch people are like godparents or ‘Yaya’s’
- 2 Papiamentu not only has informal ‘guardians of the language’ such as the children, but also formal guardians such as the University of the Netherlands

Antilles (the UNA) and various other institutions on Curaçao and Aruba which have ensured there is attention paid to the development of Papiamentu

3 Papiamentu has ‘that special something’!

4 There is a will on the Dutch Leeward Islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao to preserve and develop Papiamentu.

### **The Yaya’s**

Anthony Grant (2008: 80-82) lists the various theories advanced by scholars concerning the emergence of Papiamentu. Surprisingly perhaps, the Dutch themselves played a non-trivial role in this process. Just as there were Dutch people who rejected all that was not Dutch in the Antilles, there were others who embraced local Antillean culture and Papiamentu. The same holds true at present. While there are Dutch secondary school students in Bonaire today whose parents want them to choose French or German instead of Papiamentu as a subject, there are also Dutch primary school students in Bonaire today whose parents want them to receive more hours of instruction in Papiamentu. This is presently the case in the Pelikaanschool. Although the teaching language at this school is Dutch, the parents are lobbying for more hours of Papiamentu at school. Nowadays, there are even persons of European-Dutch origin who give (authorized) Papiamentu lessons at the secondary school as if Papiamentu were their mother tongue. Others of Dutch origin have played a leading role in promoting the status of Papiamentu, developing materials and curricula in the language, etc. All of these people have affection for Papiamentu and have cherished and nurtured the language. These people can therefore be considered to be modern *Yaya*’s of the language.

### **The guardians**

Children on Bonaire, who do not have Papiamentu as their mother tongue more often than not end up speaking Papiamentu with other children. So while their parents may be arguing over the best language policy for Bonaire, the children have already formulated and implemented their own policy, and as such can be said to be the informal ‘guardians’ of Papiamentu. Drop by any school on Bonaire, even a school where Dutch is the language of instruction. Children are often brought up multilingually. A father speaks Swedish and a mother English, a father speaks Dutch and a mother Spanish, a father speaks English and a mother Papiamentu, etc. However, in the schoolyard or at each other’s homes, the children will speak a lot of ‘Papiamentu’ with each other. As long as the children on Bonaire – in spite of their background or mother tongue – choose to speak the Papiamentu among themselves, it is highly unlikely that this language will disappear. In all probability, these children are the future teachers, doctors, lawyers, linguists, politicians, artists and writers of the island.

The UNA and other institutions also play their role as more formal guardians of Papiamentu. Papiamentu has taken enormous steps forward over the past few decades. In his acceptance speech upon his appointment to a special professorial chair at the UNA, R. Severing (2009) briefly summarized the history of Papiamentu, which includes an impressive list of achievements which can even be supplemented with a few unmentioned milestones, such as the existence of 3<sup>rd</sup> degree teacher credential programs on Curaçao and Bonaire delivered by people such as J. Clemencia and R. Hooi and the successful graduation of the first students to complete the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree teacher credential program in Papiamentu on Curaçao in 2006, and on Bonaire in 2008, which means there is now a fairly large cohort of experts present on the islands with a bachelor level degree in Papiamentu. Aruba also has a long history in similar programs, and experts in Papiamentu there regularly conduct and publish their research. The recent appointment of three professors in language at the UNA, one of whose responsibilities is the implementation of a Masters level program in Papiamentu, how can anyone claim that the language is being neglected to the point that it is in danger of disappearance?

### **Papiamentu has ‘that special something’!**

Papiamentu is a creole language, spoken and written by approximately 200,000 people in the Caribbean and another 100,000 people in the Netherlands. Using the criteria set down by Mc Whorter, Grant (2008: 83-84) indicates that the structure of Papiamentu as well as its status both inside and outside the Papiamentu-speaking community is different from that of most other creole languages. What Papiamentu shares with many other creole languages is the fact that it is relatively easy to learn.

### **The will to preserve and develop Papiamentu**

There are differences between the ‘Papiamentu’ of Curaçao and the ‘Papiamentu’ of Aruba with regard to the written language. Curaçao has chosen a more phonological approach to spelling, while Aruba has adopted a more etymological approach. Bonaire has not made a definitive choice yet, but for the time being uses the Curaçaoan orthography. Just as is the case with most other languages, there is local (island specific) lexical and phonological variation in Papiamentu. Despite these differences, there is unanimity amongst the ABC-Islands with regard to the preservation and development of the Papiamentu language – contrary to the situation in Surinam, where there is no agreement on which language they want to develop and use as national language. The message throughout the ABC Islands is loud and clear: “Don’t mess with Papiamentu”.

Papiamentu now serves as one of the most important languages of instruction at the primary level. It is an examination subject at the secondary level and even at

universities it is used in some venues as the language of instruction. On the three ABC-Islands, there are various institutions that concern themselves with developing policy and educational materials, organizing lectures, holding national competitions, etc, all for the promotion of Papiamentu. As indicated earlier, the government has also taken measures to raise the status of Papiamentu so that it now is on equal legal footing with Dutch and English.

### **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, it does not seem probable that the status and position of Papiamentu language will deteriorate in Bonaire, despite the imminent political changes. Papiamentu appears at present to be powerful enough to protect its position and status and further develop itself. As long as the children on Bonaire – despite their background or mother tongue – choose to speak Papiamentu with one another, as long as there are Dutch citizens (*Yaya*'s) around who for whatever reason believe that Papiamentu should remain an available language, as long as learning Papiamentu remains easier than learning other official languages on the Antilles such as Dutch, English and Spanish, and as long as the ABC-Islands continue to work together for the preservation and development of Papiamentu, the language will continue to thrive on Bonaire and in the rest of the Leeward Islands

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