Liefde en conflict. Seksualiteit en gender in de afro-Surinaamse familie

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Citation for published version (APA):

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SUMMARY

This study was focused primarily on understanding constructions of sexuality and gender in male-female partner relations among Creoles. The central question was: "How do Creole women and men interpret and order their (partner) relations and how should we understand this ideological and social structure against the background of (historically developed) cultural perceptions of sexuality and gender, as well as the macro-socioeconomic context?"

Sexuality is still an unexplored field in the Caribbean. Where studies on sexuality were carried out in Suriname, the focus lay strongly on female-female sexual relationships of working class Creoles. The present study looks at sexual relations between women and men. Relations which are generally considered as quite normal and natural, but where strong taboos still exist and many things remain unmentionable.

Collection of data mainly took place through qualitative methods. The in-depth interviews with 72 Creole men and women from different social layers, and diverse family- and relational backgrounds, were the most important source of information. An intentional choice was made to involve persons from the middle and upper classes. In the diverse studies carried out with regard to Creole family life, the emphasis has always been on the working class, which has yielded a limited and incorrect picture.

In the analysis of the material I have tried to understand the experiences and notions of men and women from their points of view and their perceptions and definitions of social reality, and as a product of their close interaction.

An important assumption in this study is that definitions of gender are based, to an important extent, on the meanings that the kinship system attributes to reproduction and production, or, in other words, to sexuality and labor, and that these essential qualities of life are closely interwoven. Although the kinship system has a relative autonomy, simultaneously there is also a continuous interaction with external social forces. From this point of view, sexuality, gender, economics and culture are intertwined, without one necessarily dominating the other. This is the reason why male-female relationships in the Afro-Surinamese or Creole community cannot be explained with merely economic, cultural or social factors. Life is complex, unequivocal, dynamic, and contradictory, which is also reflected in the results of this study. People are actors and led in their daily activities by different ideological reference frameworks which work simultaneously, and are often contradictory, and which determine (sexual) behavior in close interaction with socioeconomic conditions. By studying the daily interaction between men and women in detail in different areas, an effort was made to expose this intensive and dynamic interaction between culture/ideology and structure.

In studying male-female relationships, I looked specifically at biological reproduction (procreation and fertility), social reproduction (contexts within which children are brought up), sexuality (sex defined as passion, desire, pleasure), the
gender labor division (division of tasks between men and women in the household), and gender relations at the macro level.

In accordance with Raymond Smith (1986, 1996), I assumed that family structures and partner relations are founded in a collective ideology which is the product of a colonial past, in which the Surinamese society was characterized by a hierarchical race, gender and class structure. The influence of dominant colonial thought exists simultaneous with the development of meanings in the Afro-Surinamese kinship system. As an ethnic group, Creoles have, in close interaction with their social and ideological environment, given an own meaning to gender and sexuality, which builds on the common West African background, a West European colonial culture of dominance, and a specific Surinamese context. It is my opinion that the basic principles of this gender and sexual ideology cut across all social layers and forms a collective ideological frame of reference.

A further contemplation of the historical context shows that Surinamese society, since its establishment as a plantation society, has known a great variety of partner relations. The development of this varied (hierarchical) relationship structure took place parallel to the development of a social, race and gender hierarchy structure. Social relations were founded in a powerful ideology of race, in which whites were considered superior and slaves inferior. Marriage was only accessible to whites, and thus carried with high social status. Common law, or Surinamese marriage, created primarily to accommodate relationships between white men and black women, acquired a second-rate position. Entirely in accordance with the double sexual moral related to patriarchy, it was quite common that men maintained so-called outside relations and outside families besides the two main conjugal forms of cohabitation. It is in this relational context that we have to understand the phenomena of visitor relationships and matrifocal households. Characteristic to these relationships and family forms was that the man did not live with his partner, but that he ‘came and went’, even if he was the biological father of her children. Outside families and ‘buitenvrouw’ relations (outside wife - relations) had a low social status in the colonial context, and were a direct consequence, not of a demographic surplus of women, but of a surplus of lower class women. These women were potentially available to men of higher classes as their ‘buitenvrouw’.

Gender relations in white and black communities alike were dominated by a patriarchal ideology. In general, white women were subjected to a strict hierarchical regime, characterized by sexual and economic subordination and obedience. Black women were, due to the important role that they played in food production in West Africa, an important pillar in the production sector of the plantation economy. This position of relative economic independency was also reflected in the power relation with the black man. Black women had relatively more space than white women to resist male dominance and develop themselves economically, while sexual restrictions were less sharp. Since there were no cumbersome marriage standards and regulations, relationships were formed in the
slave community with a certain measure of flexibility. It was not uncommon for black women to have different or alternating sexual relationships, whilst they could also end a dissatisfying relationship. Sexuality was an important means of negotiation in relationships with both white and black men, and in general an important survival strategy.

The white image of sexuality was entirely in accordance with the dominant racial image of blacks as inferior and animal-like. In general, the sexual behavior of slaves was described in terms of ‘insatiable, animal-like and hyper-sexual’. The idea that slaves did not know marriage forms and were primarily driven by sexual instincts was deeply rooted in the white colonial thought. It is assumed that this white image was an important factor in the social construction of sexuality of black people. Throughout the years, this racist interpretation of sexuality of blacks was, consciously or unconsciously, the most important basis for the characterization of sexual relationships among blacks as perverse, and their family structure as ‘deviant’ and ‘unstable’. These colonial notions dominated the discourses on black sexuality, and not only filtered through into the many studies of family and relationships, but also into the image that Afro-Surinamese have of their own sexuality.

The plantation society was long characterized as a society of licentiousness and immorality, in which especially the powerful planters had great freedom in the sexual field, and hardly bothered with the sexual rules, which were laid down for citizens by religion and the law. The sexual attitudes and related sexual relational patterns of the planters were imitated by white and black men of other social layers of the population, and accomplished the status of ‘socially accepted’ or ‘socially tolerated’.

In the last phase of slavery the colonial government, with the support of church and physicians, undertook frantic efforts to turn sexual life in the colony to one of monogamy and marriage. Not so much because of moralistic considerations, but because they held the view that monogamous marriages among slaves would encourage sexual reproduction, and thus increase the labor force. The historical perspective shows that the colonial structuring of sexuality was closely related to economic developments in Europe, in particular in the second half of the 18th and 19th centuries, as a result of the industrial revolution.

At the end of the 19th century, the legally sanctioned civil marriage according to Western and Christian standards was forced on the Creole population as a dominant norm. In the strongly stratified colonial context, marriage was primarily a status symbol, but also a symbol of patriarchal gender relations, because more than in any other relationship, it expected partners to conform to a strict labor division: the man as breadwinner and head of the family and the woman as housewife and mother, obedient and subservient to her husband. However, the number of Creoles who entered into matrimony in accordance with the rules and regulations of Western marriage was very low.
They preferred the less imperative *verbond* (= union), although it was not acknowledged by the colonial government.

The objections against marriage did not simply ensue from material obstacles, but were closely connected with historically developed notions about gender and sexuality. Even during slavery there were clear indications that slaves could not or not easily comply with marriage regulations. And after abolition of slavery, especially the women had difficulty with the rules of unconditional obedience and subservience to the man. Couples preferred to learn to know one another first and then consider a possible marriage.

The strong association of marriage with status and prosperity put great pressure on men in particular. Even more than in other relationships, a married man was expected to adequately fulfill his role as breadwinner. Because of the high rate of unemployment, which was reinforced among Creoles by a consistent race ideology, it was extra difficult for black men to realize an economically stable position. Men of the lower social layers in particular were not inclined to marry, because they could not meet the material demands linked to marriage. As an alternative, many men chose for non-legitimized cohabitation relations or a visitor relationship.

The endeavors of the colonial power to establish the Western culture of legal marriage and monogamy as a cultural norm among both white colonial rulers and descendants of slaves, were unsuccessful. The meager effect of the colonial policy on sexual structuring should be ascribed to the specific gender, race and class relationships in the colony, and the related ideological context. This colonial context, namely the norms and values, but also the nature of social relationships, forms the most important frame of reference from which men and women even to this day derive their meaning, when they structure their relationships.

Given the historical development of interpretations, an understanding was developed of constructions of sexuality and gender in contemporary partner relations. As far as reproduction is concerned, both men and women derive gender identity to a great extent by proving fertility, irrespective of the relational context within which such fertility becomes manifest. Among women, the high cultural value for fertility is not only expressed in traditions aimed at the care and cherishing of the cervix, but also in the not strictly virginal culture. Female virginity is highly valued and is an important source of respect, but it is not an imperative demand that the birth of children takes place only within a marriage. Among men, proving fertility is also central. In the traditional image of men the male reproductivity is primarily defined in terms of 'biological reproduction'. This male image is predominantly one of the 'procreator of children', driven by the urge to provide his fertility and sexual potency in public by producing as many children as possible, with more than one woman, without linking this to social responsibility. This interpretation of fatherhood used to be quite common in the past and was facilitated by close and extensive networks of female family mem-
bers, who took the responsibility for the care of children, and hence the area of social reproduction, as a collective task. Because of the collective upbringing of children, there was relatively little pressure on men to embrace fatherhood. The area of social reproduction, therefore, developed as a typically feminine area, and women were socialized with motherhood as a central element of femininity. This practice not only resulted in the stereotypical image of the *Krioro Mma*, the loving Creole mother who takes care of her own and other children, but also in the image of the strong and independent black woman, who combines motherhood and work without problems and who, without the support of a male partner, manages to bring up her children quite successfully. This is the ideal female image, with which not only women, but men as well, grow up. It is not surprising that motherhood in this context acquires a heroic nature. Women are strongly inclined to show their ability to bring up their children on their own as a symbol of pride and power. Such pride is reflected in the firm resistance from women against taking the trouble to involve men in the process of caring for children. As one of the woman stated: ‘The children are mine, they don't belong to any man. They are mine!’

The history, but also the actual practice, shows that men are often not present as fathers. The lack of the roles of father, husband and breadwinner during slavery, the lack of access to economic sources, and historically developed notions of male reproductivity and sexuality, are material and ideological conditions that have resulted in a situation in which fatherhood does not necessarily imply a close bond with children. Whilst motherhood means having a close bond with children, the experience of fatherhood varies strongly and is closely related not only to interpretations of maleness and sexuality, but also to the sustainability and nature of the relationship. This is why experiences with fatherhood are not univocal. What predominates is the image of the ‘absent father’, but fatherhood also evokes the image of men who take responsibility for their non-biological children, and fathers who have a very close and emotional relationship with their children. It is particularly in situations of strict labor division, short, alternating relations, and the marginal presence of a man in the household, that fatherhood acquires a marginal nature, irrespective of whether the men are of middle class or working class.

The ideal images of motherhood and fatherhood are not univocal and, moreover, often in sharp contrast with real-life experiences. The (over) idealization of motherhood and the practice of giving varied meaning to fatherhood, are at odds with the ongoing national economic crisis. While motherhood is propagated as a source of pride, dominance and power, many women experience especially anger, despair and powerlessness. Increasing poverty among large groups of women leads to disintegration of their traditional networks, as a consequence of which they have to fall back on the men, who traditionally have greater access to structural income sources than women. The historically developed nature of male-female relations, in which sex and money are closely related, encourages a
female survival strategy that is primarily aimed at survival through establishing sexual relations with men. Although women are aware that in this problematic male-female relationship they pay a very high price for the ideal mother image, there exists a strong feeling that they have no other choice, and that women are born into their role as mothers to bear these burdens. The central role of the mother in the family network, and the ensuing strong mother-child relationship, also influences the nature of sexual relations. Both men and women are inclined to give priority to the bond with relatives, rather than to the bond with the partner. It is especially in the relationship between mother and child, both in mother-daughter and mother-son relationships, that existing notions of gender, sexuality and reproduction are transferred.

Nevertheless, among younger, educated women and men there seems to be a different attitude towards motherhood. In the course of time, clear changes have become evident in the structure of biological and social reproduction. Although fertility and bearing children are still important sources of social status, the desired number of children has sharply decreased among both sexes. Unlike the past, women also have more control over their reproducitivity, in terms of being able to regulate births. Women themselves can determine how many children they want and when they want the children. The increasing poverty among women, deterioration of family networks, but also increasing education and career possibilities for women, are factors that put more pressure on men to fulfill their role as a father. Young men are no longer led by the idea of ‘the more children, the more masculine’. Especially young, educated men resist the traditional male role and want to accept more responsibility and give more content to the relationship with their children.

Although people think of sexuality as closely linked to reproduction, this is not the only perception of sex. Beside its reproductive function, sex is perceived as a natural activity, which is necessary for a healthy physical and emotional functioning. The need for sexual satisfaction is important in the experience of femininity as well as masculinity. Like men, women (can) fulfill an active sexual role. Sex is not only natural, but sex in a heterosexual context is by definition penetration. It is notable that more women than men are inclined to define sexual satisfaction in a much wider context than as merely satisfaction in sex or intercourse. Sexual satisfaction is also felt to be attention, love, partnership, intimacy and understanding.

The taboo on alternative sexual practices is quite high, especially among lower class men and women. As a result of cultural traditions and also lack of knowledge about alternative sex, heterosexual sex, in particular in the lower class, has a rather limited repertoire. In general, monogamy is not regarded as a gender-specific norm, and therefore stands in sharp contrast with the double sexual moral.
Although men and women in a steady relationship expect monogamous behavior from one another, at the same time they are aware that the norm can be quite far from practice. Women are strongly inclined to behave monogamously in accordance with the norms of female respectability. This is not surprising, in view of the social sanctions connected with female promiscuity. At the same time, there is a certain tolerance in the social environment for women with more relationships, which ensues from the unwritten rule that a woman is not unconditionally monogamous. There is a strong belief that a woman who experiences sexual and/or financial dissatisfaction in her relation, is inclined to compensate for this outside.

Women, much more than men, expect that their partner will not adhere to the norm of monogamy. Women experience the double sexual moral pre-eminently as an issue in which they have little influence. While the predominantly male culture of promiscuity is the main source of relational conflicts and instability, and makes deep emotional wounds in the life of women, this issue is not discussed at the relationship level, nor at the socio-political level. The rooted perception is that men are polygamous by nature and that this is a fact which women have to live. Most women are strongly inclined to suppress their emotional anger and frustration and to console with an attitude rooted in the rule of life: 'What one does not know, does not matter'. In this day and age, in which the spread of HIV among women is showing a steep rise, and infection through the steady partner forms a genuine problem, women are more aware than ever of the lack of control over their own sexuality.

From a young age already boys and girls grow up with ambiguous messages and experiences with respect to sexuality. Girls are protected and brought up in the home, while boys have the freedom to experiment with sex. A lack of communication about sex at home in the family contrasts with the openness of sexuality in the public culture. Particularly in the lower social strata, girls are brought up quite paradoxically. On the one hand, autonomy and independence of men is strongly encouraged: 'Your first diploma is your husband'. On the other hand, girls learn from very young: 'Look for a man who can make you into something.' This contradiction is the result of the simultaneous workings of different female images.

Boys learn early that male sexuality consists of three central elements, namely: access to and control over female sexuality and satisfaction of female sexual needs. Contrary to male sexuality, with its strong patriarchal orientation, female sexuality is fed from different systems of meanings. The influence of patriarchal principles is clearly evident, which is expressed in the general expectation that women will conform to the norms of sexual morality, especially in public, namely not to take sexual initiatives, master their sexuality, not to use sexual language, and pretend sexually inexperienced. At the same time, women receive their behavior guidelines from the specific experiences of the kinship system, which in close collaboration with a socioeconomic context, produces other values and responds
accordingly. Conditional monogamy, active female sexuality, the natural female need for sex, sexual pleasure, and sex as a potential mean for social mobility, are all messages that are passed on consciously or unconsciously to women in their daily socialization.

Differences and conflict between men and women, does not diminish the need for an emotional relationship with the partner. In the collective thinking love bears material and immaterial elements, which are intertwined. Most people have a pragmatic approach towards love. Love is not something of two individuals, but is strongly rooted in a kinship system that defines gender and sexuality, and thus also provides criteria on the basis of which men and women interpret love. Love is caring. Love is meeting one's obligations and responsibilities, but love is also indulging, attention, understanding and intimacy. These more immaterial elements of love are often relegated to the background. Although the need for more intimacy is mutually present, traditional male-female images are often an impediment to freely experiencing these feelings. The hard conditions, under which the kinship system had to survive, have created specific meanings of gender relations in which the aspect of emotionality is often unconsciously ignored. Men and women are inclined to define one another primarily in strictly economic and sexual terms, hereby suppressing emotional terms.

There exists a big discrepancy between the public sexual culture and the private sexual culture. The public sexual culture is dominated by the belief that Caribbean people, and in particular black people, are naturally endowed with sexual skills and that sex is always a source of pleasure. Although in public people tend to behave in accordance with this myth, we see a private sexual practice that is characterized by reluctance, shame, ignorance and lack of sexual skills, sexual dissatisfaction, and cultural sexual taboos which hinder an open communication about sex.

Matrifocal families, economic active women and female heads of households are all characteristics of the Creole family and household structure, which do not at all imply the absence of patriarchal gender relations. In accordance with the dominant gender ideology, the structure of gender in the Creole community is also rooted in a patriarchal ideology. In partner relations, irrespective of whether partners live together (legitimized by marriage or not), there is quite a strict labor division in which the man is appointed primarily the role of breadwinner and the woman primarily the role of mother and housewife. Notwithstanding the fact that women are economically active, this division of tasks remains. Although women work, they still perceive men as primary breadwinner. Women are perceived by men primarily as secondary breadwinners, who are expected to continue the responsibility for children and home next to their economic activities. In general, men are hardly involved in the direct care and education of children, and in other household tasks. The association of men with the public sphere and women with the home/private sphere is also expressed in the gender-specific
nature of social activities and recreation. Men have a strong outside-oriented public life and also dominate macro-economic and political life. Women, even though they work and have a certain measure of economic autonomy, have social activities that are often a continuation of their responsibilities in the private sphere, namely directed towards children, home, family and local community.

The power, which some authors ascribe to Creole women, on the basis of their economic autonomy, is strongly exaggerated. In the Afro-Surinamese family the patriarchal gender ideology is also the most important frame of reference in the division of tasks and responsibilities in the household. At the same time, the present study confirms that the patriarchy is not fixed and universal. Patriarchal structures of gender relations vary according to societies and historical periods. In the Afro-Surinamese context, men see themselves as primary breadwinners, (authoritative) leaders and protectors of the family, but also grow up with the image of economically active and leading women, who from one generation to the other play a central role in the survival of the family. The man is furthermore aware that the degree to which the woman is prepared to see him as authority and head of the household, depends to a great extent on his financial input in the household. Among women we also see conflicting perceptions. Although women recognize the male as breadwinner and leader, this role assignment is not coupled with feelings of inferiority and unconditional obedience to the man. Because of the great value for freedom and independence in the female image, they - like men - have the need to move freely, and often clash with male dominance. The strong awareness of equality among women and their determination to be free and independent is expressed in particular in their need to be economically independent, that is to say, to be able to generate an own income, and to be able to develop their own social activities outside the home. This latter need gives rise to many conflicts in the partner relationship with men, because men, led by the patriarchal rule that men should control the sexuality of their women, are strongly inclined to set restrictions to the freedom of movement of women, out of fear for sexual infidelity, and thus a serious infringement of their male reputation. Men restrict women's outside activities, impede their contacts with friends, and use violence to maintain control.

Gender relations in the area of (social) reproduction and sexuality are dominated by a male perspective, which women have hardly put to the discussion at the national level. These conditions influence the manner in which women give meaning to their relationship with men and to the strategies they develop in their struggle for social mobility. As long as changes at the household level are restricted to changes in economic relations, and the male perception of the sexual labor division and sexuality remain untouched, women will be constrained in their participation in social activities. On the basis of these findings, I have described the position of the Creole women in the economic area as a relative female autonomy in an underdeveloped patriarchal structure. In fact, black women have earned a certain measure of autonomy in the patriarchal plantation community, which was
transferred from generation to generation throughout history. In present times we see that the self-image of economic independence contrasts with gender hierarchy at a structural level and a continuation of internalized notions of traditional labor division and (male) sexuality.

Collective interpretations of femininity, masculinity and sexuality also influence the structure of partner relations. The practical application of these notions can, depending on the economic position, vary, but in essence is the same. Marriage does not necessarily imply an orientation towards Western values. In general the practice of marriage is not in accordance with the Western, nuclear, monogamous family either. Phenomena like premarital sex, premarital pregnancy, outside relationships, entering into marriage while having children from a previous relationship, gender-specific social activities, are not exclusively bound to Creoles in the lower social strata, but are tolerated in the middle class as well.

People make a conscious choice for a certain relationship. The widespread notion that Creoles have a 'loose sexual lifestyle' is a product of a serious lack of understanding of the motives, interpretations and feelings that are connected to partner relationships. People strive primarily for a cohabitation relationship, and the pros and cons of the different relationship forms are properly weighed. The Christian marriage takes a central place in the Creole cultural experience. Whether it is also considered the ideal depends on a number of factors. The attitude towards marriage varies, and besides socioeconomic position also depends on age, relationship of parents, own relationship experiences, and the measure in which independence and freedom in the male-female image are important. In the past an anti-marriage attitude was ascribed mainly to men. They were said to resist marriage, because they were unable to meet the economic conditions necessary for the role of breadwinner. Women were said to be in favor of marriage and conform more than men to the dominant Western culture. Typical of classical studies, is also the strict division made between middle class and lower class Creole women, whereby the former group is typified as marriage-oriented and dependent, and the latter group as anti-marriage, and independent.

Idealization and rejection of marriage occur among both women and men, irrespective of their class position. There is a gender difference, though, between the motives used in weighing the pros and cons of marriage. From the notions women vented, a number of important opinions can be derived. First, it seems that marriage, particularly at a young age, when women still have little experience with relationships, is considered as ideal. This ideal is based on a Christian family upbringing, the influence of the mass media and education (in particular in Christian schools). Women associate marriage with security, stability, a 'peaceful' life, social status, a good education for children. But, as with men, the notion of permanent binding also causes resistance among women. As long as there they are not sure of whether the man is a 'good' man, women are not prepared to enter into marriage.
The more negative experiences women have from their own direct environment, the more resistance there is against marriage. Secondly, it seems that the relationship of the parent(s) serves as a frame of reference when women form lasting relationships. Women who grow up in an environment of problematic male-female relations are strongly inclined to reject marriage on the basis of negative relational experiences of their mother and perhaps other female family members. Thirdly, especially older women with children and a number of past relationship experiences, hold little value for the social and ideal status of marriage. In this life phase stricter demands are set on the partner. These women emphatically prefer living alone/separately, or in concubinage. In this phase, women are the least prepared to accept restrictions. Fourthly, it seems that women strongly take into account the children, which they have from a previous relationship, when they consider marriage. They are often not prepared to marry if there are indications that these children will become victims. Finally, women who have lived together with a partner for a long period of time, do display a wish for marriage, particularly in view of the legal security offered by the institution of marriage.

Men of both middle and lower classes idealize marriage. This idealization is not so much based on a Christian marriage moral, which prescribes that marriage is a ‘holy’ union, but from a colonial heritage, which associates marriage with social status and prosperity. By entering into marriage, men acquire social status, not primarily because they enter into a formal relationship with a woman, but because marriage is a symbol of a stable lifestyle and a certain measure of welfare. Thus, men are strongly inclined to link marriage with material conditions, and thus also to explicitly demonstrate their capacities as a breadwinner. Most men are of the opinion that they can only get married if they possess an own house, a plot of land, a car, and other status-raising material goods. There is, therefore, a strong association between marriage and possessions. Ideas about marriage are also intertwined with existing notions of male and female sexuality. The strong preoccupation among men with having control over female sexuality (guarantee her sexual fidelity), and inherent thereto the insecurity about the partner’s fidelity, influences decisions about marriage. Most men are unwilling to enter into a lasting sexual relationship, if they are not sure about the sexual fidelity of the partner. The man always seems to be afraid that the woman will leave him for someone else, who has more to offer economically. From long experience, men have learned that socially a woman has the opportunity to end a relationship, if it does not meet her expectations. Most men are aware that the dominant male lifestyle, characterized by outside activities and multiple partnerships, clashes with the expectations of women, as a result of which there is a good chance that the woman will end the relationship. Especially in the working class, where the economic position of men is less stable, there is an enormous unwillingness to bind oneself to formal obligations and responsibilities as long as there is no guarantee of a lasting relationship. Men see a relationship not only as a material investment, but
also as a symbol of a close bond with a partner. Among men there is a historically developed feeling of insecurity about the question of whether the woman will stay or not. Such insecurity is the reason why he does not dare take the step to lasting cohabitation. There is quite a strong uniformity that cuts across all classes concerning the manner in which men think about marriage.

An analysis of the findings leads to a number of central conclusions:

1. The structure and interpretation of male-female relationships are not primarily determined by socioeconomic conditions, but also by an intensive mutual exchange of collective notions of gender and sexuality on the one hand, and socioeconomic conditions, on the other hand. If we look at the manner in which people give meaning to male-female relationships, particularly in the fundamental areas of existence, that is the area of production (provision of maintenance) and reproduction (procreation and sexuality), we see great similarities among the classes. Moreover, the basic principles ensue from a collective notion which is the product of experiences within a specific social structure, transferred from generation to generation, and characterized by unequal race, class and gender relations. In this collective ideology there are variants as a consequence of education, age, religion, economic position. The influence of these collective notions of gender and sexuality are not only expressed in the self-images of women and men, but also in the strategies and solution models applied in striving for development. Daily practice shows that some notions and strategies linked thereto are no longer attuned to present-day conditions and have thus not only lost their functionality, but also form an obstacle to both personal and social development.

2. Females and males are in conflict with each other, in key areas of life, because in their actions they are guided by contradictory notions about gender and sexuality, and therefore cannot meet one another’s expectations. This conflict is expressed in the instability of partner relationships.

There is a widespread idea that women, contrary to men, have conformed to dominant Western cultural norms and values, expressed in their more frequent Church visits, their pro-marriage attitude, their monogamous lifestyle and their strive for social mobility. This attitude among women is historically explained by the more frequent contact, which they had with white culture. On the basis of this analysis it is concluded that in the present-day society, the position of man is seriously threatened because women, in their more directed ‘mainstream’ values, experience a rapid upward social development, as is reflected by their position in education and their mobility in the vocational structure, and that men are being marginalized. This view has led in the Caribbean to a concept of ‘male marginalization’. I would like to give my criticism of this view as follows:

- The view is fed by a racist discourse, and is characterized by a fundamental contradiction between black and white, which continues on into superior and inferior, good and bad culture, woman and
man, upward mobility and marginalization, rich and poor. The authors assume that the great need for economic autonomy, social mobility and other positive values displayed by women, are all values derived from a Western culture. The own specific historical experiences and other non-Western heritage are disregarded.

As said earlier, the economic, social and cultural development which Suriname experienced as a plantation society, colony, neo-colony and third world country, cannot at all be compared with the social developments which took place in the past three hundred years in Western countries, and thus world views will differ. It is my belief that we are not a society with a dominant Western culture, but a with colonial plantation culture, where Western powers have naturally also laid the foundations. This colonial culture is not only expressed in the structure and notions of gender and sexuality, but is also reflected in specific areas, such as the economy, politics, family relationships, religion, etc.

Because of their specific history, position in society and the experiences with respect thereto, women have developed a self-image in which freedom and economic autonomy are central elements. These values are not only transferred from generation to generation, but in the process of social mobility, also from class to class. The self-image of women was never in accordance with the dominant colonial patriarchal image of women, neither in the area of production, nor in the area of reproduction. This does not mean that women in practice do not constantly clash with a patriarchal culture, which men in particular still hold in high value. Men are more inclined than women to adhere to traditional patriarchal values. In the economic area this is expressed in the high value set by men on the strict labor division, in which the woman, even when she has an important economic input, is considered as subjected to and dependent on man, and primarily responsible for the care and education of children. In the sexual field, which is dominated by a double sexual moral that offers men socially more space to have more partners, and avoid their social responsibility in case of fatherhood and not be involved in the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transferable diseases. The strong influence of patriarchal thought on men is also expressed in the strong outside-home life and the desire to control the sexuality of women, by setting all kinds of limitations which restrict women’s freedom of movement, especially in public. Summarizing, it can be stated that men, not women, maintain dominant patriarchal values and it is women who resist these values, because they are aware that these restrict and stagnate their personal and social development.

Suriname is part of a strongly globalizing world. This globalization is characterized in particular by an unprecedented influence of inter-
national developments, among which the international support for elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. These developments have not passed the Caribbean by and have become manifest in increased international support for and pressure on local governments to introduce gender equality in all areas. In this regard, both international and national actions have been taken, which have increased women’s access to work, education, and international experience. Entirely in accordance with their self-image, women have vigorously accepted these opportunities. However, on a national level, they are still faced with a dominant patriarchal culture, characterized by great gender inequality in the access to economic and political power.

3. The male-female relationship among Afro-Surinamese must be understood against a specific background. It is therefore important that we do not merely apply theories of male-female relationships in our own society, but take the own situation as point of departure, study it and analyze it, and attain solution models and development strategies on the basis of dialogue and consensus. Like the male-female relationship in Western societies, the male-female relationship among Afro-Surinamese is based on patriarchal principles. This does not mean that the patriarchy is manifest everywhere and in the same manner, or always implies the same measure of unequal power relations. The images which men and women, in their close interaction, develop of themselves and one another, are multiple and both positive and negative. Although there are great differences between men and women, I do not believe that there are binary oppositions or antagonistic relations, as is often indicated in the literature. Unequal power relations are not absolute and in practice they are often different from theory. The latter refers to the fact that human beings in their actions are often led by an adapted translation of notions to practice, and thus in their actions are driven by strong pragmatism. Men believe in patriarchal roles, but at the same time they are aware that strict control of the labor and sexuality of women in our specific conditions, is not only unrealistic, but eventually will lead to their marginalization and self-destruction. Men consider themselves superior, but are also plagued by a fear of failure, frustration and great insecurity in their efforts to realize the dominant male image. Women are aware of the existence of male dominance in economic and sexual areas, but have learned to create a certain amount of space for themselves within this system, and to detach themselves from male dominance. In the hard practice of survival, and in reaction to suppression, women have developed a number of values and attitudes which, under the present gender relations and social structure, I believe, impede their social development and demand a high emotional price at individual level, namely: a negative male image, maintaining the traditional idea that a man should be the breadwinner, a strong materialistic view of a sexual relationship (sex primarily in exchange for money, beautiful clothing or other material benefits), maintaining
traditional authority relations with children, an excessive idealization of motherhood and thus domination of the parent-child relationship, and suppression of emotional needs. Men maintain a negative female image of being materialistic, sexually unreliable, promiscuous, while also maintaining myths about natural sexual skills and sexual potency, as well as the myth of the male breadwinner.

It would be naive to state that people have subjected themselves entirely to the ideological power. The historically developed practice and experiences which people have gained in the historical struggle for survival have also yielded a wealth of knowledge, which forms an important ideological frame of reference but that does not have any power or voice, and does not contribute to a public debate. Hence, male-female relations are not only characterized by much stress, but also by an enormous dose of solidarity. Men and women form an essential part of one another’s support networks, and are often quite sincere in their mutual support. The title of this thesis ‘love and conflict’ was chosen intentionally, because in the tales of problems, the great need for a close bond and mutual support could also be heard. Both men and women constantly show that they need one another, and that they would also be able to attain much more in close collaboration.

Both women and men in their own way try to challenge the past. One of the problems is that they are not sufficiently equipped with adequate economic means, and are moreover attached to all sorts of family, partner and other social relationships, which strengthen and reproduce traditional ideas. Constructions of gender and sexuality are not permanent; they can be changed. The question that is immediately raised is: ‘Who determines which meanings are correct and useful’. I believe that meanings should be the result of dialogue and consensus. The men and women I studied, have many basic agreements with respect to the definition of a good relationship. It is a relationship characterized by:

- a stable/peaceful cohabitation, which need not necessarily be marriage, but one that does offer legal security
- sexual fidelity of the partner
- financial security
- shared parenting and close involvement with the upbringing of children
- love and respect
- freedom of movement outside the home and possibility to develop other social relations
- respect for each others close bond with the family of origin
- economic autonomy

Economic changes are important, because they have to do with the ability to provide in one’s basic life necessities. At a national level, attention is focused on realizing economic goals, without taking into account the fact that providing in material needs is not the only means of existence. Human beings are social beings

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and have a natural desire for love, social acceptance, warmth, trust and security. Reproduction and sexuality are central in the social relations between men and women. Sexual relations can deeply influence the lives of human beings and be emotionally enriching, but also extremely painful. This study shows that problems in partner relations emotionally touch the human psyche deeply and have great influence, not only on family relations and the socialization of children, but also on other social relationships, outside the family, for example in politics and in the economic area.

In thinking about solutions for problems identified in male-female relations studies, I plead for appreciation of our strengths, but also for the acknowledgment of our own weaknesses, recognizing that there are historically developed misconceptions in the way in which we interpret the world around us. At the same time, we should do away with myths that were forced upon us: the myth of the male breadwinner, the myth of the black, independent woman, the myth of the black man as a symbol of sexual potency, of the extensive female support networks, of the free expression of sexuality, of the heroic single mother. I plead for self-criticism, for making a conscious choice for changing certain of our ideological principles, for changing negative elements in our gender and sexuality ideology, because they restrict our self-development and the development of our community. I do not suggest a fight between men and women. Gender is not a substituting term for woman; gender relates to the manner in which male-female relations are organized in a specific time and place. That is why both sexes are ‘gendered’, and both more or less subjected to a certain gender system. Both men and women are captured in a traditional gender ideology, which places enormous restrictions on them.

Ideological principles do not easily change, because they are transferred from one generation to another, and have become part of one’s self-image. I hope that this study will be employed by men and women alike to enter into dialogue with one another, and that it will thus contribute to the important process of ideological transformation. I think it is high time that men and women acknowledge the peculiarities passed down from the past, and work together to find solutions. We can only reach a true understanding of male-female relations if we are prepared to discuss with one another as a community, in order to discard the myths, which surround us, with the full awareness that it will take more than talking and better communication between the sexes to solve relational problems. For, they have a structural character and are based on the unequal access of men and women to economic, political and legal power. Hence, changes in family and community levels, for example through educational and informational programs and campaigns directed towards strengthening the bond between partners and between parents and children, will have to take place concomitantly with changes at macro-level, for example the creation of equal educational and vocation opportunities for girls and boys of all social layers, the creation of conditions for greater involvement of men in social reproduction and for equal
access of women and men to economic and political power.
Finally, I express the hope that this study and its results will be seen as a stimulance for further research on this (relatively unexplored) area of Surinamese male-female relations, and their historical development.