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Summary

From the fifties onward, Afro-Surinamese women from all social classes have been migrating to the Netherlands, while a small group of them has migrated back to Surinam. Although this topic often leads to high-running emotions for members of this group, knowledge about remigration is limited. To this day, remigration has mostly been studied in terms of push and pull factors. For this reason, little knowledge has been gained about the way in which cultural associations and identifications have been worded in the stories told by remigrated women. Moreover, this is hardly a matter of a unilinear process from tradition to modernity. Associations and identifications with diasporas do not solely arise from nostalgia; negotiation and contradictions regarding family values or interpretations of motherhood also participate in the process.

In this research, I have investigated how three generations of remigrated Afro-Surinamese women associate and identify themselves with both the diaspora of origin and the diaspora of settlement. For this purpose, I have analyzed the life stories of these Afro-Surinamese women and have worked out which aspects of their associations and identifications are related to specific interpretations of being a woman. To this end, I have interpreted gender as a process which provides significance in three aspects: symbolic, structural and subjective. Remigrated women's associations with diasporas have predominantly been analyzed at a symbolic and structural level. Identifications with diasporas are built upon the subjective aspects that provide significance to involvement with diasporas. In this study, I have distinguished three types of identifications: functional, normative and emotional. Associations and identifications with diasporas could also be seen as language-related practices of 'roots' and 'routes'. Roots desires refer to wishes and dreams, while roots conceptions have to do with the 'how' and 'what' within these images. 'Routes', on the other hand, have to do with the interconnections of transmigrants, which give rise to transcultural realities. Creolization in multiethnic societies is an important notion here. Associations and identifications with differing diasporas – together with specific interpretations of motherhood – are therefore connected to constructions of creolization and cultural identities.

Migration from the Dutch territory of Surinam in South America - as it was given shape fifty years ago - initially existed chiefly of study migration, and after that, labour migration with economic motivation. The historical ties between The Netherlands and Surinam have strongly influenced the scale of this migration. Not only the common language and culture have contributed
to this, but also the imported European educational system. Moreover, in the early fifties of the last century, there was a dawning realization that the overseas territory offered a limited scope for developing one’s personal abilities, regardless of one’s social-economical class or cultural origin. Up to 1950, migrants originated chiefly from Surinam’s upper middle class. This was a very small group of migrants, who were well aware of what to expect upon arrival in the mother nation. Because of rising prosperity and an increase in travel by air, other groups of migrants gradually joined this first group. Since the nineteen sixties, vast amounts of Surinamese people have been migrating to the country that ruled them for three centuries. Peaks in this migration occurred around Surinam’s independence from the Netherlands in November, 1975; at the onset of Surinam’s military period in 1980; and after the December Murders in 1982. After that, migration from Surinam to the Netherlands has greatly decreased. A reason for this, amongst others, is the introduction of a more strict immigration policy in the Netherlands.

Although several studies have helped to establish an image of the influence that Caribbean migration has had on the cultural identities of migrants, it is useful to reconsider the notion of cultural identity. As most studies understand cultural identity as ‘an already accomplished fact’, not enough justice has been done to the position that migrants have in their own stories. For this reason, I have chosen to understand cultural identities as ‘work in progress’, which means that ethnical and racial identities are no longer considered to be static or monolithic concepts. Cultural identities are composed as hybrids, they mainly acquire significance in an inter-local way, and as acting subjects, they can be subject to negotiation, transformation and innovation. This refers to the way people take different stands relative to cultures, and it represents a dynamic and multiform notion of culture.

While (feminist) scientists often claim that women’s (re)migration is to a great extent based on altruism, women are also (re)migrating out of a feeling of responsibility for their - often transnational - families. Other studies have shown that women migrate to utilize individual scopes for developing their possibilities, while they remigrate to help build up their nation of origin. It is impossible to specify univocal reasons for the remigration of three generations of Afro-Surinamese women. Motivations for remigration are different for each individual and each situation. But this study does show that the symbolic, structural and subjective reasons for remigration are intertwined and that they refer strongly to interpretations of Afro-Surinamese womanhood. A remarkable conclusion of this study is that Surinam’s poor economic situation - in the last two decades of the 20th century - has had little influence on the women’s remigration. However, the study shows that the economic situation that remigrated women experienced upon return to their country of origin has affected especially the second and third generation of
these women. When they returned to Surinam, many women could not find a job similar to the one they had in the Netherlands. A notable finding is that the education that the women had received in the Netherlands usually did not (or did insufficiently) pay off in terms of employment agreements. For this reason, many remigrated Afro-Surinamese women have taken on extra economic activities in addition to their paid labour. For the first generation of remigrated women, the age of remigration usually meant that they did not need to perform paid labour anymore, or the moment of return - the seventies - enabled them to easily find a paid job.

Many studies on trans-nationalism have shown how migrants live in receiving societies with a double social frame of reference. In general, migrants simultaneously direct themselves towards both the social context of the receiving society and that of the society of origin. Usually, the values and norms concerning the interpretation of womanhood are different in each of these societies. This study shows that the way migrants adapt themselves to both the receiving society and the society of origin, is different for each generation. Also, the participation of Afro-Surinamese women in Dutch society increases when they migrate at a younger age. After their remigration to Surinam, Afro-Surinamese women introduce changes in both their internal and their external sphere. These changes, which differ per generation, include interpretations of womanhood as well as (re-)creating transcultural realities. Transcultural realities - in which elements from several cultural systems are assembled - lead to new realities in the diaspora of origin, and they are often hard to reconcile with existing roots conceptions.

For the oldest generation of remigrated women (61-81 years old), it is remarkable that the roots conceptions these women (re)produce after their migration are mainly based on their diaspora of origin, for instance, by rejecting the Dutch, more liberal ways of raising children. The women stay close to their children throughout their lives, they consider themselves a unity with their husbands and they see the husband as the ‘priest of the family’. There is, in other words, a strong identification with Christian values - such as charity - which contributes considerably to closeness and altruism as interpretations of Afro-Surinamese womanhood. Many of these remigrated women’s interpretations of being a woman are established by (re)producing normative identifications, which refer, amongst other things, to collective roots memories. Associations with the diaspora of origin are brought about by means of protection and care at the family level. It is remarkable that for this generation, the interpretation of Afro-Surinamese womanhood is mainly taking place at the symbolic level, and references are made to values and norms regarding care, among other things. At the structural level, the women of this generation are shaping interpretations of womanhood by orienting themselves to the private sphere. At the subjective level, these remigrated women
are assuming positions as serving and caring mothers. Little use is made of the so-called ‘personal space’; the women do not take many decisions that originate from their own individuality.

Route effects can be found at the symbolic level. Characteristic for these effects is the way interpretations of Afro-Surinamese womanhood are being interwoven with personal qualities and contradictory subject positions are being overcome. Thus, a manner of maintaining oneself in the diaspora of settlement is being realized. In the route effects at the structural level, opinions regarding liberal marriage in the Netherlands and liberal practices of raising children particularly have to take the rap for it. On the subjective level, route effects have especially been observed after return to Surinam. For instance, one of the interviewed women was surprised at the way she had to demonstrate her Surinamese citizenship once again.

The second generation of remigrated women (41-60 years old) has parted from the notion of family closeness: the women bid farewell to their adult children in the Netherlands, to be close to their family in Surinam. A remarkable characteristic of this generation is that many women get divorced during their period of migration and that nearly all of them choose to work as social entrepreneurs after their return. The women’s associations with the diaspora of origin emerge by means of family devotion. Many of them picture life in Surinam as living in an extended family. A lot of attention is paid to remittances; the matrifocal network - of which these women are a part - remains intact during the period of migration. A notable feature of this generation of women is a functional identification with the diaspora of settlement. Many women go to college after they arrive in the Netherlands and make a career for themselves, which gives them economical independence. Their care for relatives in the diaspora of origin is not just based on normative identifications, but it also ensures them a preserved position in the extended family when they return to Surinam. The interpretation of Afro-Surinamese womanhood on the symbolic level generally manifests itself in the way the women show their family devotion. For instance, one woman deliberately chose to live a sober lifestyle in the Netherlands, to be able to send packages to her family on a regular basis. On the structural level, interpretations of Afro-Surinamese womanhood are shaped by way of close mother-daughter relationships. Furthermore, the selflessness and charity of the first generation returns in the second generation, by means of social entrepreneurship. This entrepreneurship generally draws upon the expertise that the women have acquired in the Netherlands. For this generation, attention to those in need is being professionalized. On the subjective level, these women part with the diaspora of origin’s interpretation of marriage. Route effects were encountered on the symbolic level, for instance, as one of the interviewed women allowed her husband to cheat on her. The husband’s extramarital relationship presented the woman with a contradictory subject
position. Allowing it caused a rift between the woman and her existing interpretation of marriage, but at the same time, the marriage presented financial means to provide education for her children and send remittances to her family. A number of route effects have been found on the structural and subjective levels. Many of this generation’s remigrated women have received education after arriving in the Netherlands. Therefore, with regard to the choice of career, traditional Surinamese female professions - such as teacher and nurse - have been reported less often in this generation. An important route effect at the subjective level is the development of personal strategies in the diaspora of settlement.

The third generation of remigrated women (21-40 years old) can be characterized as ‘study migrants’ who went ‘abroad’ to attend college after finishing high school in the nineties. Compared to the previous generations, it is remarkable that none of the women in this generation had the intention to establish themselves in the diaspora of settlement. When they returned to Surinam, nearly all of the women combined having a family with entrepreneurship. Like the women in the previous generations, these women were raised to be independent and able to cope for themselves. The women’s school records were above average, their parents were closely monitoring their homework and discussed their daughters’ study performance with teachers. Associations at the symbolic level can be found in the way the women redefine the concept of ‘personal space’. It is remarkable that this generation defines the borders between the internal and the external sphere. The women with children emphatically focus their attention on their role as a mother. It is also remarkable that all of these women are entrepreneurs, whether they have a salaried employment or not. Some of the women picture life in the diaspora of origin as a homely life with a lot of security. The women’s enterprises always stand for their need for a ‘personal space’, which contains both fictional and real space. The fictional space has to do with maintaining one’s personal views, while the real space refers to the physical possibilities that are linked to the management of an enterprise. Because these women predominantly use the diaspora of settlement in a unilateral manner, the functional identifications are dominant for this generation. The women use The Netherlands for education and their first job experience. Their associations with the diaspora of origin are both normative and functional, which can partly be explained by the wish to start a family combined with free entrepreneurship. Emotional identifications with the diaspora of origin are mainly expressed in terms of the quality of life. The women refer to the relative peace and quiet in Surinam, a small-scale social life and the pleasant lack of organization of the society. Associations at the subjective level are expressed, amongst other things, in a (newly found) diasporic bliss, such as a new realization of finiteness. In all cases, the decision to return to Surinam was of the women’s own choice, or it was made in consul-
tation with their partners. The women’s associations at this level - different from the previous generation - can more likely be regarded as reflections on the interpretations of existing conceptions of womanhood. In other words: in their stories, the women reflect upon their decisions as relating to existing conceptions of womanhood, in which the personal space for their own life that they claim upon return is an important factor.

In the stories of the third generation, the route effects that have to do with the way the women adapt themselves to both diasporas can be found at three levels. Because of their young age when migrating, many women have adapted to the common norms and values of the diaspora of settlement without conscious realization. In many cases, this has led to conflicts upon return to Surinam. There are, for instance, major differences regarding work ethics and professionalism, which have made it difficult for these women to fit in. For this reason, many women have created a ‘personal space’ upon return, where they are able to pursue the views and practices that they have adopted in the diaspora of settlement. An important result at the structural level is that the women of this generation experience themselves as being (relative) outsiders, which refers to both their physical isolation and their cultural exclusion. On the subjective level, route effects have particularly been found in the women’s scope to decide for themselves and in the diasporic bliss, which is mostly brought about by means of combining Western (family) values with Surinamese pleasantness.

Because the three generations of remigrated Afro-Surinamese women in this study feel ‘at home’ in several diasporas, the women are interweaving elements from several cultural systems. Cultural transference is a central part of this process. This notion involves the shifting of cultural values and practices from several diasporas, to serve specific purposes in the remigrated women’s lives.

The first generation of remigrated women uses cultural transference when the women pointedly separate the public sphere of the diaspora of settlement from the private sphere. This way, the women create their diaspora of origin within the diaspora of settlement. The women ‘survive’ their period of migration by (re)producing Afro-Surinamese family conceptions and ideals of raising children and by emphasizing Christian values. These conceptions are expressed, amongst other things, in the way the women give shape to their motherhood. The ‘survival’ takes place by means of cultural transference, in connecting Afro-Surinamese interpretations of womanhood to de-territorialized meanings. This is expressed when one of the interviewed women connects her tenderness as an Afro-Surinamese quality of motherhood to that of a Sister of Charity ideal.

The second generation of remigrated women uses cultural transference when the diaspora of settlement is used to underline the family ties to the diaspora of origin. The preservation of these ties is both collective and
individual in nature. I have already mentioned how a woman lived a sober life in the diaspora of settlement, enabling her to send remittances to her family members and to provide funds for her children's education. Another woman of this generation strongly identified herself with the Saramacca people in Surinam and managed to pass on the initiation rites of this community to her children in the diaspora of settlement. While the first generation of women considered the diaspora of settlement to be an ‘alien outside world’, the second generation of women used this diaspora to retain family ties and to realize social mobility. Transference takes place, amongst other things, when women apply their acquired expertise to the diaspora of origin by means of social entrepreneurship.

The third generation of women uses cultural transference when they intertwine new values and practices with existing interpretations of Afro-Surinamese womanhood. Contrary to the first generation, this generation has internalized Western values and practices, which has generally lead to new interpretations of womanhood. An example of this is the way a remigrated woman picked up the Dutch work ethics, which led to conflicts with her employer when she returned to Surinam. For this reason, many women in this generation feel like outsiders. Out of necessity, they create new personal spaces, by means of starting their own enterprises.