THE EARLIEST KNOWN DOCUMENT IN PAPIAMENTU CONTEXTUALLY RECONSIDERED

I. Introduction

In their History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles (Cincinnati, 1970), the late Isaac S. and Suzanne E. Emmanuel photographically reproduced the last page of what they described as a "Letter of a Curacaoan Jew in Papiamento, 1776." The historians provided neither a translation nor any comment. They did not indicate the whereabouts of the page and did not mention whether the preceding pages were still extant. Antoine J. Maduro, a Curacaoan historian of Papiamentu, realized, upon seeing the illustration and its caption, that this was in 1970 (and is apparently still in 1981) the earliest known document in Papiamentu, the Afro-Spanish creole dialect spoken by the entire native born population of the Dutch Caribbean islands of Curacao, Aruba and Bonaire. In June of 1971 he published in Curacao a booklet entitled Bon Papiamentu. The appendix contains a transcription of the last page of the letter in question, taken from the Emmanuels' book, followed by a linguistic commentary. In addition, A. J. Maduro provided excerpts from two legal declarations in Portuguese and Papiamentu dated January 16, 1776 which have a direct bearing on the mysterious letter. From these he was able to deduce the identity of its writer, Abraham da Costa Andrade Jr., and of its addressee, Sara de Ishac Pardo e Vaz Farro. Further, he was able to establish that the letter was sent in October of 1775, not in 1776 as the Emmanuels stated in their caption.

In Neophilologus (LVI, 1972, 18-30) Richard E. Wood published "New Light on the Origins of Papiamentu: An Eighteenth-Century Letter." His analysis of the letter's last page, also based on the illustration in the Emmanuels' book, took no account of Maduro's earlier publication. His line by line transcription of the manuscript text is followed by a "normalization into modern Papiamentu orthography" as well as by an English translation. His analysis is in many respects far inferior to A. J. Maduro's. Further, misled by the fact that the author of the letter twice refers to himself as bo marido (your husband), Wood erroneously concluded that this intimate letter was addressed "from a loving husband to his ailing wife." In fact, as we shall presently see and as A. J. Maduro surmised, it was written by a loving "husband" to his pregnant mistress, both being guilty of adultery. Due to his misunderstanding of the letter's content and context, inability to read the manuscript correctly and failure to recognize many common Papiamentu morphemes, Wood misinterpreted the fragment to such an extent that practically all of its meaning has been lost or distorted.

Wood, who prepared his article with the acknowledged encouragement of I. S. Emmanuel, was seemingly not permitted to share the historian's awareness of the letter's whereabouts. Wood assumed that it was to be found in the Rijksarchief at The Hague (West-Indische Compagnie docu-
Incredibly and inexplicably, he made no effort to verify his own assertion to this effect.

In June of 1978 I visited the Rijksarchief and discovered that Wood was both right . . . and wrong. I found not a single original document in Papiamentu or in Portuguese. On the other hand I did find the complete text of the letter in question from Abraham da Costa Andrade Junior to Sara Pardo, wife of Selomoh Vas (or Vaz) Farro as well as a letter by Sara to Abraham and also various declarations connected with the affair. All these documents, however, are official Dutch translations of the Papiamentu and Portuguese originals, made at the time of the affair by one Nicolaas Henricus, sworn translator of the Curacao courts. From the contents of the letters it is clear that both were written on the day following Kipur (Day of Atonement) of 1775. Thus we can now precisely date them: October 5, 1775.

The literal Dutch translations, besides furnishing at last the context of the exchange, permit me to offer a far more accurate transcription and translation of the fragment in the Emmanuels’ book than the ones provided heretofore by A. J. Maduro and R. E. Wood. In addition, the Dutch texts contain a number of linguistic peculiarities which may be of interest to historians of Dutch as examples of how it was deformed among the bilingual (i.e., Papiamentu-Dutch speaking) Protestant inhabitants of Curacao. Most importantly, however, the letters and declarations provide conclusive evidence that Papiamentu was the language of intimacy among the Portuguese Jews of Curacao as early as the eighteenth century. We have here a striking example of a slaves’ language being adopted by the masters alongside and finally in place of their own. Lastly, the letters constitute moving and curious documents humains, reflecting the sensibilities of two creatures in love, deeply troubled by the dire consequences of their behavior. Thus, in publishing these documents, I hope to shed light on both the linguistic and the social aspects of the notorious “Andrade Cas” which shook K.K. Mikve Israel, the Sephardic congregation of Curacao, to its foundations and sowed the seeds for its ultimate disintegration.

Here now follows my English version of the Dutch translation of the Papiamentu letters. At the point where the available original Papiamentu text begins, I shall borrow Wood’s method of line by line examination of the final fragment, such examination now resulting in quite a different transcription of the original lines and a far more accurate English translation of the same. The consecutively numbered notes will attempt to clear up or call attention to various linguistic, religious and social problems. The final section will summarize the intercepted letters’ legal consequences. An appendix will contain the Dutch manuscript texts.