

## The Divine Territory and the Map: keynotes on Sint Maarten nation

When we think about being a nation, we think too often about flags and anthems. We think too often about ownership of a piece of rock. We think too often about being a chosen people. We think too often about being different from other human beings, who are equally imagined as belonging to other nations. We think also too often in terms of a reactive narrative to the imperial narrations of history stemming from the centers of misinformation in Europe (If they claimed that they civilized us, we will show that they were barbarians; if they claim we are ugly, we will proclaim that black is beautiful, etc). To employ the terms of the Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter, we mistake the map for the divine territory of what it means to be a nation.

If we plan to be successful in the project of creating a national vision for Sint Maarten, we will have to dwell attentively in the divine territory that we have been given and given to, and not just relate to the common sense maps we habitually employ to describe ourselves (so not just in terms of the flag, anthem, passport, language issue, and debates concerning who has more ancestry, etc). In this all too brief keynote, a note that truly seeks to be a key to wisdom and insight, I would like you to appreciate that being part of the Sint Maarten nation, dwelling in this divine territory, is cultivating a particular sensitivity and attentiveness. I call this a supra-sensual feeling in which you are the island walking, talking, breathing, working, and dancing. In this suprasensual state you will have no need to own the island, for you are it and it is you. It is given and You are given to it. You will be responsible. If you cultivate this feeling well and induce others to do the same, You (the singular/plural You) will be an example to the rest of the Dutch Caribbean, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the wider Caribbean, and the planet. You (the singular/plural You) will finally live up to the name Sint Maarten.

The rogues who colonized this piece of rock, and robbed men and women and children from their native homelands to work the saltpans and plantations, named her after one of the most outstanding Catholic saints: Sint Maarten. Here is a supreme form of irony that I welcome you to

ponder. Who was Sint Maarten? When you call yourself a Sint Maartener, whose name are you honoring?

Sint Maarten was a kindhearted Catholic Bishop born in the year 315 in what is today known as Hungary. He is best known for sharing his cloak with a freezing beggar, who later in a dream revealed himself as Jesus Christ. From him we learn the importance of seeing the divine in the face of the downtrodden. Could it be coincidence that this island, scarred by the ignoble institution of trans-Atlantic slavery, is today known as the friendly island where thousands undocumented workers from the wider Caribbean and elsewhere earn a living without being excessively harassed by those who arrived earlier?

Moreover, is it simply chance that like the bishop Sint Maarten who made no distinctions and washed the feet of nobility, seeing in their faces a trace of the divine too, that we welcome wealthy tourists to our shores? Many of these men and women descend from those who profited most from the colonial adventures. How are we emulating the life of Sint Maarten of Tours when in serving them we implicitly teach them and ourselves a divine inspired conception of equality; equiliberty (equality and liberty) without remorse?

Is there a mysterious working through, and working out of history, involved here? Are we who were given and given to this island being summoned to recognize the divine territory? If this is the case why do we not recognize it?

Perhaps it is because we are too exclusively wedded to common sense maps. Even then many of us do not know these maps well enough. For what exactly is Sint Maarten when we think exclusively in terms of maps (so not in terms of the divine territory of which I was just speaking)?

Sint Maarten is not an autonomous country. It is an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Kingdom of the Netherlands is an extended state which consists today of four constitutionally recognized internally autonomous countries. This is the case since the

Statuut, the Charter of the Kingdom, was redesigned on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2010. These internally autonomous countries are the Netherlands, Curaçao, Aruba, and Sint Maarten.

In their role as presiding and guiding internal affairs, leaders of these four countries are allowed to set up nation building projects in an effort to strengthen social cohesion. These nation building projects, and the imagined communities that emerge out of these, must not be mistaken for their nationality. All citizens of the Kingdom of the Netherlands have but one nationality, namely Dutch. They carry the same passport, have the same foreign policy, the same defense force, and are represented by one monarch: King Willem Alexander.

Also over and above the four governments there is the Kingdom government which consists of the parliament in The Hague and the minister plenipotentiary of Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten. This arrangement, called a democratic deficit, whereby The Hague as a disproportionate amount of say, is a remnant of colonialism that can be remedied. With visionary leadership, less economic dependence from tax payers in the Netherlands, and an educated citizenry, the leaders of government can push for further reforms within the Kingdom Charter.

To this constitutionally daunting extended statehood to which we belong, we need to add the EU layer that is at our doorstep. As we speak there is a project underway to federalize Europe (on the mainland as well as in the Indian and Atlantic Ocean, which means You too). There is lots of contestation about this extra layer, but few believe that the developments of a common market, court of justice, central bank, and a council charged with influencing "the general political directions and priorities" of all the nation-states, can be totally halted without a major fallout.

These are the maps that the people on this island have to know. This knowledge needs to be disseminated in schools and civic organizations. Sint Maarteners need to appreciate the constitutional webs of which they are part.

But the maps that I have just explicated are not the territory. They are not to repeat myself, the divine territory that we have been given and given to. To explain what I mean by “given” and “given to” we need to leave behind common sense and enter into super sense.

Common sense is informed by history and fossilized geography. With history the past is fixed and understood as a fact that curtails your choices. From a historical frame of mind, you can't change the past, you can't change your past, and you can't change the colonial past of this island; totally breaking ties with the Netherlands and leaving the Kingdom would not undo the fact that in the past the island was a colony. Also geographically the island is and remains in the Caribbean Sea.

Super sense is informed by a living sense of myth grounded in a geography that dances. The past is an endless resource infinitely amendable to our interpretations; our stories about ourselves and others. This island like our existence can then be conceived as a gift. It is given to us by a mystery many on this island call God. In this we too are given to the island. In this double sense of being given (given and given to) there is no sense of ownership. There is a sense of having to return the gift: of sharing our mantle with the needy and washing the feet of nobility like the bishop of Tours, Sint Maarten, did! We see in the Other, in each other, the face of the divine. We appreciate then that being part of the Sint Maarten nation, dwelling in this divine territory, is cultivating a supra-sensual feeling in which we are the island walking, talking, breathing, working, and dancing. We as a nation, as the island, become a dancing geography in the carnival of the earth that touches all other participants (living on islands and countries named after legends) respectfully.

