First Salute NOS Radio Okt15, 2026 - Transcript

Host - The Netherlands was 250 years ago the first country in the world that recognized America. That happened at Sint Eustatius, with cannon shots.

In a month, it will be celebrated on the island. King Willem-Alexander is there, and also the American Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marco Rubio. But there's criticism as well, because whose party is this actually? More and more people at Sint Eustatius aren't enthusiastic about the event.

Correspondent Caribbean Dick Draaier explains what kind of celebration it is.

Dick Drayer - On November 16, Sint Eustatius celebrates Statia Day every year, with the first salute, the cannon shots, and their own island culture. The idea of celebrating this anniversary big this year came in 2018 from MPs Bosman and Van Raak.

And they said explicitly, also pay attention to the dark sides of the past. Because what happened in 1776? An American ship passed by Sint Eustatius and saluted. Governor Johannes de Graaff had that salute shot back from the fort.

And that was seen as a recognition of American independence. The first foreign state to recognize American independence. But Sint Eustatius itself was under Dutch colonial rule.

And De Graaff was even an enslaver. And that makes the commemoration complicated now. Because whose freedom do you actually celebrate when the enslaved population of Sint Eustatius itself was not free? And how do you make sure that that story, that history, is told?

Host - And from the Sint Eustatius community, a petition was launched to move the celebration. Kenneth Cuvalay is the initiator and chairman of the Sint Eustatius Burial Ground Alliance. Good morning.

Kenneth Cuvalay (KC) - Yes, good morning. It is Sint Eustatius Afrikan Burial Ground Alliance.
Host - African Burial Ground.

KC - Yes, yes, that is very important.

Host - An important addition, absolutely. Yes, yes. You would very much like that meeting to be moved to The Hague. Why?

KC Well, look, the central government, the Dutch state, which has been instrumental in slavery and trade there, in the life of settlers and so on. Yes, of course, it has connected with the V.S. and that recognition, as Dick Dreyer has just indicated, and the seat of the government is not in or on Sint Eustatius. It's just in The Hague.

And we know the reputation of Mr. Bosman, for example, with statements about non-white people in this country. And if you think that this event should be celebrated, then do it in The Hague. The Sint Eustatius population has worked very hard to appropriate the dominant

colonial image of Sint Eustatius in the context of decolonization the past 11 years to express their African appearance, their African identity on that island.

And it's just a shameful act that this happens in this way. And if the entire historical act would be told, then it could be less shameful. But it is also a one-sided narrative of the Dutch side.

Host - Ah, so that there is no attention to the position at that moment of the inhabitants of Sint Eustatius, you also disagree.

KC - Not only me, the population also.

Host - Yes, you are the representative of the population.
What do you think of the king coming here?

KC - Well, that is very contradictory, given that the king, I believe in 2023, if I remember correctly, made his personal appeal to the African descendants within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, as it is called, and in international context to the African descendants to give personal forgiveness in connection with the role that the royal family of Oranje played, asked for, and at the same time offered a general apology for the most barbaric and grotesque acts that in that period played a major role, especially in 1776, for forgiveness.

And on the basis of that appeal to the African descendants, that he did then, and now with this event that he is present, yes, then the question is in the eyes of the population, the descendants and of course de Alliance, what is that apology and the appeal for forgiveness worth then? If all of this falls back together and takes place?

Host – Yes. Because you always celebrate on November 16th, Station Day, and the Caribbean culture and history. Does that offer, as it is now, no counterbalance?

KC - Well, look, there is a celebration on this day, the expression of the African Caribbean culture, of our ancestors.

I prefer to call it the African Caribbean culture, because it has to do with our ancestors. As I just said, the population fought for it over the years to let the world know, with a forgotten history, that they are present.

Host - But maybe the spotlight can come on that now, or not?

KC - Well, yes, I don't know. Marco Rubio and the whole world, which is in the spotlight in relation to a distorted narrative at the moment, that is dominant. And can you imagine that that happens, but the focus is on the dominant colonial narrative that is happening at this moment. What we are trying to do now, to get attention for it, is precisely the burial of the unethical burial that took place in 2021 for our ancestors, without the involvement of the community.

Our ancestors, after more than five years, towards six years that are still unearthed, to be reburied on November 13th. And so we hope to get some attention from the international spectacle that is taking place at the moment.

Host - Well, you were able to tell your story today.

Thank you very much for doing that for you in the middle of the night. Thank you, Kenneth Cuvalay of the Sint Eustatius Afrikan Burial Ground Alliance.