A Symbolic Analysis of Aruban Aloe: A View of Cultural Continuity and Change

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This essay examines the symbolic context of *Aloe vera* in Aruba, Netherlands Antilles. [1] Aloe, and the oral tradition surrounding this cash crop, serves to symbolically demark Aruban ethnicity and culture. The plant has served as an extra and reliable source of income for at least 100 years and has become demonstrative of the pride native Arubans have in their past and a means by which they have perpetuated it. Aloe cultivation is presently quite active on the island and is the focal point around which the following is based. Particular attention is given to aloe's role in the local economy and to an analysis of the Aruban Coat of Arms.

Since about 1800 Aruba's agricultural history has been unpredictable (Phalen 1975: 11; 1977: 87–90). Droughts and subsequent crop failures have plagued the island. Despite the usually unfortuitous environmental conditions for edible cultigens, Arubans did discover an inedible but reliable cash crop, *Aloe vera*. Aloe requires little water, thrives in the bright Aruban sun, annually regenerates its harvested leaves, and requires little care aside from weekly weedings of aloe *cunucus* (fields). The plant appears to obtain enough water from the limestone aquifers (underground porous rock formations which retain water) and thus is not dependent upon Aruba's sporadic and unreliable rainy season of October-December (Phalen 1975: 9–21; 1977: 85–90). Consequently, the plant does not require a growing season delimited by seasonal climatic regularities. Food crops are dependent upon the main rainy season and a secondary one in July-August. Aruban cultivators regularly attend to the preparation of their food crop *cunucus* commencing in late June. Preparation, sowing, weeding, and harvesting of cultigens last from the end of June through January. During this part of the agricultural cycle aloe plots receive a weekly weeding, but in general the plants are given little attention.

After the January harvest of edible crops labor is focused upon aloe production. The leaves are cut and the latex is gathered and stored until the 'cooking' or evaporation process begins. It is this process which transforms the viscous aloe oil into a dark resin. Usually the resin is sold to individuals who act as exporters of the aloe gum. Most aloe growers cultivate small fields, as they do for subsistence plots. Before and after a small scale aloe cultivator harvests and processes his own aloe he works as a cutter for other, usually larger, growers who in the past also acted as exporters. Ties are maintained between producer/cutter and exporter which rarely dissolve except upon death (Phalen 1975: 19, 25–26). Aloe is exported to the United States and Europe for use in the manufacture of cosmetics and purgatives; the industry is again proliferating after a fifteen year lull. In 1968 the Aruba Aloe Balm Company began operations and has been producing a line of cosmetics. This business has furnished a new income source for aloe growers. After the latex is drained from the leaves, they can be sold to the company which uses an extract from the leaves in the production of their products. The current success of the company has stimulated much discussion by the island government about modernizing the aloe industry.

The hardy little aloe plant has helped Aruban cultivators weather precarious food production by insuring a cash income with which they can purchase imported foodstuffs.

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