

# The Rehabilitation of Tula: Is Epistemic Injustice overcome?

Course: Transitional justice and Human Rights

Supervisor: Prof dr Nicole Immler, Dr Niké Wentholt

Word count: 2757

This case study explores the historical portrayal of Tula Rigaud, a leader of the 1795 slave revolt in Curaçao, through the lens of Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice. The analysis distinguishes between testimonial injustice, where Tula's confessions under torture were selectively believed, and hermeneutical injustice, which resulted from the historical marginalization and misinterpretation of the experiences of the enslaved population. The study argues that both forms of injustice are present in Tula's narrative. While testimonial injustice affected Tula's credibility, hermeneutical injustice led to a collective gap in understanding the enslaved people's experiences. The paper critiques Fricker's collective aspect, introducing Rebecca Mason's concept of blameworthy ignorance, emphasizing the silenced epistemic agency of the marginalized group. The discussion challenges the notion that Tula's rehabilitation by the Dutch government resolves epistemic injustice, cautioning against reproducing colonial powers through claims of justice done by the dominant group. The conclusion advocates for an ongoing process of battling epistemic injustice, emphasizing the importance of language and the need of addressing orientalist discourse.

## Tula's Revolt and Rehabilitation

*"Mijne slaven zijn des morgen gekomen en weijgeren in 't algemeenen dienste te doen wat verder haare intentie is, weet ik niet,"* [Today my slaves came together to tell me that they will not work for me anymore; why they decided this I do not know] are the first written words by the owner of plantation the Knip in Curaçao, dated 17 August 1795, heralding the beginning of the slave revolt led by Tula Rigaud (Paula, 1974 p. 26). Although the revolt only lasted for a month, it defined an important moment in the history of Curaçao. With around 2000 slaves revolting, it was one of the biggest slave revolts that ever took place on Curaçao (Cain, 2009 p. 41). Although the historical implications and details are not only interesting but also of importance, I will here mainly focus on the portrayal of Tula Rigaud through the years.

The revolt ended the moment Tula got betrayed by some of his companions and consequently captured by the *Koloniale raad* [Colonial government] (Goslinga, 1990 p. 13-14). He was gruesomely tortured, for he was first tied up on a cross hit by iron bars to break his bones, followed by burning his face with torches, to be finally beheaded. His body was thrown in the sea, his face placed on a stake to make an example out of Tula (Paula, 1974 p. 166-67). In memoirs, by Pieter Theodorus van Teijlingen responsible for the 'interrogations,' often paired with gruesome torturing, of Tula, it is written that Tula had the intention to kill all the white people and start a 'government of Nigers,' of which he would become the governor (Cain, 2009 p.186-87). Teijlingen even argued in favor of an inscription underneath the beheaded head of Tula with: 'The Chief of murderers, plunderers, and arsonists' (Paula, 1974 p. 199).

Another portrayal of Tula can be found in the writing of Schink, a Catholic pastor who tried to convince Tula to end the rebellion. Schink writes that he was surprised by Tula's knowledge, who told him that France had abolished slavery and that since France was now ruling over Holland, enslaved from Holland also should receive their freedom. When Schink's attempts appeared to be in vain, he returned the next morning to ask Tula once more. Tula replied with: 'We desire nothing more than our freedom' (Paula, 1974 p. 268-71).

The negative view of Tula became the dominant viewpoint, even in the 1930s; he was not included in teaching materials in both Curaçao and The Netherlands, and when he was mentioned, it was in the context of an evil villain (Hielkema, 1995). In 1970, Tula was for the first time re-interpreted as Curaçao's real hero in a theater play by Pacheco Domacassé (Sille, 1972), but it took 38 years more before Tula would be proclaimed as the national hero of Curaçao by the Curaçaoan Fundashon Rehabilitashon Tula on 17 August 2010 (Antiliaans Dagblad). It took another 12 years before the Dutch government would make official apologies about their colonial past and another one before Tula would

be rehabilitated by the Dutch Government exactly 228 years after his death on 3 Oktober 2023 (van Suchtelen, 2023).

## Framework: Fricker's Epistemic Injustice

How can we understand this case study of Tula through the lens of Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice? In her book *'Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing,'* Fricker distinguishes two kinds of epistemic injustice: Testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007). Fricker defines testimonial injustice as an injustice towards the speaker who either receives more credibility than he or she would otherwise have; this she calls *credibility excess*, or it results in the speaker receiving less credibility than he or she would otherwise have, which she calls *credibility deficit* (Fricker, 2007 p.17).

According to Fricker, the second kind of epistemic injustice, Hermeneutical Injustice, follows from the unjust and uneven ways the resources of epistemology and knowledge are distributed, specifically the uneven distribution of concepts, credibility, and knowledge, which Fricker calls hermeneutical marginalization (McKinnon, 2016 p.440-41). This systematic and wide-ranging marginalization of some social identities leads according to Fricker to hermeneutical injustice, which she defines as: *'the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.'* (Fricker, 2007 p.155). In other words, the marginalization and exclusion of social identities lead to a "gap in the collective hermeneutical resources" for it produces a collective hermeneutical resource that is deficient with respect to the experiences of the marginalized social group (Fricker, 2007 p.6).

## Fricker's epistemic injustice applied on Tula

In the case of Tula, I would argue that both kinds of injustice could be found. Fascinating about the testimonial injustice is that it consists of two records from the same actor; however, only one was, for a long time, regarded as true while the other was regarded as false. Tula's confession done under torture in which he confessed that he would kill all the white people was regarded as Tula's true intention while his intention as reported by Pastor Schink was neglected. This, I would argue, is a clear example of testimonial injustice since only the confession that depicted Tula as an not-so-intelligent villain and monster was regarded as credible in the belief system of the dominant culture of that time, while the notes taken by Pastor Schink received a deficit in credibility. The notes of Schink underscore this interpretation for Schink was surprised himself by Tula's reasoning and argumentation.

As shown above, testimonial injustice happens when a credibility deficit or excess occurs; hermeneutical injustice occurs when there is a gap in the collective hermeneutical resources. In other words, the experiences of the marginalized group are altogether not understood by the dominant and potentially also by the marginalized group. In the case of Tula, Schink being surprised by his reasoning and argumentation clearly shows the marginalization of the group that Tula represents. Fricker's prime example of hermeneutical injustice is that of sexual harassment experienced by women in their working life. Before the term 'sexual harassment' was introduced, women had a difficult time describing and understanding their experiences, creating a collective gap in the hermeneutical resources that wronged, marginalized, and harmed women (Fricker, 2007 p. 149-51). The epistemic injustice done to Tula and the group he represents therefore spans more than only the period of the revolt and Tula's execution. The epistemic injustice also stems from how this event was remembered through history. For example, even in the 1930s, the slave revolt led by Tula was a 'forgotten' historical event that was not taught in schools in both The Netherlands and Curaçao; the sparse moments that Tula was mentioned, he was villainized, exposing a clear 'gap' in the collective hermeneutical resources, for Tula's and the other enslaved

people's experience was not understood, disadvantaging not only the enslaved people but also the Curaçaoan people of today.

Another example can be found in the nine measures introduced just after the revolt. Although some of those measures were taken to improve the lives of the enslaved peoples, the measures ultimately served to scare the enslaved to such an extent that they would not revolt again (Hofland, 2016). Captain Van Westerholt writes: *"The hearts of the enslaved peoples are unchanged since they long for a new revolt"* (Paula, 1974 p,294)." The new measures are only meant to strengthen the position of the dominant group instead of listening to the voice of the marginalized group. It, therefore, shows that the experiences of the enslaved people were not understood altogether, clearly showing the gap in hermeneutical resources.

Only in 1970 did a theater play for the first time address the epistemic injustice by making people aware of another narrative, one that showed Tula's heroic perspective. Epistemic injustice was further battled by the rehabilitation of Tula by the Curaçaoan Fundashon Rehabilitashon and recently also by the Dutch government..

### **Mason's critique on Fricker's notion of hermeneutic injustice**

But does this mean that epistemic injustice is overcome? That with the rehabilitation of Tula by the Dutch government, this injustice is now officially resolved? I would argue against this reasoning. To clarify my argument, let me first introduce the critique of Rebecca Mason on the 'collective' aspect of Fricker's 'gap in collective hermeneutical resources'. Mason argues that the gap is not a collective unknown but is ambiguous between two kinds of unknowing. Besides the hermeneutical injustice suffered by members of the marginalized group, there is also the epistemically and ethically blameworthy ignorance perpetrated by members of the dominant group (Mason, 2011 p. 294). By focusing only on the collective epistemic injustice, the resistant epistemic practices of the marginalized group are not taken into account, which may paradoxically contribute to the marginalization and disempowerment of the already marginalized group. According to Mason, Fricker therefore underplays the epistemic agency of the marginalized group (Mason, 2011 p.295). By introducing ignorance as a term to analyze the hermeneutical 'gap', Mason enables us to see that not Tula but the colonial dominant group lacked the proper understanding of their doings. As the notes by Pastor Schink show, Tula himself clearly understood his experience that marginalized him and the other enslaved people. It was, therefore, blameworthy ignorance of Captain van Westerholt, for he did not understand the real reason for the enslaved to revolt. It was blameworthy ignorance to not include Tula's revolt in the teaching material, and it was blameworthy ignorance for not understanding the wrongdoings that happened under the colonial regime.

Furthermore, the first time Tula was portrayed as a freedom fighter was in a play by Pacheco Domacassé, who was a Curaçaoan teacher, musician, actor, playwright, and director who had a great cultural influence on Curaçao, strengthening Mason's argument that epistemic understanding can be already present in the marginalized group but is often silenced by the dominant group. An especially strong case in favor of Mason's inclusion of blameworthy ignorance perpetrated by members of the dominant group silencing the marginalized group can be found in the earlier newspaper article in the *Trouw* with the lead reading:

*"Curaçao is not celebrating a national holiday today. Even after two hundred years, August 17 is still not a special date. Historical awareness is apparently not very deeply rooted among Antilleans, even when it comes to one of the most important moments in the development of Curaçao (Hielkema 1995)."*

By critiquing the Antilleans for having a deeply rooted historical awareness, the writer is not only turning the tables upside down by claiming that the dominant culture is trying to close the

hermeneutical gap while the marginalized culture apparently is not. It also shows an epistemically and ethically blameworthy ignorance of the writer who blames the marginalized group for not understanding their history while the dominant group should be the one to blame for not including the revolt led by Tula in the Dutch and Curaçaoan education system. Whether or not, intentionally or unintentionally, the writer further marginalized the already marginalized group through disregarding the potential epistemic understanding of the marginalized group.

## **The Orientalism as pitfall in addressing epistemic injustice**

Mason thus shows us that we should be very mindful not to make the mistake of underplaying the epistemic agency of the marginalized group. Celebrating the rehabilitation of Tula by the Dutch government as a successful example of epistemic injustice finally being resolved would, therefore, be 'a bridge too far'. We would make the same mistake as the journalist by crediting the dominant culture for closing the hermeneutical gap and, therefore, participating in blameworthy ignorance. In fact, by regarding the rehabilitation of Tula by the Dutch government as the final stage of resolving the epistemic injustice done, it would still be a form of exercising an orientalist hegemonic discourse "*by dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient* (Said, 1979 p.3)". With rehabilitating Tula, the Dutch government still exercises authority over Curaçao since it, in essence, celebrates the closing of the gap in hermeneutical resources by the dominant group, reproducing the marginalization of the marginalized group. This leads me to Glen Coulthard (2007) who argues that the contemporary politics of recognition reproduces the dominant colonial powers the marginalized group sought to transcend. In this case, the rehabilitation of Tula would be such a form of recognition, especially if we would regard the rehabilitation by the Dutch government as the final stage in overcoming the epistemic injustice.

## **Conclusion**

Does my argument mean that the theoretical framework of epistemic injustice is insufficient in dealing with rehabilitation and other forms of recognition? On the contrary, I would argue that it is a necessary framework to understand the injustice done. However, I think that the original definition as coined by Fricker does indeed underplay the epistemic agency of the marginalized group. Mason's addition of epistemically and ethically blameworthy ignorance perpetrated by members of the dominant group, therefore, is an essential addition to Fricker's hermeneutical injustice. Moreover, the mistake must not be made that epistemic injustice can be simply overcome and thus justice is served. As soon as that happens, we fall into the pitfall of orientalism by reproducing the dominant colonial powers the marginalized group sought to transcend. Instead, we should see rehabilitation and other forms of recognition as processes in which epistemic injustice is battled, but with no clear definable end.

What does this concretely mean? If we want to effectively battle epistemic injustice, we should not only stress the epistemic understanding already present in the marginalized group but also realize that the construct of orientalism, as a hegemonic discourse, exercises authority over marginalized groups and is deeply rooted and hardly escapable. A way forward would be to address language that fuels this orientalist discourse. As Fricker shows with the introduction of the word 'sexual harassment', language enables us to narrow the gap of hermeneutical resources and address epistemic injustice. Let me, therefore, start by adding a second word, for how can we speak of addressing epistemic injustice while politics and the media still daily talk about terrorism?



## Bibliography

Antilliaans Dagblad. (2010, 17 augustus). Tula in ere hersteld. *Antilliaans Dagblad*. URL:

<https://antilliaansdagblad.com/nieuws-menu/1691-tula-in-ere-hersteld>

Cain, A. (2009). *Tula: De slavenopstand van 1795 op Curaçao*. NiNsee.

Coulthard, G. S. (2007). Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the "Politics of Recognition" in Canada. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 6(4), 437–460. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300307>

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

Goslinga, C. Ch. (1990). *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in Surinam 1791/5-1942*. Van Gorcum.

Hielkema, H. (1995, 17 augustus). Curaçao heeft nog steeds moeite met zijn slavenopstand. *Trouw*. URL: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/curacao-heeft-nog-steeds-moeite-met-z-n-slavenopstand~b1a87c12/>

Mason, R. (2011). Two Kinds of Unknowing. *Hypatia*, 26(2), 294–307. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01175.x>

McKinnon, R. (2016). Epistemic Injustice. *Philosophy Compass*, 11(8), 437–446. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12336>

Paula, A. F. (1974). *1795: De slavenopstand op Curaçao: Een bronnenuitgave van de originele overheidsdocumenten*. Centraal Historisch Archief.

Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism (First Vintage Books ed.)*. Vintage Books.

Sille, R. (1972). The Theatre in Curaçao. *Educational Theatre Journal*, 24(1), 86–87. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3205402>

T. Hofland. (2016, August 25). *De lange weg naar vrijheid*. Maatschappijgeschiedenis / History of Society. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2105/34785>

Van Suchtelen, E. (2023, 3 oktober). Van misdadiger naar verzetsheld: Tula's eerherstel komt met verplichtingen. *Trouw*. URL: <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/van-misdadiger-naar-verzetsheld-tula-s-eerherstel-komt-met-verplichtingen~b2e6d4b5/>