

Non-Dutch Petitions in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Atlantic

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Abstract

This article argues for the centrality of petitions for colonial administration in the Dutch Atlantic. Moreover, through a study of non-Dutch petitioners, it demonstrates the diversity of individuals that exercised influence on colonial decision-making. This adds an important understanding of political exchanges to the well-established understanding of the Atlantic world as based on inter-imperial, cross-cultural, and multi-ethnic economic exchanges. The colonial inhabitants did not stand idly by as decisions in and from the European metropole or West India Company (WIC) administrators invaded their lives, but instead actively attempted to influence the rules and regulations that governed them. The space that allowed for this on-the-spot negotiation between the colonial government and those individuals it governed was open to virtually everybody and the topics covered were equally as varied, ranging from local decentralized authority to regulations for colonial commodities and issues of religion.

Keywords: Dutch Atlantic, petitions, New Netherland, Dutch Brazil, lobbying, vast Early America

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7 June 1656 was a day like many others on Manhattan Island, as Peter Stuyvesant and the other members of the High Council of New Netherland came together to read and decide upon petitions presented to them. One of the petitions that day was signed by fifteen merchants and requested a removal or decrease of the impost on beer and wines.¹ Like many other petitions it was successful, as becomes clear from the ordinance the High Council published later that same day: ‘The Director-General and councilors of New Netherland hereby make known that upon the remonstrance and petition both of the Dutch as well as of the English merchants’, the collection of duties on exported beer, wine, and spirits would be one-third lower than previously agreed.²

Petitions (*rekesten*) were the primary vehicle for individuals to influence the regulations that governed their lives.³ Petitioners addressed many issues that either impacted them personally, including petitions for a job or a privilege, or that impacted the wider community, such as petitions for a regulation. A petition like that of 7 June 1656, and its response, was a typical example of the way in which the Dutch West India Company (wic) ruled in Brazil and North America in the seventeenth century. Petitioning allowed the inhabitants of the colony to influence decision-making directly, and at the same time it ensured the wic a relatively efficient way of governance.

1 Although I consulted the original materials from the New York State Archives in Albany, NY, I have made use of the English translations provided by the New Netherland Institute, available on-line via www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/research/online-publications/council-minutes-1638-1665/. *Council Minutes*, VIII, 14-15, Petition of 7 June 1656. The signatories were Jacob Backer, Pieter Schafbanck, Reynier Reycken, Pieter Rudolphus, Pieter de Jonge, Pieter van Couwenhoven, Govert Loockermans, P. Cornelisse vander Veen, Warnaer Wessels, Pieter Jacobsz Buys, Pieter Jacobsz Marius, Claes Bordingh, Abram Nickel, Joost van Beek, and Joan Withart. This article is based on research funded by a Fulbright Fellowship, Cátia Antunes’s NWO VIDI project ‘Challenging Monopolies’, and the Leiden University Fund. I would like to thank the EMLC editorial board, as well as the anonymous reviewers for challenging all prejudices about reviewers: their comments were supportive and very helpful. Finally, I am indebted to Sophie Wilkowske for proofreading the final version. All remaining errors are of course completely my responsibility.

2 *Council Minutes*, VIII, 16, Ordinance of 7 June 1656.

3 Prak, ‘The Dutch Republic as a Bourgeois Society’.

Through a study of petitions submitted to the colonial governments in the wic colonies in Brazil (1630-1654) and North America (1614-1667), this article argues that petitions facilitated the inhabitants of these colonies far-reaching influence on the decision-making process. This means that colonial decision-making extended far beyond the European metropole and that governing was a much more multi-ethnic affair than the imperial façade would suggest. To contribute to the understanding of the Atlantic World as a multi-ethnic, inter-imperial, cross-cultural, and pluri-religious cohabitational space, this article studies how non-Dutch petitioners tried and succeeded to influence colonial decision-making.

Around the turn of the century, the historiography on the Atlantic has moved from a nationalist perspective to an Atlantic perspective.⁴ In practice, this means that there is an emphasis on Atlantic activities that stretched beyond imperial borders: the smuggling and inter-imperial exchanges of ideas, people, and goods. Not just the Dutch, but also the French, Scandinavian, Iberian, and other European colonial ambitions in the Atlantic survived because of supra- and inter-imperial individuals and practices.⁵ This presents a tension between the imperial structures that had existed for centuries, and the colonies where seemingly the subjects ‘obeyed, but did not comply’ with metropolitan rules.⁶ At the very least, colonial inhabitants had far-reaching autonomy in the way they structured their lives.

This autonomy, of course, was partially negotiated and also stemmed from the distance between the metropolitan centre and the overseas colony. Jack P. Greene already argued for British America that the geographical periphery enjoyed considerable autonomy.⁷ This autonomy derived not just from the weakness of the metropolitan coercive resources and distance from the centre, he noted, but also from settler domination of local authority structures. Recent literature has found similar colonial agency in relation to negotiations within the Iberian Empire.⁸ However, despite its peripheral autonomy in comparison to the wic directors in the metropolitan centre, the wic colonial leadership still had to negotiate its position ‘on the spot’ with a variety of local actors.

In 1991, Richard White theorised the space of on-the-spot negotiation as a ‘middle ground’ in ‘a world system in which minor agents, allies, and even subjects at the periphery often guide the course of empires’.⁹ Combining space with historical process proved

4 For more traditional literature, see for example: Den Heijer, *Geschiedenis van de wic*; Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire*; Jacobs, *New Netherland*. Revisionist literature includes Postma and Enthoven, *Riches from Atlantic Commerce*; Oostindie and Roitman, ‘Repositioning the Dutch’; Fatah-Black, *White Lies and Black Markets*; Shaw Romney, *New Netherland Connections*; Klooster, *The Dutch Moment*; Klooster and Oostindie, *Realm between Empires*.

5 Bailyn, ‘Preface’; Marzagalli, ‘The French Atlantic’; Wirta, *Dark Horses of Business*; Cañizares-Esguerra, *Entangled Empires*.

6 See the foundational article by Phelan, ‘Authority and Flexibility in the Spanish Imperial Bureaucracy’, who translated the Spanish expression *pero no cumplo* as ‘but I do not execute’.

7 Greene, *Negotiated Authorities*.

8 Irigoien and Grafe, ‘Bargaining for Absolutism’; Bethencourt, ‘Political Configurations and Local Powers’. See also Daniels and Kennedy, *Negotiated Empires*.

9 White, *The Middle Ground*, xxvi-xxvii.

an important analytical tool that allowed other historians to build on his work and to highlight cooperation over conflict.¹⁰ Instead of viewing the colonial political mandatories and colonial apparatus as a source of despondency for the indigenous population, White studied the emergence of new cultural norms between the French colonisers and the native Americans in the *pays d'en haut* of the Great Lakes of North America. In a forum on the book in *The William and Mary Quarterly* fifteen years later, one contribution highlighted the positive elements of White's work, while two others were more critical, and a fourth tried to bridge the book's finding to new fields.¹¹ Most relevant in this context is the criticism from Brett Rushforth, who draws on wars between the indigenous group called Fox and some of their neighbours to question White's presumption of unity among the Algonquin-speaking people. Although on occasion some of the groups stood together against a common enemy, 'there has been a tendency to exaggerate both the extent and duration of this cooperation'.¹²

Mirroring the criticism of Rushforth on the other side of the equation, this article demonstrates the problem of considering the Europeans as a singular entity when they are conjoined as uniform 'white' colonists vis-à-vis the inhabitants of the lands before the arrival of Europeans. Petitions offered an important possibility for on-the-spot negotiation in the colonies. From a legal point of view, the right to petition did not enter the statute books until 1689. Nevertheless, it is clear that people have been petitioning those with political decision-making power all over the world for hundreds of years.¹³ Petitions were presented by people from all walks of life, possibly assisted by a learned individual for a small fee, and the institutions they addressed carefully archived the petitions.¹⁴ Even though there was no right to petition, people could not be punished for petitioning either, which offers further evidence that it was an accessible process that carried little risk. More importantly, there was a widely held belief that addressees had a responsibility to receive and respond to the petition. From the late eighteenth century onwards, many governments – including the Dutch – started guaranteeing the well-established custom of petitioning as a 'self-evident right'.¹⁵

Historical studies of early modern petitions in the Dutch Republic is a recently burgeoning field, and has a history of its own. In the 1970s the legal historian Fockema Andreae laid important groundwork, studying the legal foundations and highlighting the importance of solicitors and other go-betweens for petitioning in the Dutch Republic.¹⁶

10 Google Scholar provides over 3000 citations for the book.

11 The positive contribution was by Deloria, 'What Is the Middle Ground, Anyway?'. The first criticism came from Heidi Bohaker, who focused on the role of kinship in native American communities that was undervalued in White's analysis: Bohaker, 'Nindoodemag'. The fourth contribution was by Desbarats, 'The Middle Ground'.

12 Rushforth, 'Limits of Alliance', 80.

13 Bowie, 'From Customary to Constitutional Right'; Oddens, 'The Greatest Right of Them All'; Ocko, 'All the Way to Beijing'.

14 Würgler, 'Voices From Among the "Silent Masses"', 12.

15 Oddens, 'The Greatest Right of Them All', 635. In the United States, the Right to Petition famously became the first amendment to its constitution.

16 Fockema Andreae, *De Nederlandse staat onder de Republiek*, 108-109. See also, Roelevink, "'t Welck doende etcetera'", 160.

Nevertheless, by the 1990s Henk van Nierop rightfully noted that research on petitions – especially for the sixteenth and seventeenth century – had not progressed much.¹⁷ In the last twenty years, much of the scholarship on petitions in the early modern Low Countries – mirroring a similar trend in the UK and building on cases from Germany, Switzerland, and Italy – has demonstrated the importance of petitions for local governments, and has studied how petitions facilitated institutional access for lower social classes.¹⁸ With the exception of publications on the last two decades of the eighteenth century, however, petitions have been largely overlooked in an imperial or colonial context – in the Americas as much as in Asia.¹⁹

Studying these overlooked colonial petitions offers three main insights. Firstly, it helps to expand the understudied theme of on-the-spot negotiation in the Dutch experience of empire. Daniels and Kennedy's *Negotiated Empires*, for instance, has only one contribution on the Dutch compared to fourteen on the English, French, and Iberians.²⁰ Moreover, the petition and response system offered (both literally and figuratively) space for on-the-spot negotiation that is inherently seeking mediation, but that at the same time offered an (implicit) threat of force and violence.²¹ As such, studying petitions not only calls into question the presumed uniformity of Europeans in the middle ground, but also brings in the often-overlooked archive of petitions. Thirdly, the study of petitions in the colonial space makes a necessary contribution to the existing Atlantic historiography that highlights the multi-ethnic, cross-cultural, and inter-imperial reality behind the national imperial façades. Colonial petitions bring to light the multiplicity of actors in the colonial decision-making process.

This article has four sections. The first provides the organisational foundation of the Dutch Atlantic and background of the colonies. The second section demonstrates that petitions were an effective medium for influencing colonial decision-making, based on a petition by non-Dutch inhabitants of the colony. The third section focuses on the issue of authority within the colony and how this was negotiated within the colonial space through petitioning. In the fourth and final section, I explore rules and regulations, and examine how petitioners contributed to the creation and structuring of the ordinances that shaped their lives.

First, however, it is paramount to reflect on the source material. The only available colonial petitions are those that made it to the minutes of the colonial councils, which means that there is an inherent bias in the source material. It is impossible to assess which petitions never made it to the minutes: we do not know what we do not know. The minutes of New Netherland sometimes refer to a Book of Petitions in which petitions were either

17 Van Nierop, 'Popular Participation', 280-288.

18 Prak, 'The People in Politics'; Vermeesch, 'Professional Lobbying'; Vermeesch, 'Miserabele personen'; Nubola and Würzler, *Bittschriften Und Gravamina*; Kümin and Würzler, 'Petitions, Gravamina and the Early Modern State'.

19 Roitman and Jordaán, 'Fighting a Foregone Conclusion'; Den Heijer, 'A Public and Private Interest'; O'Shaugnessy, 'The Formation of a Commercial Lobby'; Gilbert Olson, *Making the Empire Work*; Penson, 'London West India Interest'.

20 Daniels and Kennedy, *Negotiated Empires*.

21 Compare for instance to the importance of climate and reliance on indigenous assistance in coping with climate: Cunigan, *Weathering Extremes*.

saved or copied. However, at least since 1820 this book has been documented as lost – if the book existed at all. Indeed, there is a good indication it never existed as the minutes' references to the specific folio in this Book of Petitions are left blank. It is sometimes mentioned in passing that 'several petitions' on an issue were received, without further elaboration on any of those petitions. This indicates that even more petitions than those preserved in the archives were submitted in this period to the High Councils. At the same time, the fact that there are no written complaints about ignored petitions, and that there are petitions that received a negative response (as we shall see in section four of this article), suggests that those that are available to us provide a good sample. The plurality of archiving mechanisms of petitions in the colonies in North and South America is the first important point in this article, as it underscores that dealing with petitions was an informal responsibility, but not a formal obligation.

Another important issue is the representativeness of non-Dutch petitions for the corpus of all petitions. It is impossible to quantitatively assess or compare petitions from both colonies; record-keeping varied according to time and place. Petitions related to employment are an excellent example. While quite numerous in Brazil, only five (1.8 percent) in New Netherland relate to this topic. Studying non-Dutch petitioners presents an additional problem: not all petitioners necessarily indicated whether they identified as Dutch, English, Portuguese, or Tupi- or Algonquin-speaking. Of the 281 surviving petitions from New Netherland submitted between 1637 and 1656, 100 petitions (35.6 percent) do not indicate the group to which the petitioners belong. A further forty-one (14.6 percent) of the petitions presented in New Netherland had multiple signatures or claimed wider representation (e.g., 'all of us'), without indicating specific names or nations.²² Another nine petitions (3.2 percent) had a mixed composition of petitioners, meaning they signed with their names and that their names could be related to a specific group, or a signature of an individual combined with a collective.

The sources for Dutch Brazil show similar problems with assessing the background of petitioners. Therefore, I have been conservative in assessing the background of petitioners and only included petitions with a (self-)described background. Partially as a result of this, the sample of some groups might appear almost insignificant. However, the value of this article is not in a quantitative overview of the petitions, but to describe and analyse the processes and mechanisms of colonial decision-making that includes and gives voice to a wide variety of petitioners. This demonstrates that the creation, maintenance, and structuring of the Dutch Atlantic (see figs. 1 and 2) was a multi-ethnic, pluri-religious, and cross-cultural affair, and that the different non-Dutch groups discussed in this article had access to a significant forum for on-the-spot negotiation.

The Atlantic and the Dutch

In 1621, the States-General chartered the WIC in order to open an Atlantic front in the war with the Spanish king (the Eighty Years' War). Cutting off the Spanish crown's

22 For the 'all of us' reference, see: *Council Minutes*, VI, 111, Petition of 21 October 1655.



Fig. 1 Northern Atlantic, indicating the colonies of New Netherland (orange) and in the Caribbean (blue), situation before 1667. Jan Luyken, Paskaart van West Indië en de Caribische Zee met het aangrenzende deel van de Atlantische Oceaan, c. 1684-1799, etching, 51,2 x 5,91 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Atlantic riches was to undermine the financial basis for the Spanish war effort in Europe. The activities of the New Netherland Company – a Dutch company chartered in 1614 that monopolized the (primarily fur) trade to Dutch North America – were integrated in the governance structure of the WIC. New Netherland was, however, not managed by the Board of Directors of the Company (*Heeren XIX*), but was controlled directly by the WIC chamber of Amsterdam.²³ Since New Netherland was flanked by New England and

²³ Apart from the chamber of Amsterdam, the WIC had four more chambers: Zeeland, Meuse, Northern Quarter, and Groningen. This was not a unique situation, the settlement in Essequibo resided directly under the chamber of Zeeland.

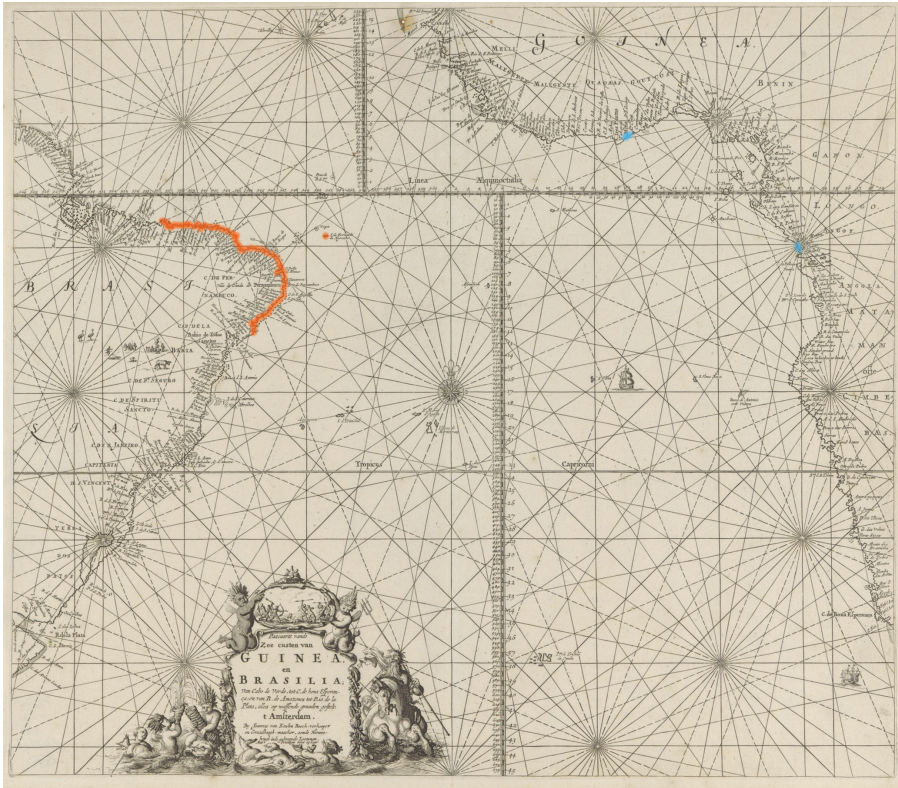


Fig. 2 Southern Atlantic, indicating the colonies in Brazil (orange) and forts on the African Coast (blue), situation before 1667. Jan Luyken, *Paskaart van het zuidelijke deel van de Atlantische Oceaan met de kusten van Afrika en Brazilië*, c. 1683-1799, etching, 51,8 x 59,6 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Virginia – both in English hands – it did not feature prominently in the ‘grand design’ of the Company’s war effort against the Spanish king.²⁴ As the Portuguese and Spanish kingdoms formed a dynastic union (1580-1640), the WIC considered the Portuguese colony in Brazil central to their plans to break the Habsburg Crown economically. In 1624, the Company’s attempt at conquering the sugar-producing colony resulted in a nine-month occupation of the city of Salvador in the Bay of All Saints. After Portuguese forces recaptured the city, the Company attacked the Captaincy of Pernambuco and established a Dutch colony in the northeast of Brazil that lasted from 1630 until 1654.²⁵

Just like the Dutch had frequented many other empires in the Atlantic before the founding of their chartered companies, the ‘Dutchness’ of the WIC colonies was primarily an

²⁴ Den Heijer, *Geschiedenis van de WIC*; Klooster, ‘The West India Company’s Grand Scheme’, 59-64; Jacobs, *New Netherland*, 7-44.

²⁵ Boxer, *Dutch in Brazil*; Van Groesen, ‘Lessons Learned’.

imperial façade obscuring a hotchpotch of different groups inside the colony.²⁶ Apart from the Dutch colonisers there were large numbers of other Europeans. In Brazil these were principally the Portuguese; in North America, they identified as English. Moreover, a minority in both colonies were of Dutch origin, with large groups originating in the German lands, the Southern Netherlands, the British Isles, and Scandinavia, as well as from other areas of Europe.²⁷ An important difference between the populations of New Netherland and Brazil was the presence of Jews. While Recife had a sizeable Jewish population and the first synagogue in the Americas, the twenty-three Sephardim fleeing Brazil in 1654 and arriving in New Amsterdam were asked ‘in a friendly way to depart’ by the colonial leadership, as they were ‘not allowed further to infect and trouble this new colony’.²⁸ It was only after Jewish Amsterdam merchants petitioned on the refugees’ behalf to the WIC Board of Directors in Amsterdam in 1655 that they were allowed to stay.²⁹ Yet Jews never made up more than a tiny percentage of New Netherland’s population. Apart from Europeans, there were also both enslaved and free Africans and indigenous Americans. In Brazil, the Dutch took over more than 40,000 enslaved people who had lived in Portuguese Brazil prior to the Dutch invasion, while under WIC rule at least 23,000 more were imported, primarily from the West African and Southwest African coasts.³⁰ The enslaved population in New Netherland was relatively small, largely because the colony did not have a plantation economy; by 1664 they totalled approximately five hundred.³¹ New Netherland was the more diverse of the colonies in terms of indigenous population, including the Iroquois Five Nations, the Algonquin-speaking Munsee and Lenapes, and the Iroquoian-speaking Susquehannocks.³² Despite the larger geographical scope of the conquests in Brazil, Dutch sources make a distinction between only three Amerindian groups: the Tupi, the Tapuya, and the Tupi-speaking Potiguar (see also fig. 3).³³ In sum, in both colonies the WIC led a dominant group of English or Portuguese ‘co-colonisers’, a large indigenous population with which the company traded, fought, and forged military alliances, and, particularly in Brazil, a large number of enslaved Africans.³⁴

In the minds of the directors and many others in the Dutch Republic, Brazil took primacy over New Netherland. The files of the States-General dealing with the West Indian Affairs, for instance, are filled with material related to Brazil, while dealing with New Netherland only sporadically. The primacy of Brazil was further expressed in the form of address of Company functionaries: Johan Maurits was the Governor-General of Brazil (1637-1644), whereas Peter Stuyvesant in New Netherland was ‘merely’ termed

26 Ebert, *Between Empires*.

27 Jacobs, *New Netherland*, 54; Miranda, *Gente de Guerra*.

28 Cited in Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 171.

29 Emmanuel, ‘Early American Jewry’, 15-16.

30 Parker Brien, *Visions of Savage Paradise*, 135; Wätjen, *Das Höllandische Kolonialreich*, 311; Van Welie, ‘Slave Trading and Slavery’, 60.

31 Jacobs, *New Netherland*, 312-313.

32 Meuwese, *Brothers in Arms*, 228-229.

33 Meuwese, *Brothers in Arms*, 125-132.

34 I have borrowed the term ‘co-coloniser’ from Tonio Andrade, who used it to describe the Chinese colonists on Taiwan under VOC rule: Andrade, *How Taiwan Became Chinese*, chapter 6.

Director-General (1647-1664). Both men, however, presided over a council that formed the highest authority in the colony (for simplicity they will both be henceforth referred to as 'High Councils'). Lower legal jurisdiction in both colonies was in the hands of a council of a *schout* and multiple *schepenen*, the former acting as prosecutor, and the latter as a body of judges. In Brazil, this council was still named a *câmara*, in the Portuguese fashion, but unlike in Portuguese times the *câmara* now combined its municipal administrative function with a judicial role.³⁵ Typically, but not always, the *schout* would be Dutch, while the *schepenen* could more often be Portuguese or English. While these lower courts in both colonies had juridical duties, the *câmara* also had municipal administrative responsibilities. In practice this meant that the *câmara* would receive political petitions, while the lower councils in New Netherland did not. The only exception was the council of *burgermeesters* and *schepenen* in the city of New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island that was allocated administrative tasks.³⁶ It should be noted, however, that in both colonies these local councils also functioned as a way of communicating concerns to the respective High Councils. As the highest authority, the High Council was the primary recipient of petitions concerning affairs in the colony and the only colonial governing body of the WIC of which petitions have survived.³⁷

The Power of Petitions

Petitions in the colony were not exclusive to colonisers originating in the Dutch Republic. A well-known example of enslaved Africans petitioning in New Netherland occurred in 1644, when a group of eleven jointly – and successfully – requested manumission.³⁸ However, this was the only petition expressly submitted by enslaved or formerly-enslaved people. The enslaved population does not feature prominently in petitions in New Netherland; the only other occasion was a petition by Edmund Scarborough, who requested permission to sail 'with some purchased Negroes' to Virginia.³⁹ In the history of Dutch Brazil, only five petitions were submitted by enslaved people, a small number compared to the large enslaved population.⁴⁰ Three of the five were submitted in 1635, when enslaved Africans serving in the army – Manuel Ferdinandus, Manuel de Barres, and Casper Rodrigues – petitioned for manumission and continuation of their military service as free men.⁴¹ In Brazil, there is one example of a slave not active in the army who petitioned for manumission: Simão Gonçalves in February 1654, who had served 'in loyal service' on the shipyard for eighteen years. He noted that a long time ago he had already

35 Van den Tol, *Lobbying in Company*, 46-90; Stoeterau Navarro, 'Law and Institutions of Dutch Brazil', 12; Luciani, *Municípios e Escabinos*, 121-161.

36 Jacobs, *New Netherland*, 95-170.

37 To keep matters more comprehensible, I have chosen to ignore petitions from the patroonships (proprietary colonies) in this article.

38 *Council Minutes*, IV, 212-213, Decree of 25 February 1644. See also Wagman, 'Corporate Slavery', 38-39.

39 *Council Minutes*, VI, 77, Order of 29 August 1655.

40 I am indebted to Dr. Lucia Xavier, who knows the *Dagelijkse Notulen* better than anyone, and who shared these petitions with me.

41 The Hague, Nationaal Archief (hereafter NA), Archief Oude WIC (hereafter OWIC), 68, 1 May 1635 (Manuel Ferdinandus) and 5 September 1635 (Manuel de Barres and Casper Rodrigues).

been promised his freedom.⁴² The final example of a petition by Africans occurred on 29 August 1645. That day ‘a few free negroes and others’ entered the meeting of the High Council in Recife and jointly petitioned for the establishment of a permanent army company ‘under their own captains and officers’.⁴³ The High Government resolved to appoint two people to create a list of ‘people as well as slaves’ that wished to enlist in this army division.⁴⁴ An explanation for the relatively low number of petitions by enslaved Africans serving in the army might be that they were organised in brotherhoods and could make requests from the High Council through their captain.⁴⁵

It was not just Africans who were enslaved in the colonies. The indigenous population was also enslaved, and on occasion men from the Barbary states whose ships had been seized were brought as slaves to Brazil.⁴⁶ There are seemingly no petitions of enslaved people other than those by Africans. The free indigenous population did petition on their own behalf in Brazil, but in New Netherland Indians only feature as the topic of petitions, such as in the request signed by Oloff Stevenson and Allert Anthony in March 1656.⁴⁷ This petition moved to restrict the freedom of movement of Indians within the city of New Amsterdam on account of their becoming a nuisance after ‘drinking themselves drunk’.⁴⁸ Petitions by the indigenous population in Brazil, however, were quite numerous – possibly because Europeans had been present in the country for longer. For instance, on 28 August 1642 Johannes Listrij, ‘the *commandeur* of Brasilians’, entered the meeting with several petitions intending to limit abuses in native villages (*aldeias*).⁴⁹ While these requests appear to be largely supportive of the Company’s plans for governance, other petitions are more closely tied to the interests of the Tapuya (fig. 3). These include petitions for payments of arrears or other type of requests intended to enforce earlier promises. The Tapuya, furthermore, succeeded in influencing regulations such as defining and limiting the use of meadows by cattle of private persons as well as the Company. Although the Tapuya made use of a European go-between to facilitate contact with the Company in this instance, this changed after 1645 when the High Council confirmed one Potigar and two Tapuya *regedores*, or civic magistrates, proposed by the indigenous groups themselves.⁵⁰ These *regedores* took over the responsibility of facilitating exchanges between the Company and the indigenous Brazilians that had previously fallen to *commandeurs* like Johannes Listrij.⁵¹

42 NA, OWIC, 75, 9 February 1654.

43 NA, OWIC, 70, 29 August 1645: ‘Alsoo eenige vrije negros en andere haer presenteren om tsamen een comp op te rechten onder haer eijgen capiteijn ende officieren.’

44 NA, OWIC, 70, 29 August 1645: ‘de personen nevens slaeven’.

45 Dewulf, ‘Emulating a Portuguese Model’, 9–12.

46 For enslavement of Indians, see: Van den Tol, ‘De Portugese Slavenlobby’. For enslaved Turks, see: NA, OWIC, 68, 2 November 1640.

47 In the English Massachusetts Bay Colony, there were instances of native petitions. See for instance Harvard’s Native American Dataverse, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/nativeamericanpetitions> (Accessed on 2 October 2019).

48 *Council Minutes*, vi, 256–257, Petition of 3 March 1656.

49 NA, OWIC, 69, 28 August 1642.

50 For go-betweens in the context of Brazil specifically, see Metcalf, *Go-Betweens*.

51 Meuwese, *Brothers in Arms*, 170–171. See also NA, OWIC, 70, 11 April 1645, and NA, Archief Staten-Generaal, 5757, Liassen Westindische Compagnie, 24 November 1644 (marked N.3. in top left corner).



Fig. 3 A Tapuya man (left) and a Tupi woman with child (right). Left: Albert Eckhout, Portrait of a Tapuya male with hunting gear, 1641, canvas, 273 x 167 cm, Denmark, National Museum. Right: Albert Eckhout, Portrait of a Tupi woman with her child with a basket on her head, 1641, canvas, 274 x 163 cm, Denmark, National Museum.

The petitions of the enslaved and free non-European people demonstrate that they had the ability to influence the decision-making processes of the High Council, and that they had some autonomy with regard to how they structured their own lives – petitions were powerful. The ability of the indigenous population in Dutch Brazil to shape their governance structure is proof of the power of their petitions to influence the political decision-making process. Moreover, after the colony was lost in the 1650s, one of the Tapuya who was elected *regedor* in 1645, Antonio Paraupaba, even crossed the Atlantic and submitted petitions to the States-General in the Dutch Republic.⁵² This demonstrates the faith he and other Tapuya had in the power of petitions, based on their experience in the Brazilian colony. This faith was, surely in part, a result of their experience in addressing authority in the colony. Free Africans, likewise, had a successful experience in petitioning for the creation of a new army company. This is a rare instance of an African petition that extended beyond the personal relation of the petitioner with the addressee. This is best

⁵² Hulsman, 'Brazilian Indians', 51-78.

illustrated through an example from New Netherland, where even when the High Council granted eleven petitioners and their spouses their freedom, it simultaneously stipulated that their (future) children would still be born in slavery.⁵³

Addressing Authority

On 11 April 1645, 'a large number of [indigenous] Brazilians' appeared in the meeting of the High Council and 'delivered a written petition'.⁵⁴ Their petition included many topics, including the supply of the necessary teachers and ministers and permission to administratively merge two *aldeias*. Of particular interest is their request to erect their own *câmara* 'for the convenience of our nation and community'.⁵⁵ The High Council granted this request, and selected members from a list proposed by the Tapuya and Potigar to form a total of three *câmaras*. This effectively meant that the Tapuya and Potigar of Dutch Brazil henceforth had the authority and jurisdiction to try smaller offences within their own community without interference by the Company. At the same time, through this petition, the Tapuya and Potigar accepted the WIC as both overlord and as possessing the legitimate power to authorise their formation of this *câmara*. The petition re-affirmed the legitimacy of the WIC rule.

The Indians were by no means the only group that addressed issues of authority in petitions. A striking example from New Netherland is a petition from December 1653, jointly drafted by nineteen English representatives from several villages on Long Island. The petitioners claimed to be 'under our sovereigns, the high and mighty, lords States-General, whom we acknowledge as our rulers', as well as under the directors of the West India Company, 'whom we acknowledge as lords-superiors of this place, with you as their representatives'.⁵⁶ The petitioners requested six things, amongst which were checks and balances for the colonial administration before 'disposing of life and goods of any individual'; influence in the election procedure of officers and magistrates; clear orders and proclamations as the petitioners often found themselves ignorant of them; and a general deed of freedoms and privileges.⁵⁷ In other words, even though the petitioners acknowledged the 'paternal government' of the WIC in the colony, they demanded more influence on important affairs and freedom to make decisions on their own. The Council was baffled by this request and exhibited its arrogance by responding that the petition was either poorly translated (into Dutch) or just unclearly phrased; they would need a better petition in order to be able to discuss it.⁵⁸

Given the limited number of individuals with legal training in the colony, it is not surprising that the villages turned to the city council of New Amsterdam on Manhattan to

53 Wagman, 'Corporate Slavery', 38-39.

54 NA, OWIC, 70, 11 April 1645: 'Sijn ter vergadering verschenen een groot getal Brasilianen van alle de aldeas uijt deser gantse conqueste, ende hebben overgegeven dese schriftelijke remonstrantie.'

55 NA, OWIC, 70, 11 April 1645: 'Tot beter commodijt van onse natie ende gemeente versoecken wij op t ootmoedigste dat bij uwe Ed: drie cameras werden opgericht.'

56 *Council Minutes*, v, 91-92, Petition of 11 December 1653.

57 *Council Minutes*, v, 92-93, Petition of 11 December 1653.

58 *Council Minutes*, v, 93-94, Minutes of 12 December 1653.

request its assistance as a political broker. The next day, 12 December, seventeen of the original nineteen signatories got together again.⁵⁹ This time the petitioners presented themselves as ‘we, the *burgemeesters en schepenen* of this City of New Amsterdam with the respective commissioners of the village of Gravesend, Flushing, Middelburgh, Heemsteede, Amersfoort, Breuckelen, and Midwout’.⁶⁰ They submitted individual copies of the more clearly written petition (dealing with the same points as the previous one) to each council member, adding that they would prefer a timely resolution as ‘the commissioners are here at great expense’ – an argument also put forward in many petitions in the Dutch Republic.

Before responding to the petition’s content, the High Council focused on its form and procedure, saying that ‘the Director-General and Council are ignorant of any commissioners from the respective villages’, and asserted that ‘Midwout, Amersfoort, and Breuckelen have neither court nor jurisdiction’ and ‘consequently they are unqualified to send commissioners’. In order to protect the rights of the lords and rulers, the Council felt compelled to protest against this present gathering. The Director-General and Council further stated that ‘they do not feel bound to a private and unclear remonstrance by a few unauthorized commissioners’ who were ‘assuming the rights and privileges of the whole’, ordering them not to use this name and title ever again.⁶¹

In their discussion of the petition’s actual content, the High Council continued their criticism, now also addressing the city council of New Amsterdam. The city council should have been more careful than ‘to sign what an Englishman has drafted, as if there was no one of Dutch origin intelligent enough and capable to draft a petition’. It was also unclear to them what ‘a paternal government established by God and nature’ meant exactly, and they deemed it ‘doubtful whether the author [...] understands it himself’.⁶² The response to the six points was negative, as the Council either felt that the English already had privileges that were more advanced than those of the Dutch, or because they outright refused it.

Balancing the careful act of addressing the correct governing body and finding the right tone, the villages from Long Island tried again the following day. This time, the collective supplied a new petition, now introducing themselves as ‘representatives from the respective villages’ rather than commissioners, and denying the allegations of ‘an unlawful usurpation of authority’. They argued that, on the contrary, ‘the laws of nature give all men the right to assemble for the welfare and protection of their freedom’.⁶³ In this third remonstrance, the petitioners were assisted by Dirk van Schelluyne, probably the only public notary in New Netherland at the time.⁶⁴ The lawyer also made sure that the petition included the threat that in the event of a refusal, the petitioners felt compelled to address themselves to the States-General as well as their *patroons*, the directors of the wic.

⁵⁹ Two names were dropped from the initial list of signatures: John Seaman and William Wasborn.

⁶⁰ *Council Minutes*, v, 94, Petition of 12 December 1653.

⁶¹ *Council Minutes*, v, 94-95, Minutes of 12 December 1653.

⁶² *Council Minutes*, v, 95-96, Response of the Director-General and the High Council, 13 December 1653.

⁶³ *Council Minutes*, v, 100-101, Petition of 13 December 1653.

⁶⁴ I have found only two other petitions of individuals who wanted to start their practice as notary: Joan de Decker in April 1655 and Mattheus de Vos in March 1656. Adriaan van der Donck was another notable legal expert in the colony who assisted in drafting petitions occasionally, but he was still in the Dutch Republic in the winter of 1653.

Neither Schelluyne's legal assistance nor the threat had any immediate effect, as the Council remained of the same opinion and denied all requests by what they named 'the so-called delegates'.⁶⁵ With regard to the threat made by petitioners, the Council responded that it wished to prevent no-one from writing to high authorities as long as they maintained respect and truth. However, they added, 'the remonstrants have no authority to write as representatives of this province'.⁶⁶

The threat to approach the States-General was by no means idle. Several times individuals had crossed the Atlantic to petition the States-General or other political bodies in the Dutch Republic.⁶⁷ It was still fresh in the memory of the Council that a few years earlier, in the fall of 1649, another individual by the name of Adriaan van der Donck had acted on this threat and departed on a ship for the Republic. However, unlike Van der Donck and others, the villagers of Long Island did not in fact send a delegation to the Republic. Considering that a majority of them were of English origin, it might have been difficult for them to arrange a meeting with the States-General. On the other hand, as mentioned before, Brazilian Indians did succeed in 1654 and 1656 in meeting the States-General, so their threat might not have been that far-fetched.⁶⁸ For the Long Island villagers, crossing the Atlantic was unnecessary, as the mere threat of doing so proved sufficient. During 1655-1656, they would slowly request more authority and privileges and then consequently received a positive apostille.⁶⁹

In March 1656, Thomas Wheeler and fifteen English companions requested to 'submit' themselves 'unto the government of the said Netherlands' and its jurisdiction, provided that they could continue to enjoy their own liberties in choosing their officers for the administration. In their response, the Council allocated a place called Vreedlant to them and granted them the same 'conditions and [patents] as other free people in the villages of Middleburgh, [Breuckelen], Midwout, and Amersfoort'.⁷⁰ This included the privilege of nominating a 'double number' for the local administration from which the High Council would select administrators, further indicating that the other villages on Long Island now enjoyed more authority than they had previously. In May 1658, the recently conquered Swedish inhabitants of Tinnicum in New Sweden also petitioned for, and received, certain privileges and regional authority while being incorporated in New Netherland.⁷¹

In comparison to the English in New Netherland, the Portuguese co-colonisers had a different starting point, since much of the governmental structure had already been in place when the colony was under Portuguese rule. Like the people in the villages of Midwout or Breuckelen, the members of the Portuguese *câmaras* were selected by

65 *Council Minutes*, v, 101-102, Deliberation of 13 December 1653.

66 *Council Minutes*, v, 103, Deliberation of 13 December 1653.

67 These included Hendrick Haecxs from Brazil in 1647-1648, Cornelis Melyn and Abraham Kuyter from New Netherland in 1648, and Abraham de Azevedo, Jacob Hamel, and Jasper van Heusen from Brazil in 1652-1653.

68 Hulsman, 'Brazilian Indians', 51-78.

69 To use Midwout as an example: *Council Minutes*, vi, 56, Petition of 15 June 1655; *Council Minutes*, vi, 101, Order of 16 October 1655; *Council Minutes*, vi, 271-272, Petition of 15 March 1656.

70 *Council Minutes*, vi, 275, Order of 15 March 1656.

71 *Council Minutes*, viii, 469-470, Petition of 8 May 1658. In 1655, Stuyvesant benefited from Sweden's involvement in the Second Northern War (1655-1660) and conquered New Sweden along the lower reaches of the Delaware River.

the High Council from a double number. The *câmara* of Olinda had petitioned for a specific time for the High Council to receive requests concerning 'Portuguese affairs': every Tuesday and Friday morning between eight and twelve o'clock.⁷² This was, of course, a less viable option for the municipalities that were further away from Recife. Therefore, in 1640, the high Council organised a 'Portuguese Meeting', inviting delegates of the six different jurisdictions in Dutch Brazil: Mauritsstad, Paraíba, Itamaracá, Iguaraçu, Porto Calvo, and Serinhaem. Each jurisdiction sent representatives of its respective *câmara* and representatives of one or more commonalities (*gemeente*). Mauritsstad, for example, sent three *schepenen* from the *câmara* and representatives from the commonalities of Várzea, Cabo, Pojuca, St. Lourens, Moribeeque, St. Amaro, Paratibe, and Jaquaribe. In total no fewer than fifty-five representatives from all over the colony were in attendance.

The jurisdictions of Iguaraçu and Mauritsstad petitioned for a matter that sheds light on the issue of authority.⁷³ Both requested that they be permitted to appoint a solicitor in their *câmara* to increase accessibility for inhabitants of the colony. Appointing a solicitor could streamline the process and make sure that all petitions were adequately addressed and formulated. Receiving petitions, and especially having the ability to respond to them, would acknowledge the (increased) authority of these two jurisdictions. In fact, the proposal was such a change to the structure of the colony that the High Council was unable to grant it. Nevertheless, they showed their support by not refusing it outright, instead forwarding the request to the Board of Directors in the Dutch Republic. The Directors henceforth granted the request.⁷⁴

Claiming authority was one thing, addressing it another. Although a petition could lead to the granting of lower-level authority, it was not wise to 'usurp authority,' since that would inevitably prejudice one's cause. Requesting authority from the High Council reinforced and reconfirmed the legitimacy of the address; the act of requesting something acknowledges that it is within the Council's powers to grant. Furthermore, it is clear that authority was not just delegated from the metropole to the colony, but also from the High Council to the lower councils. This decentralisation of authority was not limited to European co-colonisers, as it was through a petition that the indigenous population gained the ability to select their own councils within the Company's colonial framework.

The Rules of Petitioning

Petitions were not only about authority, but also about the rules and regulations governing all of the colonists' lives. Petitions submitted for rules and regulations even included requests for rules and regulations to be attached to the practice of petitioning. Following a petition by the Portuguese co-colonisers in Brazil, the High Council regulated that a decision on a 'large petition' would cost eighteen *stuivers* and a 'normal' or 'small' petition twelve *stuivers*. What constituted large or small was not specified. Presenting the petition

⁷² NA, OWIC, 69, 5 May 1637.

⁷³ NA, OWIC, 68, 1 September 1640.

⁷⁴ NA, OWIC, 9, 18 April 1642.

would cost another twelve *stuivers*. The revenue would benefit the *câmara*. The fee structure for solicitors was also regulated: they could ask one guilder for presenting a petition and an additional guilder for listening to the response.⁷⁵ In New Netherland, the High Council seemingly did not act in response to a petition when it decided to formalise the payments for the secretary of the courts of Brooklyn, Flatlands, and Flatbush in 1655. From then on, drafting a petition ranged between sixteen and twenty-five *stuivers* depending on the size and function of the petition. Recommendation of a petition at the court would cost an additional twelve *stuivers*.⁷⁶ This made petitioning slightly pricier in North than in South America, but in both cases it remained affordable – a day labourer and his slave made about six guilders a day, a carpenter between four and five guilders. Its affordability contributed to the great influence petitions had for the on-the-spot organization of rules and regulations.

One example of petitioning for rules and regulations from Brazil concerns a petition requesting a prohibition on the overnight storage of sugar in order to increase quality by preventing spoilage that could result from morning dew. Although the effect on the sugar would not be noticeable in Brazil, the added moisture that resulted from overnight storage would be detrimental in competition on the European sugar market. Another example was a request to limit the slaughter of yearlings to make sure the colony would have enough livestock in the future. Both petitions were granted by the High Council, which once again shows the power of petitions in the colony as the co-colonisers succeeded in contributing to the future of the colony and the success of its commodities. Perhaps even more consequential was the High Council's agreement to limit what could be sold by creditors during foreclosure.⁷⁷

Another example that demonstrates how a petition could influence regulation can be found in a request from September 1642, when two *schepenen* from Mauritsstad, Halters and Cavalcanti appeared in front of the High Council. On behalf of the other members of their *câmara* they loudly complained about 'the Negroes from Recife and Mauritsstad, who, when collecting grass, water, or firewood in the *varzea* [the rural land around Recife] were cutting the sugarcane in order to consume or sell to others', causing great financial losses for the owners of the sugar cane.⁷⁸ This led to the promulgation of an ordinance five days later. Johan Maurits and the other members of the High Council legitimised their decision by referring to 'the daily complaints presented to them'. From then on, the Council forbade 'the Negroes from Recife and Mauritsstad to collect grass, water, or firewood in the *várzea*', to cut sugarcane there for themselves, or to take it with them.⁷⁹

These examples clearly show how legislation was created through petitions. Not only was the incentive to publish this ordinance provided through the petitions from the *câmara* of Mauritsstad, the ordinance also directly copied the rhetoric and some of the phrasing from

75 NA, OWIC, 68, 2 November 1640.

76 *Council Minutes*, vi, 42, Order of 5 May 1655.

77 NA, OWIC, 68, 1 September 1640.

78 NA, OWIC, 69, 4 September 1642: 'Dat de negros van t Recijff en Mauritsstadt in t halen van gras, water, off branthout doorgaens haer in de rietvelden van de varzea begaven, alwaer sij het riet snijdende om te eeten, en om aen anderen te vercoopen, de labradores groote schade aenbrenge.'

79 NA, OWIC, 69, 11 September 1642: 'Alsoo ons dagelicx klachten te vooren comen, dat de negros van het recijff ende Mauritsstad ende van dese omleggende quartieren int haelen van gras, water, en branthout te lande waerts haer in de rietvelden van de varzea.'

the petition. Another potential solution to the problem of the enslaved Africans going into the *várzea* to feed themselves with sugarcane was also suggested in the petition, namely to hand out *farinha* (manioc flour) to them. This solution was suggested in the petition, too, but discarded by the supplicants because it would increase the price of this staple good too much. The High Council thus also followed the rationale of the petition in the drafting of its ordinance.

In New Netherland, petitions were also used to shape and structure the rules and regulations of the colony. Unlike Brazil, the colony did not grow sugar, but it did plant tobacco. As a result of one petition, the High Council decided that ‘the inspectors must examine it [tobacco], and mark the barrels in order to maintain its reputation’.⁸⁰ As in Brazil, the population petitioned for rules and regulations that would protect the quality of their products and safeguard the competitiveness of their goods on the global market. At other times, this type of quality assurance of goods was more locally oriented, such as the petition of Pieter le Febre which succeeded in effecting a prohibition on competing brewers, merchants, grocers, or distillers serving customers wine or beer ‘by the small measure’. The High Council granted the petitioner the exclusive right to sell spirits for ‘reasonable and tolerable’ prices.⁸¹ Similarly, the bakers of Beverwijk petitioned for a regulation that prohibited the sale of bread by others, particularly the Indians.⁸² These examples clearly demonstrate how petitions could contribute to a form of regulatory capture.⁸³

What perhaps shows the potential of petitions even more clearly is a case from November 1653, when ‘some of the most prominent citizens and inhabitants’ of the city of New Amsterdam came together to draft a petition.⁸⁴ The issue at hand was the maintenance of public works in the city. The city council had asked its inhabitants to furnish the money required to pay for public works, but had found that the required sum was not readily available. As a solution, the city council proposed to collect the excises on beer and wine by the city treasury rather than the Company and use the revenue to pay for public works. The High Council agreed with the proposed solution.⁸⁵

Despite these examples, petitioners were not always successful. When a number of Dutch and English merchants petitioned together a few years later to abolish the excises on the export of wines, beers, and spirits, they received *nihil* on their request, presumably because the excise had already been farmed out – and those excises included the export duties.⁸⁶ A Portuguese petition proposed that contracts signed in the period under Spanish rule (from 1580 until the invasion of the WIC) should be considered under the Spanish law instead of

80 *Council Minutes*, vi, 54, Order of 4 June 1655.

81 *Council Minutes*, v, 79, Ordinance of 24 November 1653.

82 *Council Minutes*, viii, 144, Petition of 10 October 1656.

83 Regulatory capture is a situation where special interests from an industry dominate or persuade a regulatory body to benefit the industry instead of the public interests. For example, the regulation that only optometrists can sell contact lenses in the US creating a profitable market for optometrists with high prices for consumers, while in the Netherlands contact lenses can be sold online or at supermarkets leading to lower prices for consumers. In this example, the optometrists in the US have captured the market through regulations. See also the defining work of Stigler, ‘The Theory of Economic Regulation’.

84 *Council Minutes*, v, 80-81, Petition of 11 November 1653.

85 *Council Minutes*, v, 81, Decision of 25 November 1653.

86 *Council Minutes*, viii, 15-16, Decision of 7 June 1656.

Roman-Dutch law of 1580 – a proposal which would have far-reaching consequences. The High Government responded that it was not their decision to make and forwarded the petition to the Board of Directors in the Dutch Republic.⁸⁷ The Directors ultimately either denied the petition or never responded to it, and consequently the request was never granted.

These were not the only examples of petitions that received a negative response. One petition presented by the Jewish population of New Netherland, for example, was denied ‘for important reasons’.⁸⁸ Yet the Jews did not only receive negative responses. The same three petitioners – Abraham de Lucena, Salvador de Andrada, and Jacob Cohen – were allowed to establish a Jewish burial ground on the land belonging to the Company.⁸⁹ When Salvador de Andrada petitioned on behalf of the Jewish population to the High Council because the city of New Amsterdam had denied their petition for citizenship in 1657, the High Council sided with the petitioners and ordered the city government to grant citizenship to the Jews.⁹⁰ Another well-known petition tied to religious issues in New Netherland that received a negative response was the so-called ‘Flushing Remonstrance’ in which about thirty residents of Vlissingen (Flushing) on Long Island requested an exemption from the ban on Quaker worship.⁹¹ What made the petition of these thirty English co-colonisers particularly interesting is that they themselves were not Quakers, and thus petitioned for the rules and regulations that primarily affected the lives of others.

Conclusion

Studying petitions in the WIC colonies in Brazil and New Netherland demonstrates the centrality of petitions for the creation, shaping, and maintenance of the colonial organisations in the seventeenth century. The daily reality of empire was not one of lofty ideals or zealous Dutch regents; it was a petition-and-response system. These petitions ranged from the mundane requests for a higher wage to requests for the establishment of decentralised authority, from requests for rules to safeguard the global competitiveness of colonial commodities to requests for religious tolerance. If the English and Portuguese were the co-colonisers of the empire, the petitioners were its co-creators.

For something so central to colonial administration it is striking that the record-keeping of petitions was not uniform. In the early years, the High Council in New Netherland regularly copied the petitions directly. Later they started referring to their Book of Petitions and noted their apostille in their minutes. As mentioned earlier, it is unclear whether this Book of Petitions ever existed at all, since it has not survived and when the minutes refer

⁸⁷ NA, OWIC, 68, 1 September 1640.

⁸⁸ *Council Minutes*, VI, 150, Undated decision [1655].

⁸⁹ *Council Minutes*, VI, 68, Undated decision [1655].

⁹⁰ *Council Minutes*, VIII, 277-278, Undated decision [1657]. The decision to grant citizenship was the result of a petition to the High Council: *Council Minutes*, VIII, 218-219, Petition of 22 January 1657. For more information on citizenship in New Amsterdam, see Maika, ‘Securing the Burgher Right in New Amsterdam’.

⁹¹ *Council Minutes*, VIII, 330-333, Petition of 27 December 1657. See also Haefeli, *Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty*, 169-185.

to it, the specific folio has been left blank. Compared with those of New Netherland, the copied petitions in Brazil's High Council minutes are few and far between; most information on petitions in this colony can only be derived from the summary of the request and the response. For comparison, the States-General kept a large number of petitions in *liassen* (assorted papers) organised by topic or geographic origin. The VOC (the Dutch East India Company) kept even fewer copies of petitions in their administration, but often mentioned that an issue had 'become apparent'.⁹² The inconsistency in record-keeping of petitions demonstrates the informality of petitioning; petitioning may not have been a right, but responding to them was a responsibility. Petitions were part and parcel of the sphere of on-the-spot negotiation.

This space for on-the-spot colonial negotiation was not limited to subjects of Dutch origin, but was open to virtually all inhabitants of the colony, including enslaved and freed Africans, the indigenous population, a variety of other Europeans, and diverse religious groups. That being said, there is little historical evidence of the enslaved population influencing the lives of anyone other than themselves. The above-mentioned informality of petitioning meant that the colonial administration could deny a request without citing any justification other than 'important reasons' or because there were mistakes in the way an issue was addressed. Nevertheless, the influence of petitions on colonial decision-making was clearly far-reaching. When focusing specifically on non-Dutch petitioners it becomes evident that their petitioning was paramount for the creation, shape, and maintenance of the Dutch Atlantic. Petitioning was not a bilateral 'middle ground' between white colonists and the indigenous other; rather, it provided a space for on-the-spot negotiation that was open to a variety of subjects from different backgrounds. This included other European co-colonisers, but also subjects from the Americas and Africa. In other words, petitioning allowed all colonial inhabitants to contribute to the creation of the Dutch Atlantic.

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⁹² Van den Tol, 'Gambling on Formosa'.

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