

Spring 2019

Vibrations, Memory, and Identity: The embodiment of Tambú and the Afro-Curacaoan Identity in Curacao

Jazondré Kaniela Renee Gibbs
Bard College

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Recommended Citation

Gibbs, Jazondré Kaniela Renee, "Vibrations, Memory, and Identity: The embodiment of Tambú and the Afro-Curacaoan Identity in Curacao" (2019). *Senior Projects Spring 2019*. 194.
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Vibrations, Memory, and Identity:
The embodiment of Tambú and the Afro-Curacaoan identity in Curacao

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

Jazondré Kaniela Renee Gibbs

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2019

Acknowledgments

I would like to start out by saying thank you to my mother for her continuous support throughout this project. Your many reminders for me to “get to it” and stop procrastinating truly helped me to stay grounded. Your daily encouragement is something that I truly treasured. Thank you for always answering my phone calls when I was stressed about this project and life, and for always never steering me wrong. I love you, mom! Everything that I’ve been able to do at Bard has been thanks to the sacrifices that you made for me as a single mother. You worked hard so that I could have the opportunities to do things like this thesis, and I hope I’ve made you proud.

This project would not have been possible without the help of my dear friend Ryanne and her mother Nichette. Nichette: Thank you for opening your home to me and for providing so many connections and opportunities to make my fieldwork a reality. It is undeniable that my project would not have been nearly as informative if it wasn’t for you.

To my senior project advisors, Gregory (Duff) Morton and Diana Brown: Thank you for pushing me and for seeing the end of the tunnel when I couldn’t. By working with the two of you, I have discovered new parts of myself through writing and have built up my confidence in anthropology. Thank you for being tough on me when needed, and for being supportive when needed. You were a great team, and provided me with a wealth of knowledge that helped to guide my project.

To my boyfriend, Armando: Thank you for being my light and heart throughout this process. Whenever I couldn’t focus or wasn’t motivated, you brought me back to reality and pushed me forward. Thank you for always reminding me that I’m amazing and for reminding me

to stay true to myself. I appreciate everything you've done for me – specifically the times you accompanied me to Red Lobster for crab legs when I was stressed.

To my friends: Thank you for encouraging me to work, but also encouraging me to play. I have learned from my network of friends that balance is important, and you all have helped me truly see that when I didn't think it was important. Seeing all of you work hard made me want to work harder. Thank you for listening to me think out loud, and for providing synonyms when I needed them. I won't forget the time I've spent with all of you, and I hope for opportunities for us to come back together in the future so we can reminisce about these last four years.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2018, I decided to do the research that has resulted in the culmination of this paper. I selected to go to the country of Curacao so that I would have the opportunity to do research about something I discovered through literature called Tambú. In the end, I found not only the contested history of Tambú but also that of the Afro-Curacaoan identity and therefore the way that Black Curacaoans select to identify themselves. The end result of that research is this multifaceted ethnography that explores the ways that colonial history and influence can facilitate a long-lasting impact of people's perceptions of their own position in the world. For this reason in particular, this thesis specifically focuses on the formation of the Afro-Curacaoan identity in the context of modern Curacao. In this paper, I argue that the tradition of Tambú in Curacao is an important facilitator for Black Curacaoans to be in contact and accepting of their African ancestry.

To prepare for this project, I managed to address as much literature as I could about Curacao or the Black identity in Curacao. While much of the literature about Curacao was in either Dutch or Papiamentu, I did manage to find some notable sources in English. Some literature that I read before my fieldwork included looking at the historical beginnings of Curacao as an island inhabited by an indigenous population and case studies of the power dynamics that were existent after the colonization of Curacao by the Netherlands. I also began by reading sections of a book by Nannette De Jong, who is the only person I have found from my research who has written extensively in English about Tambú in Curacao.

In order to conduct my research, I spent two full weeks in Curacao. I stayed at the house of a local woman named Nichette, which allowed me to escape from the tourist side of Curacao into the everyday lived experience of Curacaoans. Nichette was also incredibly helpful in assisting

me in arranging interviews. Because she has been a resident of the island for her entire life, she either directly knew the people I needed to talk to, or she knew who I needed to find and how to contact them. This was so important because it provided me a “foot in the door”, so to speak. In fact, she explained to me that she was my “garoshi” on the island, which roughly translates to “wheelbarrow”. By being my “garoshi” she meant that she was able to support me and open doors for me. By using her name, I truly believe that I was able to get interviews with people who would not have thought twice about meeting with me.

In Curacao, while I was able to try new foods and see new sights, I was also able to conduct 10 interviews, and I had two specific moments of ‘observations’ which I address in this paper. Almost every interview was audio recorded, and I took notes by hand which were later transferred to a secure typed document. The observations that I specifically note in this paper are a private Tambú dance lesson and a formalized slave rebellion commemoration ceremony that one of my interlocutors organized. In order to conduct my field work, I was mostly able to get around the island by walking. However, I did end up getting a rental car after the first week on the island and once again, Nichette acted as my “garoshi” and managed to get me an incredibly discounted rate for the little car. By walking and driving, I was able to get to all of the interviews or events that were key to being able to develop my ideas and theories. In addition, I was able to ensure that the people I interviewed were able to decide where we met which allowed me to see new places and to even see their houses and meet their families.

This project is structured into three separate chapters, each one focusing on a different aspect of the project. The first chapter is focused upon briefly explaining the colonial history of Curacao along with what Tambú is and where it fits into the colonial narrative. This chapter serves as an opportunity to set the historical context which will be important to keep at the forefront of

the mind of each reader for the remainder of this paper as the historical context is a building block to the modern ideologies.

The second chapter focuses on understanding Tambú through a proposed contextual recognition of the vibrations that are considered to be an inherent part of Tambú. I provide the opportunity to look at the concept of ‘vibrations’ through a new lens that provides a new understanding of the way that diasporic peoples can select to engage with the world. In this chapter, I engage with Donna Haraway’s theory of embodiment along with theories of cultural trauma and memory in order to think critically about lived experiences and the reasons why some experiences may resonate more with others within specific cultural groups; in this context, specifically for those of African descent from the island of Curacao.

And finally, the third chapter addresses the Afro-Curacaoan identity directly and the way that understandings of national identity, ethnicity, and ‘African-ness’ complicate the general idea of what it means to be a Black Curacaoan. In this chapter, I engage with the ways that Dutch ideologies are still important parts of the lives of Curacaoans, and the ways that those ideologies have caused Black Curacaoans to construct their own ideas of identity. In order to successfully analyze these ideas, I have selected to engage with diaspora theory as presented by both Stuart Hall and Paul Christopher Johnson, hybridity theory as presented by Stuart Hall, and dual cultural orientation theory as presented by A.F. Marks.

Chapter One

Memorializing the Past: Curacao's Fight for Freedom

Discovering Curacao

I became interested in the country of Curacao when I was studying abroad in the Netherlands in the Fall of 2017. While abroad, I discovered that one young woman out of my nine housemates was from Curacao. When she began talking about Curacao I remember saying to her, “Oh, you’re from the Dutch Antilles.” She immediately began to vehemently deny that Curacao was the Dutch Antilles, and insisted upon saying that her country was simply known as Curacao. To me, this implied some kind of internal separation that she had between the Netherlands and Curacao that peaked my interest in the island.

This was the beginning of my interest in the country of Curacao, and my comprehension of what it means to be Curacaoan. This same young woman once had a discussion with me about being Black in the Netherlands. I had expressed to her how agitated I was with the constant stares that I would get from the local older White Dutch population. These stares would come when I was in the farmer’s market that took over the main square of the town of Middelburg every Thursday, or when I went to the Albert Heijn grocery store to pick up groceries for our house dinners. When I expressed this to my new friend, she simply said to me, “They just aren’t used to people who look like us. We’re exotic to them.” This sentence led us into an in-depth conversation about what it is like to be Black in Curacao, a country that is full of Black people but is fully indoctrinated with Dutch values and ideologies. She told me that when she is in Curacao, she is seen as White. She had long brown loose curly hair, with small streaks of blonde in it. Her face was rounded, and her light skin a bit darker than the color of caramel. To me, she undeniably looked like a light skinned Black woman – I couldn’t even imagine how others could think she

was white! She explained to me how her lighter Black skin was seen explicitly as a privilege, and she was treated differently than other Black Curacaoans. However, while she is in the Netherlands (due to her Dutch citizenship, which is awarded to each Curacaoan native) she is seen as Black.

This contestation between the multiple identities that someone can be ascribed and even personally select was incredibly interesting to me and led me into this project. Upon further research, I discovered Tambú and its significance to the Afro-Curacaoan identity within academic literature. I was curious about the real-life impacts of Tambú and wanted to understand the significance of both Tambú and these impacts for myself. In addition, I wanted the opportunity to be able to study the incredibly complex idea of identity in terms of both racial identity and identity through ethnicity. When I did my research about Tambú, I found it to be a practice that was strongly resistant. African slaves used Tambú as a cultural tool to persevere through slavery, and current Afro-Curacaoans use it to provide a remembrance of the past in opposition to Dutch oppression. More specifically, the use of Tambú is still consistent today with the use of the past in defying those who wish to stop the practice of Tambú and those who wish to continue the oppression of Black Curacaoans.

While the concept of the Afro-Curacaoan identity did not necessarily come into being through slavery, I believe that it came as an effect of unhappiness with Dutch erasure of the Black body and of Black ancestry. I think that it is beautiful to see an identity come out of hardship rather than disappear from it, and form into something that provides peace. In addition, there is so much value in someone becoming comfortable and confident in their identity which can ease the potential difficulty of trying to align and identify oneself in the context of their environment and the world. For this reason, this chapter evaluates the history behind Curacao, Tambú, and how both exist in the current Curacaoan memory. This is important to think about, as much of the history

behind the Tambú involves retaining the past that Dutch colonizers attempted to erase through the use of music, dance, and ritual. For the purpose of this paper, I define ritual as organized cultural traditions that often have performative qualities.

A Brief History of Curacao

The relationship between the Netherlands and Curacao is one that is long and interconnected. Prior to 2010, Curacao was simply a Dutch territory in the Caribbean. The government of Curacao functioned entirely through Dutch influence, and all of the decisions that were made for Curacao were also made to ensure that the Kingdom of the Netherlands was benefiting. In 2010, Curacao shifted from being a Dutch territory of the Netherlands to become a constituent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands (“Curaçao” 2018). Though now technically its own country, it often appears that Curacao is still expected to mainly function to benefit the Netherlands. In fact, a man I interviewed explained to me that he believed that the Curacaoan Government is corrupt because they all want to “please the white people in Holland.” An example that another woman gave me was how the large Curacaoan flag located in the middle of the city of Otrobanda has a small fence around it that, if you look at it from above, is in the shape of a crown. And what’s more is that this same fence has decorative tops on each metal post that are small crowns. By the time I interviewed her and learned this information, I had passed that same flag many times and had never noticed this. She explained to me how the flag and fence had been erected right before a visit from the queen of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. She said that the fence made her feel like Curacao was saying, “Yes, we’re now independent, but we’ll still do whatever you want us to do in order to please you” which she likened to be similar to a child trying to please their parent.

This shows only some of the long-term effects of the extended and extensive history of colonialism between the two countries. I was able to see these effects on the first Friday of my stay in Curacao, when I made my way to the Parke Lucha pa Libertat from Otrobanda.¹ I walked to the park as the sun set, and took a 15-minute walk along a busy highway which led me to a beach where the shore was so close you could easily drive into the sea. I was invited to the park by a man named Gibi Bacilia with whom I was trying to schedule an interview, with some difficulty. I first called him, after being told by Nichette that it was more appropriate to call someone before you text them – Especially for something like an interview. I will be forever grateful for the guidance of Nichette, who was the mother of the friend I made while studying abroad who advised, housed, and fed me while I did my fieldwork in Curacao. When I called Gibi, he informed me that he was quite busy organizing an important event and that he would give me his availability for an interview when the event was over. When we got off the phone, I messaged him over the cell phone application Whatsapp to ask if it would be alright if I attended whatever event he was planning. He then invited me to a commemoration ceremony, and said that there would be, “a debate and a cultural program with music, dance, poetry, and drama.”

Upon my arrival to the park on Friday evening, I was met with smells of charcoal burning and smoke in the air, with a lovely ocean breeze that lifted the smell around the crowd. You could hear the splash of sea water at the shore and the sound of people and children laughing and speaking – mostly in Papiamentu. “Bon tardi” and “Con ta bon?” could be heard throughout the air as I took a seat in the metal bleachers that had been prepared for the crowd.² I was a bit nervous to be at this event – especially by myself – and I didn’t know what to expect; so, I chose to sit on the right side of the bleachers where there were fewer people. Within 15 minutes of sitting down,

¹ Translated from Papiamentu to “Fight for Freedom Park”

² Bon Tardi translates to “Good afternoon” and Con ta bon translates to “How are you?”

I was surrounded by people climbing into the bleachers. The crowd was mostly full of older Black women and men, and I found myself next to a lovely older Black woman who saw me, reached out her hand to me, and expected me to help her up into the bleachers. I obliged, and she began speaking to me in Papiamentu in a raspy friendly voice.

“I’m so sorry, but I only speak English.”

She looked at me with a surprised face, and then just smiled and nodded her head. I’m sure I looked suspicious with my yellow notebook and my phone out in preparation to record everything that was happening. Throughout the event she continued to look over at me, and when I would catch her eye, she would give me a small smile. Nobody else could likely tell, but I felt incredibly out of place in this space. But it felt like a secret between us that even though I blended in, I wasn’t quite like everyone else.

I want to take this opportunity to recognize that it was definitely a privilege for me to be a Black woman doing this research in Curacao. It’s undeniable that because of the color of my skin, I was able to do much of my research and talk to many of the people who became my points of contact. For many of my key informants, I reminded them of their neighbors, their children, or their sisters, and because of this I was often treated like family or like a close friend. They shared with me the things that were most important to them, and felt comfortable doing so, for which I am so incredibly grateful.

Similar to my being at this commemoration event and blending in, walking along the streets of Curacao was also easy for me, because I was not seen as another tourist off of one of the Carnival or Royal Caribbean Cruise ships that docked in the main port every Monday and Wednesday morning. Many of the tourists that came on these cruise ships were White Americans on a Caribbean vacation, and other people from the cruise ship often stuck out because of their bright

swimsuit cover ups, the way they spoke English loudly inside of the stores at the cruise port, and the expensive souvenirs they bought. It was not until I opened my mouth and began to speak that Curacaoan locals asked questions about who I was and where I came from. For this reason, many people, similarly to the older woman sitting with me in the bleachers, tried to speak to me in either Dutch or Papiamentu. In the context of the commemoration ceremony (and from other conversations about race and ethnicity) I found there to be many similarities and differences between the way I understood the world in the context of being a Black American woman, and how my informants understood the world in the context of being Black Curacaoan people.

I want to add that being an American also played an important role in my conversations. I was advised by an interlocutor to be cautious about speaking Spanish when approaching other women, because they could think I was from the Dominican Republic which could harm my research. Apparently, there is a stereotype in Curacao that Dominican women are ‘homewreckers’ or prostitutes, due to immigration to the island. So, I was advised to always approach people with English first, and then to transition to speaking in Spanish if needed, once I had established that I was American. This is a way that my American identity provided me with privilege for others to feel comfortable with me.

That night, I went to the Parke Lucha pa Libertat to attend a commemoration ceremony dedicated to the Curacaoan slave revolt led by an African slave named Tula. Tula was born to African parents in Europe, and spent his youth travelling alongside his overseer and became an educated sailor and herb doctor (Fatah-Black 2013). The event was being held in the Parke Lucha pa Libertat because the Curacaoan government had placed there a large statue of two slaves chained together, with one slave in the middle holding a hammer as if he intended to break the chains that bound them all together. I later discovered that this statue was supposed to represent

Tula and the two slaves that assisted him in the revolt. This event happens every year on the 17th of August, which was the day that Tula led the slave rebellion in Curacao in 1795 (Kwame Nimako and Glenn Willemsen 2011).

In the 17th century, Curacao was the main center of commerce and trade for the Netherlands, and did not rely on monetary gains from their plantations (Allen 2010b). The Dutch actively participated in the slave trade through the buying and selling of primarily West-African people, as well as Africans from the Congo and Angola areas. Many of the enslaved Africans would find themselves sold away to countries like Brazil (since this was one of the main countries that the Dutch sold to), while others would find themselves in their new forced home of Curacao, where they would work on plantations farming subsistence products or working with small crafts for White Dutch settlers (Allen 2010). I was later told that the story most people know about Tula is that the Dutch slave masters cut up his body and the bodies of his two fellow countrymen. Afterwards, their bodies were said to have been thrown into the ocean, which perhaps explains why the statue is located at the beach.

In the Caribbean, it was not uncommon for slave owners to cut up the bodies of the enslaved people who they felt were not obeying them. This practice became commonly known as the way that “slave masters projected their authority symbolically through spectacular punishments committed upon the bodies of the dead.” (Brown 2003: 24) In other countries of the Caribbean, the slave masters often would cut off body parts of slaves and then mount them up in well-travelled areas as a way “to haunt those places with memories and narratives of crime and punishment” (Brown 2003: 28). I believe that I can make the argument that the site of this statue can be interpreted as both a site of rebellion for the Afro-Curacaoan’s as well as a site of subjection. It can be interpreted as a site of rebellion, because it serves as a constant reminder of what one can

achieve – especially if you have people working with you in the way that Tula had his friends working with him. It can be viewed as a sign of subjection for the Dutch, as it serves as a symbolic reminder of what can be done to you if you attempt to fight against the hegemonic powers that exist which would be the Dutch. Not only will they kill you, but they will kill whoever was associated with you as well. And also, not only did they have the power to kill you, but they had the power to cut up your body – which is not necessarily the easiest thing to accomplish, and then to humiliate you in death.

The statue of the three chained slaves is also symbolic in nature, due to what it represents and where it has been situated by the Curacaoan government. While the statue appears to be in a place that is meant to represent freedom (specifically noted in the name of the park), the fact that the statue shows the slaves still chained together, and not free, is interesting. I believe that this statue symbolizes the way that Afro-Curacaoans are still not free and are symbolically working towards some kind of freedom. While they technically have the same freedoms as everyone else, it is possible that this statue symbolizes the work that is yet to be done, though perhaps in not a visibly obvious way. The work that is yet to be done is represented by the man in the middle of the statue who is holding the hammer to break the chains on the two other statues that are not yet broken. In addition, the name of the park “Fight for Freedom Park” can also be interpreted to allude to the idea that the fight for freedom is not yet complete. This further exemplifies the way that the public memory of the brutal death of Tula still exists in the memory of Curacao and definitely still informs the Afro-Curacaoan mindscape. I want to pointedly note that this is not to victimize Black Curacaoans, but it is instead to think critically about the way that the past directly informs the present and the future in a way that cannot be ignored.

The Ceremony of Memory

There were performances, speeches, and music at the commemoration event, but none were as incredible to watch as the ceremony dedicated to Tula. The ceremony commenced at sunset, when the sky began to look like waves of cotton candy. The band on the front stage began to play, and two men dressed in all white in what would be identified as traditional African style clothing, stood up in the walkway that was surrounded by the sets of metal bleachers. One of the men blew into a cow horn, and the band stopped playing music which allowed silence to fall all around us. The other man had a white headwrap on top of his head and started singing, but I admit that it wasn't entirely clear to me what language he was singing in. It didn't sound like Papiamentu, nor did it sound like Dutch. The two men walked together down the middle walkway quite slowly, while singing and playing in harmony. They walked to the ocean, and the man who was singing bowed and dipped a wooden bowl in the water, stood up tall and raised the bowl of water above his head, and sang louder than ever before. They then turned around from the ocean together, and walked slowly away from the ocean, down the walkway, and towards the statue of Tula. When they arrived at the statue of Tula, the man holding the bowl continued to sing, and then splashed the bowl of water at the base of the statue. The whole time this was happening, there were people following them with large production style video cameras to capture everything as it happened. They then placed multiple bouquets of red roses at the base of the statue, and the crowd erupted in applause.

It was clear that this was something that was meant for consumption. Everyone was watching intently, and we all paid close attention to the steps being taken for this event because it was clear that it was for us. This made me think about the amount of importance being placed on this part of the event that seemed African in nature, or rather, in performance. The use of the cow

horn and the African clothing was selective and was clearly made to be seen by others, specifically through the use of this large commemoration event and then by the use of the cameras following every move of this ritual from the beginning of the event to the end.

Throughout the commemoration event, there were many other smaller performances and debates, but there was one performance that stuck out in particular. A theatre performance took place where the group of actors and actresses lined up in two single file lines with large chains handcuffed around their wrists. They wore all black clothes and sang in Papiamentu loudly and passionately. A man wearing black clothes stood at the base of the Tula statue and sat down on a stool. He began to play the tambú drum³ which is the primary drum used for the Tambú experience. It is not clear to me if they were singing Tambú music (as I assume that singing alongside the Tambú drum does not quite make something “Tambú music”), but the fact that they sang in Papiamentu is not something to be ignored. Papiamentu is an incredibly interesting language, and one that I had never heard of before meeting the young lady who eventually became my friend in the Netherlands.

Papiamentu is a creole blend of languages that came out of colonization and is the official language of Curacao, Bonaire and Aruba (Jacobs 2012). Papiamentu is a blend of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, with some Cape Verde creole influence. The language rose into prominence during the most intense period of slavery trade on the island in the 1800’s (Jacobs 2012). Tambú music is only sung in Papiamentu, despite the many languages that Curacaoans often know how to speak. This further exemplifies the way that Tambú seems to be directed to a specific

³ Throughout this work, when I refer to tambú (lower case ‘t’) I am referring to the actual drum, whereas when I refer to Tambú (upper case ‘T’) I am referring to the actual experience which includes the dance, music, and spiritual alignment.

community, and how there are specific things that are needed in order to truly participate and be integrated with Tambú.

Similar to the clothing that was selected for the men who completed the ritual from the ocean to the statue, it seemed that the tambú was also brought because it appears to be and is generally understood as African, and so therefore it provides a symbol of what they're trying to represent. If they are trying to show that they are proud of their African descent, no matter how far removed they might actually be or feel that they are from it, then they chose to select clothing and an instrument that is well known as "African". I believe that these choices assist in evoking the emotion needed to center oneself in the space, and to reflect on the importance of this ceremony in this location and with this statue. With both, it appears to be a declaration of some sort - that you must be okay with this type of clothing and this type of drum, if you are recognizing that you are of African descent. The clothing and the drum are both items that can provide a direct connection to the homeland or motherland, that their ancestors were once snatched away from so many years ago. This action of taking people away from their homeland is one that is a constant reminder at this ceremony, but specifically through the Black actors who have been chained together, in front of the statue of slaves who are also chained together.

An Introduction to Tambú

The Tambú performance in the commemoration event was notable, because Tambú is a musical and spiritual tradition that persisted in Curacao throughout the period of slavery on the island. Tambú lasted on the island through rebellion and I believe that the spirituality behind the music and its traditions are an attempt to hold on to a disappearing past. Examining the

disappearing past presents the opportunity for Afro-Curacaoans to connect to their African ancestors, who are now seemingly so far removed from their current lives.

Tambú was not only practiced in Curacao, but throughout the Dutch Antilles which previously included Aruba, Bonaire, and Antigua (De Jong 2012). Over time, Tambú also made its way to Cuba, Venezuela, and other Caribbean and Latin American countries. When slavery was still in place in Curacao, Tambú was a musical tradition that was combined with a religion called Montamentu. Montamentu was a religion that was focused on equating African deities with Catholic saints while paying homage to both African and Amerindian ancestral spirits (De Jong 2012). Over time, Montamentu became less prominent due to Dutch pressures and Tambú became the primary fusion of both the musical tradition and the religion.

To this day, Tambú is performed with a singular large drum like the one from the commemoration event, a metal hoe (called a *chapi*), and a singer. In the past, people openly danced and sang songs in order to invoke multiple gods and spirits at once (De Jong 2012). The tambú drum was often personified and was treated as if it were a human being. The drum was known to do human things like eating, drinking, or it would “want blood”. Many Afro-Curacaoans would learn how to make the tambú drum from scratch using goat skins and wood, and would have close relationships with their instruments. This shows the sacred nature of the drum, and the way that it was seen as an important part of the overall Tambú experience.

Tambú grew out of Yoruba musical and religious traditions brought to Curacao, and was molded through the immigration of people from Suriname, China, and India. While it went through many changes and became more diverse from external influence, Tambú continued to be the bridge for Afro-Curacaoan people to connect to their African ancestry. Hundreds of thousands of slaves from all different countries graced the shores of Curacao, and the ones who stayed began to form

their own cultural identity, which eventually became known as the Afro-Curacaoan identity and, I argue, worked hand in hand with Tambú.

During the period of slavery that Curacao endured, Tambú had many uses outside of its spiritual purposes. Tambú could be used for “battles” against other slaves on plantations who wronged a member of another plantation or could be used for a funeral to ensure that the person who passed away would not come back in spiritual form and invoke havoc upon the plantation, in the form of an angry spirit. In addition, Tambú (specifically the Tambú singer) was used as a way to be critical of both people and systems, and as a way to spread gossip (Kwame Nimako and Glenn Willemsen 2011). Interestingly, you typically had to be in the community to be able to understand what was being discussed in the song. The following is an example provided to me by an older man that I interviewed: “If everyone is talking about a young girl that is supposedly pregnant in the community, you might sing a Tambú song talking about that young girl and how she’s not married and no one knows who the father of the child is.” And on the other hand, “If you think that the government is embezzling money, and it’s a rumor, you might get up and sing about that rumor as well.” Anyone can be a Tambú singer, and so the young girl could go up afterwards and sing back to everyone about how she’s not pregnant or about how she is going to get married. Because of these seemingly unusual ways to utilize religion, Tambú was frequently contested by Dutch authorities. The Dutch perceived Tambú as devilish and believed that it was inherently demonic because people were dancing, singing, and invoking spirits – which were all actions associated with witchcraft.

When we look at Tambú today, we see a tradition that has fought to withstand the tests of time. The tradition can now be viewed in two separate ways – from a secular standpoint, or from a sacred standpoint. From a secular standpoint, it has been utilized as an opportunity for people

from the Afro-Curacaoan communities to come together and share news or gossip. This is often seen as a key mechanism of building community within groups, as gossip specifically has proven to show an interconnectedness within one's community (Gluckman 1963). In addition, Tambú has become associated with secular events and holidays, such as the Curacaoan New Year, where it is believed that all the participants can help to erase all of the bad luck that was accumulated over the past year which is also known as to "seka fuku". Though primarily practiced during the Curacaoan New Year, the concept of "seka fuku" is the most common reason for people to listen to Tambú music or to dance Tambú any other time of the year. To "seka fuku" is to let go of all the negative energy that has become attached to you and your spirit through sweating and dancing. A key reason that people dance to Tambú music is so that they can "seka fuku" to have more balance within their energy. Other than for the Curacaoan New Year, the music of Tambú is said to be considered as Christmas music and is only played during the Winter months in which the Curacaoan youth use the music of Tambú as party music (De Jong 2012).

In spite of all the ways that Tambú can be utilized, dancing Tambú is one of the most important parts of the overall Tambú ritual because one is only able to "seka fuku" if they dance. Before I saw it for myself, a few people non-Black Curacaoans that I spoke to were surprised I was doing research on Tambú because they thought it was "a mating dance". In fact, one person even told me that he heard that Tambú came into existence because the Dutch enslavers wanted the slaves to have more children, so they created a mating dance and forced them to do it. While there is no evidence of this as fact, it shows the outside perception of Tambú and the importance of understanding it from within.

To dance Tambú, you must rotate and swivel your hips with your knees bent ever so slightly. In addition, your feet must be flat to the ground and you must lift your feet up and down

from the floor to a few inches from the ground. You do this over and over again to the beat of the music, and you almost immediately begin to sweat. Despite outside perception of Tambú as some sort of mating dance, there's simply nothing sexual about it. You do not have to dance with anyone, in fact it's acceptable for you to dance by yourself. If you want to dance with a partner, you can dance with your brother, sister, mother, or neighbor. There is no rule that men must dance with women, nor is there any implication that by dancing with a partner that you have some kind of interest in that person.

On the other hand, Tambú is continued as an important musical tradition as an opportunity to worship deities and to be in conversation with one's ancestors. Through my research, I found that while Tambú (specifically the usage of the word "Tambú") is still generally accepted, the past of Tambú, Montamentu, is looked down upon and not used by anyone (De Jong 2012). From my research, I believe that this condescending ideology is primarily from the negative associations and connotations that were influenced by Dutch contestation of the religion. The Dutch were known to imprison anyone who was associated with Montamentu and would take legal action if a person had the typical large drum or clothing that was associated with Tambú and Montamentu (De Jong 2012). If anything, this is a primary example of the impact that Dutch colonialism had upon the growth of the Afro-Curacaoan identity, in relation to music and spirituality. It is notable that a word (Montamentu) that was once more closely related to the African ancestry of Afro-Curacaoans is now seen as a low class and dirty word that no one talks about or uses (De Jong 2012).

Because of the widespread Dutch perception about Tambú, there were many changes that had to be made so that the slaves of Curacao would be able to practice Tambú without being punished. An example is how there is only one drum used to play Tambú music. This is different

from other countries such as Cuba or Bonaire who play Tambú music as well, but use multiple drums to do so. The result of using multiple drums for the music is that you are able to have three consistent beats at once. In Curacao, one person is able to create those three beats using only one drum – this is something that is incredibly notable about the Tambú of Curacao and what makes it distinct from the others. The reason that they used one drum in Curacao is because it was easier to hide the drum from the Dutch (Rosalia 2018). If a slave was caught with a drum that was associated with Tambú, they would almost certainly be punished. In order to avoid this, but still play the Tambú music that was important to them, they learned how to play the Tambú rhythm with one person and one drum to navigate the colonial pressures around them.

By practicing Tambú, it is possible for people to select to articulate their identity and their acknowledgement of memory. As a ritual, Tambú acts as a conductor of memory and implores people to pay attention through the way they dance and the sweat that is a byproduct of the experience. Both Tambú and the statues of the slaves produce memory in very different ways, as will be addressed in the following chapter. Either way, Tambú is an important aspect of cultural life for some Afro-Curacaoans which is reflected in both the secular and sacred nature of the way they select to use Tambú. This is further examined in the use of Tambú at the commemoration ceremony, where they performed a seemingly sacred act while filming with large production cameras. Similar to how Tambú originally survived through its adaptation to the world by leaving Montamentu behind, it seems that it continues to be adapted to the world which helps it last through the times. The survival of Tambú speaks to me, and lets me know its importance and how the people who keep it alive do so for a reason, be it through their personal connections to Tambú or through the importance of “seka fuku” in their lives.

Chapter Two

Vibrating Bodies, Vibrating Memories, Vibrating Trauma

Within this chapter, I will discuss the many nuances of Tambú as it is related to the understood concepts centered around the vibrations that are produced for the ritual of Tambú. I argue that these vibrations are an embodied experience, and the experience itself is further amplified through a formed collective memory. In addition, I argue that cultural trauma formed due to the result of the movement of enslaved people from the continent of Africa to Curacao and to other islands of the Dutch Caribbean. I wish to place a significant amount of importance on the way that memory is quite tricky and elusive, yet still often finds a way to manifest as material forms. Specifically, in this case, the material forms manifest as vibrations that are embodied through physical bodily movement. For this reason, I argue that the ritual of Tambú is a commemoration to the past that we must comprehend if we wish to begin to fully grasp the Afro-Curacaoan identity. Within this chapter, I primarily engage with Donna Haraway's "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" and Ron Eyerman's "The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory".

The Ritual of Vibrations

Vibrations are understood to be a conversation between oneself and mother earth, and this communication is only possible because it comes from your own movements. This is the way that I began to comprehend how vibrations were key to Tambú and the way it is understood by Black Curacaoans. Vibrations are used throughout the practice of Tambú and the musical elements of Tambú. There are vibrations from the musical instruments used, the singer, and even vibrations in

the way that people move their bodies. These vibrations are experienced, and are an important part of assisting in the process of “seka fuku”, as you move your body to the music in order to do so. I learned about this first-hand on a breezy Sunday afternoon, at the house of my host Nichette’s sister Gwendelyn (affectionately also called Gweni). Gweni was a middle school teacher, and invited over a past student of hers named Cher to talk to me about Tambú and to show me how to dance as well.

After having a meal of tacos and speaking a bit to the student in order to become comfortable with her, we all went outside. Gweni’s house was on a hill, and you could feel the breeze from the sea as soon as you stepped outside. Cher scrolled on her cell phone for a bit, until she found a song that she thought would be suitable to use to teach me how to dance Tambú. Immediately, you could hear the sound of the chapí being hit over and over again, which served as the beginning of the song. After a few drum beats, Cher caught the rhythm and began to dance. By saying that she “caught the rhythm”, I mean that she found her entrance into the song by essentially feeling that it was the proper time to dance.

She bent her knees ever so slightly, and gyrated her hips in order to move from the left to the right, almost like water. Her arms looked so natural, as she held them up above her waist while she moved her legs to create a natural vibration of her body. In this instance, the natural vibration of her body refers to the reaction of body to her movements, in the way that if you move your leg you might expect it to jiggle. After watching Cher dance for a few moments, she motioned for me to begin to try to do it myself. At first, it did not at all feel natural to me. My legs were bent awkwardly and my hips would not quite sway in the same way that Cher’s did. After a few more tries, and laughing at myself, they all began to encourage me because they said I was doing it! I began to dance Tambú! I span around in circles, shifting my feet slightly to move around the back

garden. I felt my hips move, my heartbeat increasing, and my consistent yet ever so slight flat stomps into the ground. I began to sweat and my thighs began to hurt from the way my legs were bent.

Even though that experience was the first time I felt the vibrations of Tambú, the very first time I actually had those vibrations put into words was with an older man named Richard. I arrived at his home late at night in the city of Willemstad within Curacao. That evening I drove down a long dirt road that was lined with many gated houses and pulled over to the only house at the end of the road with a lone light shining outside of it. Unsure if this was the house at which I was meant to arrive, I called the phone number that Richard previously gave to me via email. He answered the phone (surprised that I was a woman because as he told me, he knew very few women anthropologists) and then confirmed that I was at the correct house. He made his way down the walkway with his two dogs dancing around his legs, and opened the gate for me to enter his compound.

The compound looked like a small forest with a large house in the middle. His trees were thick and round, and looked sturdy like they'd been there for years. He had bushes all around that lined the sides of the cement walkway that led to his front door. Upon entering his house, I received a quick tour and met his housekeeper who was a middle-aged Dominican woman who only spoke Spanish. She prepared a glass of lemonade for me and a bowl of soup for Richard. We then exited the house and sat on the porch where there was a small black metal table, and two metal chairs. Richard wore a sarong, and looked at me with earnest attentiveness in order to learn about me and my interest in Tambú. We began to speak, and the conversation that resonated with me the most was focused around something he identified as the vibrations of Tambú.

Tambú music is simply made out of vibrations. The metal chapi is aggressively tapped by another metal object to hold the tempo, while the Tambú drum is playing three different beats at the same time and relies on vibrating to accomplish the sound required to play the song. And then of course, there is the vibration of the voice of the Tambú singer, who is not required for Tambú music but does add another dimension to the types of vibrations that exist. The chapi provides a high frequency vibration, while the Tambú drum provides a low frequency vibration, and the voice goes between both vibrations. Finally, there are vibrations of the body from the people who dance to the Tambú music.

Richard explained how he believed that the connections to the vibrations came from Africa. He specifically told me that “your body will remember” (Doest 2018). This one sentiment really resonated with me because it referred to how he believes that those of African descent have some kind of unconscious memory of being from somewhere in Africa, despite the fact that most of them have never stepped foot on the continent. Richard’s thinking can be described as “recollections of a shared past which are passed on through ongoing processes of commemoration” (Eyerman 2004, 161). He spoke about how the vibrations of the Tambú instruments could give rise to these unconscious memories, and how “your body will know how to react” when it hears those significant noises (Doest 2018). I claim that the memories are unconscious because Richard has an understanding that the memories are existent within the mind but are not necessarily at the forefront of the mind at all times. This is fascinating because I believe that it further implies that no matter what, the knowledge is a part of you. Though it might not be always on your mind, it is there and can be evoked in certain times. To me, Richard’s understanding of vibrations meant that Tambú is itself a commemoration to the past, which can be understood through its own contested history. In hindsight, it is difficult for me to really know if my body just “knew” how to react to

the Tambú music that I heard in Gweni's back garden. It was incredibly awkward for me at first, but after a few attempts it is undeniable that my body felt comfortable doing the dance. I had never seen or experienced the dance before but was still able to do it, and I was told by others that I looked as if I had been doing the dance for years.

The sound of the chapi and the tambú drum together naturally make your body move, the same way that one's head begins to bob when hearing a catchy song. By "naturally" making one's body move, I am alluding to the way that people can sometimes hear a song and begin to move – sometimes without realizing it. Richard spoke about the way that the vibrations somehow transcend space and can touch some parts of your body, which would make you feel as if you must vibrate the rest of your body and dance. He alluded that all of this comes to people of African descent quite naturally. By talking about the way people would naturally react, it became clear to me that Richard was referencing the history of the African slaves were brought to Curacao. When they were taken to Curacao by the Dutch Kingdom and left their native lands in Africa, they couldn't bring anything physical with them as they were shackled and transported on a slave ship. Richard explained to me how he believed that due to this reason, "they couldn't bring anything but their knowledge of vibrations" with them to this new land (Doest 2018).

So according to this narrative, African slaves carried with them their knowledge of their culture, their music, and their knowledge of the importance of vibrations. In this specific moment, I wish to place a certain emphasis on the "knowledge" as I feel that it was this knowledge that built the memories that allowed Tambú to last. It was further explained to me that they brought with them not only the knowledge, but also an understanding of the power behind vibrations. There is something inherently powerful about someone's personal understanding that something as seemingly simple as vibrations can come from their ancestral or racial past. In a way, it's like the

family heirloom that you didn't realize you inherited. It is powerful because it shows us that there is always something more to be understood about the things that we do – be it cultural actions or social actions. This powerful knowledge informed a conversation I had with a well-known Tambú singer on the island named Elia Isenia.

I met with Elia in her office at the cruise dock next to the ocean. On this particular day, there was no ship coming into the port so the dock was completely empty with the exception of the two of us. We bonded quickly and she told me about her personal individual experiences with Tambú. She explained to me about how whenever she becomes sick, she listens to Tambú in order to heal. She told me that she usually finds that listening to Tambú while sick helps her feel better faster than taking medication. In this moment she shared with me that she trusted me, and for this reason she wanted me to know that this was what she did. As in the previous chapter, I want to reiterate that my identity as a Black woman and as an American assisted in my ability to navigate these conversations and to learn the information that I was so lucky to learn.

The Embodiment of Tambú

I'd like to invoke Donna Haraway's text "Situated Knowledges" in order to help us understand the way that vibrations are understood by my interlocutors. Haraway addresses the ways that truth is embodied through the experiences of people. For the purpose of understanding embodiment, I understand embodiment as an encompassing visceral experience in which people are fully in touch with their lived experiences and how those experiences effect their bodies. Donna Haraway's text is useful in understanding my informants because they themselves embody the vibrations and experiences that they understand as aligning with those vibrations. Specifically, the vibrations are seen to align with the past history and trauma of the past and so there is an implicit

personal connection that my interlocutors make with the past. It very much appears as if my informants, who were all Black Curacaoans, have essentially produced their own knowledge of vibrations, and have created their own meaning for them both with and through history. For this reason, I want to argue that memory is embodied through Tambú which I relate to also mean that memory is embodied through the vibrations of Tambú.

Haraway notes that “situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals” (Haraway 1988, 590). I believe that this is an important note, because it connects to the way that vibrations are interpreted. While this may be true, I would like to disagree with this specific sentiment as I have found that while there is a community component to Tambú, there is also quite a bit of importance placed onto the individual experience. Typically, a Tambú festival consists of a community of people and then is intensified through the vibrations of all of the bodies which can be interpreted to be understood as unity. In this instance, Tambú is incredibly social and is dependent upon the collective to enhance the experience. However, it is important to note that everyone completes the Tambú ritual for their own reasons so while it is a collective experience, it is not necessarily a similar experience. For this reason, it is possible to say that practitioners are able to use the collectivity of the Tambú experience for their own individual purposes. This further exemplifies what was presented to me by Elia, as there is also a key personal and individualistic side of Tambú that is not obvious upon first glance.

By only thinking about the situated knowledge community experiences with Tambú, we actively miss out on the importance of the individual experience that adds to the situated knowledge that each person has. When Elia listens to Tambú music to heal when she is ill, there is a personal understanding of what vibrations can do for her in that moment. It is not incredibly far off from the concept of using Tambú to “seka fuku” which is usually in a collective group

experience, as she is essentially using Tambú to get rid of the negative energies that are perhaps contributing to her illness.

I want to stress that Elia's experience is not necessarily seen as a magical process, as much as it is seen as a physical process. She is not expecting magic to heal her body, as much as she's depending on the natural networks of the world to heal her through vibrations. Though she is only listening to music to get rid of the sickness and she is not dancing, the vibrations still exist through the music she listens to. I can interpret my conversation with her to explain that the vibration of the music essentially works without her, as there is the work of the vibrations onto her body without her consciousness. By this, I mean that the vibrations of the music that she is listening to, specifically the vibrations of all of the Tambú instruments, are impacting her body. If anything, this further exemplifies the relationship between the body and the vibrations.

Elia explained to me that she believes that she goes into some sort of trance while she dances, and Richard explained to me that this is likely the case for many people due to the many vibrations. Richard shared that when all of the different vibrations occur at once (the singing voices, the chapi, the movement of the body through dancing, and the drum), it can increase a participant's heartbeat which would result in them going into what they would call a trance. Going into a trance is not uncommon for dances that come out of the African diaspora, but he noted that he believed that this experience is quite individual to Tambú due to the unique way that the drummer plays three beats at once on a singular drum. This increasingly shows that without her intervention, Elia's body begins to have the relationship between itself and "mother earth" as previously explained to me by Richard.

By thinking about the body and vibrations in this way, it raises the importance for us to recognize that there are people who see the body as not just its own being, but as an inherent part

of the natural network of the world. This natural network of the world suggests a deep and meaningful connection to the world in which we do not interrupt, but instead we experience. To me, this is the understood meaning of Tambú as something that is “natural”. Haraway notes that “nature is only the raw material of culture” (Haraway 1988, 592). If anything, this refers back to the possibility that nature is reproduced through the cultural components of life. And so, for this reason, the historical culture that was created through slavery and movement, now exists in a “natural” way. If we follow the ideas of Haraway, then it seems to me that this “natural” way seems to be one of embodiment which would mean that nature and the body are aligned. This is not far off from my interpretation of my informants and their thoughts of the way that their bodies connect to the earth while dancing Tambú. But, it furthers the conversation around the way that the way that Tambú came into existence (and rose to importance) in the context of Curacao specifically.

This leads us to the conversation about whether or not Tambú was created either from trauma or before trauma. I argue that Tambú was definitely created before the trauma of slavery, but then was sustained through the trauma of slavery. As noted in Chapter One, Tambú was previously an accompaniment to the African religion of Montamentu which was primarily practiced in West Africa (De Jong 2012). And then, due to Dutch influence and religious pressure, Montamentu was essentially removed from daily life and was replaced with a form of Christianity. Despite this change, Tambú continued to exist on its own - though mostly behind closed doors. This is likely because Tambú was not likely seen to be sacred by the Dutch in the way that Montamentu was since it itself was not a religion. It seems to me that Tambú existed and continues to exist as a covert attempt to overcome past cultural trauma, or even to remind the Black Curacaoan community that this cultural trauma occurred.

Cultural Trauma and the Collective Experience

I believe that the definition of cultural trauma, as provided by Ron Eyerman, best explains the type of trauma that exists in the context of Black Curacaoans. Eyerman notes cultural trauma as “[referring] to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion” (Eyerman 2004, 160). This feels like an adequate explanation, specifically as it relates to slavery and the long lasting after effects that became a key component in both creating and shaping culture. While not everyone in Curacao may agree that slavery created cultural trauma, it is clear that there are people who would agree. The slave rebellion commemoration ceremony that I referenced in the previous chapter, is a key example of the way that cultural trauma is being mediated on the island. The fact that there were so many families and people at the event, and also because it is an annual event that is incredibly well planned, further shows that the trauma is “understood, explained and made coherent through public reflection and discourse” (Eyerman 2004, 160).

In the context of Eyerman, cultural trauma is very much a collective trauma. Though it is true that current people in the community have never experienced the trauma of being forced into slavery, I believe that the cultural trauma is somehow situated within the Black Curacaoan experience. I would like to put this directly in conversation with Haraway, as she notes that the collective is important in the context of situated knowledge similarly to the way that Eyerman notes that the collective is important to cultural trauma. We can clearly see how there are people who individually ignore the situated knowledge that exists within them by looking at those who ignore or actively avoid Tambú. I think that this is once again why it is so important to look at the trauma and the situatedness on individual levels. Though there are people who are a part of the

cultural trauma due to their ancestry, they may individually choose to interact with that trauma in different and individualistic ways (if they choose to do so at all).

To this end, I believe that trauma is also able to be understood, explained, and made coherent through other mediums such as music, dancing, singing, and playing instruments. It is through these mediums that many Black Curacaoans are able to find ways to connect to the past in a way that is healing – both metaphorically and physically. For this reason, all of the components of Tambú are incredibly important and play a role beyond just being music, which is perhaps why there is a lot of importance being placed upon the vibrations of the music (and what it does to one's body) as well.

In returning to the words of Richard, when he talks about how those of African descent should be able to dance Tambú, he very much seems to think of it as an activity that connects Black Curacaoans to one another. Eyerman notes that these types of activities, rituals, or ceremonies are times where “membership is confirmed” (Eyerman 2004, 162). This statement can assist in our understanding of the way Richard views the importance or relevance of African ancestry as it relates to Tambú, if he believes that one can confirm “membership” to the Afro-Curacaoan identity through dancing. Not only does it seem like membership to the community is confirmed through Tambú, it also seems like membership is reaffirmed. It becomes a process that is based around remembering the past, while also being exclusionary to those who are not members of the community due to their lack of African ancestry (Eyerman 2004). Within this reclaiming of the past, there is also the opportunity for the previously silenced to become empowered through the types of experiences that exclude their oppressors and allow them to celebrate themselves.

However, this empowerment can be primarily accomplished if we think of Tambú as a commemoration to the past. Membership is confirmed through “cultural practices that evoke

sentiments of the past in the present” (Gibau 2008, 260). This is exactly what the vibrations of Tambú are doing – as it evokes a feeling of connecting to your past ancestors through the belief that you are doing what they once did. While there is clearly no exact way for us to know for sure that this is the truth, to me this seems to be the general complication with memory. Those who practice Tambu are also making themselves connect to their past, but this is done through “the commonsense recollections of the past upon which people rely to construct themselves as members of a present collectivity” (Gibau 2008, 260).

These “commonsense recollections” in this context, are the recollections that seem to be the most practical and the most realistic to their understanding of the past. By this, I mean that it is historically unclear if the vibrations originally meant in the past what my interlocutors have made it mean in the present. This adjustment in meaning occurs through the memories that have been constructed through historical knowledge, which was then orally passed down through families. This has been addressed in literature as something called “selective amnesia” where there is often a reinvention of the past where people end up selecting certain parts of the past to remember, while also leaving out other parts (Gibau 2008). I want to note that this is not necessarily a purposeful thing that happens, as much as it seems as a way to, as John Gillis notes, “revise our memories to suit our current identities” (Gibau 2008, 260; Gillis 1994, 3). To me, this seems like a way to enhance one’s identity and to provide some kind of grounding to assist in the building of identity. At any rate, this will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Commemorations to the Past and the “Authentic” Experience

I do believe that the concept of selective amnesia raises a question around authenticity in regards to Tambú. But, I do not believe that it is incredibly important for me to argue for

“authenticity”, nor did I find it important within my fieldwork to demand for proof of what my interlocutors told me in regards to their understanding of Tambú. Specifically, when thinking about memory, it seems silly to require all of the acts around rituals to be “authentic” to the past. I find it silly to require authenticity because in most diasporic contexts, it is rare to find exact replicas of the rituals and traditions of the past. Therefore, with Tambú, I find there to be what is described as “performative authenticity” (Karlström 2015, 31).

Through the performance of Tambú (individually or collectively), authenticity is “created and maintained through performance and empowerment of objects” (Karlström 2015, 34). In the case of Tambú, I believe that there is both empowerment of musical objects in addition to the empowerment of the body. But this empowerment and authenticity is subjective, as Karlstrom importantly notes that “authenticity is a human construct” which seems to support the idea that communities have agency to determine if what they are performing is considered authentic. This seems to place the onus on a person to determine if what they are performing is authentic, and also places emphasis on the origin of the performance in order to confirm its authenticity. What I want to call attention to, is the way that the origin of Tambú is decided and agreed upon. It seems to me that the origin of the African nature of Tambú is confirmed through memory, and then its authenticity is amplified through the collective understanding of its origin.

Author Yvonne Daniel examines many dances that came out of the African diaspora, and examines the similarities or differences that can be interpreted from the past. Something that I found quite interesting was concerned with thinking about how Tambú persisted. Though it was perhaps not seen as sacred by the Dutch, it is possible that it was seen as sacred (but not portrayed as sacred) by the enslaved people. Daniel notes that some dances from Angola and the Congo have the same dance moves for both sacred and secular settings, and I believe that this may be a reason

that Tambú was covertly hidden and further maintained (Daniel 2011). This is reflective of Curacao as those are two countries that were previously identified as locations that African slaves came from upon being taken to Curacao.

Thinking about Tambú in a secular setting and in a sacred setting is an interesting turn when thinking about memory. Tambú has now become more secularized over time, and young adults will dance to Tambú music but not quite in the same way as before. It is said that they now “dance back to back, make intimate body contact... perform with their bodies upside down, [and] demonstrate all forms of improvising and dancing skills” (Rosalia, n.d.). It seems like similar to their own ancestors, they have the dance of Tambú and have added a new cultural meaning. I feel like this is important to note because it shows the ways that individuals can still create shifts within cultures while still maintaining other components of culture. Despite the changes that they have made to the secular side of Tambú, the sacred side still stands and is still reproduced for the next generations of Black Curacaoans.

For this reason, I believe that the knowledge of Tambú comes from both one’s own memory in addition to social memory. I believe that the distinction is important as it relates to our understanding of the importance of Tambú. The social memory refers to the lived experiences of individuals within society (Berliner 2005). This further enforces the individual experiences of people as it relates to their memories, and provides some sort of overarching individuality as it relates to their own experiences which have likely shaped them as a person over the years. I believe that this is where collective memory becomes most useful in assisting us to understand the impact of historical memory upon the collective community. Susan Sontag states that “what is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story of how it happened” (Eyerman 2004, 162; Sontag 2004, 85-6). I agree with Sontag’s

definition of collective memory, because I find that the stipulating nature of collective memory is what contributes to the creation and sustaining nature of both monuments and commemorations. In addition, I find that Sontag's definition also importantly implies the way that things that have happened in the past are not idle moments of time. Rather, moments of the past are persisting moments which "weigh heavily on the present" and are therefore quite relevant to the construction of both society and the individual (Eyerman 2004, 161).

Both monuments and commemorations are ways to be consistently reminded of the past, specifically around what is important and how it happened, and to enhance one's cultural memory through doing so. Commemorations specifically are discussed as a "conscious effort 'to limit forgetfulness'" (Gibau 2008, 260). We have seen this in the previous chapter, through both the Tula Commemoration Ceremony and the statue in the park dedicated to Tula and his enslaved companions who defied the Dutch and fought for slavery. The effort to limit forgetfulness is further exemplified through stories that focus upon the brutal murder of Tula by the hands of the Dutch. While commemorations are often seen as celebrations fixed events that are representative of specific dates, I argue that Tambú is a type of commemoration that we have perhaps not imagined quite yet. Tambú is a commemoration that does not necessarily need a crowd, a date, or a large kind of production in order to be validated. While I have previously said that Tambú is a commemoration to the past, I want to be more specific and say that the ritual of Tambú, with the vibrations of the Tambú experience, is a commemoration to the past. You can choose to dance Tambú wherever and whenever you choose as there is no formal location in which you are required to experience it. Unlike some other sacred forms of dancing, you typically only just need the tambú drum if there is no option to listen to the music electronically, in order to dance or to have a Tambú

experience. The fluidity of Tambú is important as it is a key reason that Tambú was able to survive and is obviously reflected in the simplicity of the items needed for Tambú.

Tambú is a commemoration to a past before slavery, and “[represents] a story that a given community tells itself about itself” (Burke 2010, 108). In this context, the community is the Black Curacaoan community which uses Tambú as not only an opportunity to connect to the earth and their past ancestors, but as an effective way to “seka fuku”, or rather – to get rid of the negative energy that they have accumulated throughout any given period of time. Tambú also very much tells a story of overcoming contestation, which is an understanding of Tambú that seems generally well received by the majority of my interlocutors. Tambú itself, as an act, focuses on overcoming contestation in everyday life, through dealing with the difficulties that people have on a day to day basis. So, not only is Tambú contesting the Dutch authorities or Dutch idealized religion, but it is also contesting the negative of the everyday experience. So, this commemoration to the past allows people to overcome the challenges that they face in their lives. There is, of course, quite a bit of power through the community having the understanding that their ancestors were able to maintain a connection to Tambú, despite the hardships they faced through enslavement and cultural erasure. For this reason, the vibrations of Tambú are important as they provide additional feelings of interconnectedness to the community and the world which further emphasizes the connection of Tambú to an experience before slavery and the trauma that came with it.

I want to also return to the statue dedicated to Tula at the Parke Lucha pa Libertat as mentioned in the previous chapter. While Tambú acts as a commemoration to a past before slavery, the statues very much act as a memorial to the past of slavery. Thinking about this in this way is important because it provides an opportunity for there to be a memorial to those who have suffered from the horrors of slavery and have dealt with inhuman treatment. Furthermore, the symbolism

of the statues contributes to this understanding and the usage of the imagery of chains that haven't been broken provide a memorial not only to the past, but also a memorial to the present experience of Black Curacaoans. I believe that the commemoration of Tambú and the memorial of the past of slavery through the chained statues evoke two very different reactions. On one hand, by dancing Tambú you are getting rid of the negativity and you also have the physical reaction of sweating from dancing, while also being cognizant of the connection to your ancestors. On the other hand, with the statues you feel a reminder of the cultural trauma and a reminder of what was done to people who looked like you when they stood up to the Dutch people on the island. Both act as memorials to the past, and through evoking memories of the past they also evoke certain feelings that can either cause some to be more drawn to their identities or to be removed from them.

In the next chapter, I wish to explore the ways people understand their identities, and the reasons why people may select to identify more with one part of their identity than another. I wish to invoke these thoughts before continuing on to the next section, because despite the memorials to the past mentioned in this chapter, there are still difficulties in accepting African ancestry. Similar to the history of Tambú, I believe that the rejection of African ancestry is a sentiment presented by the Dutch, and then was perpetuated by the Black Curacaoans who wanted to be accepted by the dominant White and Dutch population. Vibrations are a key part of how the collective memory is consistently reiterated and re-informed of the past, and the way that vibrations directly interact with the identity of Black Curacaoans. For this reason, Tambú informs the Black Curacaoan identity and the history of Tambú can be used to think critically (and empathetically, perhaps) of the way that the Black Curacaoan identity exists today.

Chapter Three

Too African? Nuances of Diasporic Homelands and Identities in Curacao

From my research and fieldwork, it appears to me that the Afro-Curacaoan identity is highly contested. From conversations that I have had with multiple individuals, I have found that there is a divide between who calls themselves Curacaoan, who calls themselves Afro-Curacaoan, and how they form their identities as it relates to their ethnicities, races, and nationalities. I am particularly interested in looking at the belief that claiming the Afro-Curacaoan identity relies on people being accepting of their African past. Contrarily, the African past is not understood in the same way by all Black Curacaoans, which complicates our understanding.

I'd like to emphasize that though this is a chapter about identity, I selected to never actually define identity through the eyes of a theorist. I made this decision because I think that it reflects the experience that I had while doing my fieldwork – specifically in the way that I came to understand the way that identity is such a malleable concept. As will be addressed in this chapter, many of my informants for this project presented so many different ideas about identity to me, some of which placed more emphasis on nationality, race, or ethnicity. All of those different understandings about identity are present, and I think it would do a disservice to attempt to place them all in the same theoretical box, when that is clearly not the case. In order to understand how identity works specifically in the context of Curacao, we must further understand the steps that have taken place to establish and form the identity as we know it today.

The History of the Afro-Curacaoan Identity

Black Curacaoans have historically been viewed as second-class citizens as echoed by A.F. Marks, in chapter two of his book “Afro-Curacaoan Household”. He notes that in Curacao,

religion was associated with skin color which added another variable to the growth of various identities. When Tambú was being actively contested as mentioned in the previous chapters of this project, many Black Curacaoans had to associate and align themselves with either Protestantism or Roman Catholicism in order to avoid being put in jail for witchcraft (Marks 1976). Protestantism was, and currently still is, the main religion that is practiced in the Netherlands. In addition, Roman Catholicism was, and currently still is, the main religion of Spain, which was the first country to “discover” Curacao. However, I do not see Spain as incredibly relevant for the purpose of my project, as Spain did not actively colonize Curacao, and was indirectly related to the slave trade in Curacao.

Both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism were associated with skin color, with the Protestant denomination of Christianity being seen as the highest-ranking religion. Protestantism was seen as the highest-ranking because it was associated with both the White Dutch population of Curacao and lighter skinned Afro-Curacaoans. Despite their Blackness and African heritage, the Dutch categorized many lighter skinned Afro-Curacaoans as White (Marks 1976). On the other hand, Catholicism was seen as a Black religion and was associate with the darker skinned Curacaoans. In order to accommodate their African heritage, the Afro-Curacaoan population needed to figure out how to balance their African traditions and religions with the new Dutch societal conventions, which often put their traditions and religions conventions in conflict – an example of this would be Tambú, as previously discussed. Marks brings in a very important new term into the conversation about Curacaoan identity: Dual cultural orientation.

The term dual cultural orientation is used by Marks to describe the ways that people of a community work to include both of the cultures that they are a part of. It is seen as a reconciliation of culture, in which a sacrifice is often made in order to accommodate both sides. This is seen in

Marks' chapter through the struggles that Curacaoans faced in attempting to conform to new religions that were forced upon them, though it conflicted with the cultures and traditions that they had prior to arriving in Curacao through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. I would like to argue that dual cultural orientation still occurs in Curacao, but instead of specifically with religion, it happens with identity and it influences the way that Black Curacaoans understand what it means to be Afro-Curacaoan. However, it is undeniable that the reason that the dual cultural orientation is important to engage with in this context is because of the growth of a dominant culture in Curacao, which became Dutch culture. Furthermore, I believe that dual cultural orientation is facilitated through the hybridism of identity, which will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter.

Despite Dutch culture being the dominant culture, Dual cultural orientation allows us to think critically about the role of agency in the lives of Black Curacaoans. Despite the existing cultural structure on the island, Black Curacaoans were able to make the decision to accommodate multiple parts of their identity in order to hold on to the parts of their identity that were important to them, which included retaining Tambú. This reflects the way that Black slaves, who later on became Black Curacaoans, were able to keep Tambú in practice, even though they had to stop practicing Montamentu – the original religion that accompanied Tambú. This is an example of the way that Black Curacaoans produced new options for themselves, even though the Dutch likely thought that they were making the decision for them.

Expressing Nationalism: “I am a Yu di Korsou!”

For the population of Curacao, identity was gradually created through a group Antillean identity (associated with some of the other Caribbean islands), as discussed by Rose Mary Allen in the journal article “The Complexity of National Identity Construction in Curaçao, Dutch

Caribbean”. In the article, Allen discusses the growing identity of the “Yu di Korsou” in the 1960’s, which was a large-scale movement of the youth accepting and confirming the concept of their Afro-Curacaoan identity (Allen 2010, 118). This is a relevant historical note for Allen to make because it shows how before the growth of the Yu di Korsou movement, identity was largely dependent on skin color (as similarly discussed by Marks), which favored Curacaoans who were born with a lighter complexion. Due to their lighter complexion, they were seen as able to navigate racial categories in a way that others could not. The history of the concept of what a “Yu di Korsou” is, comes out of a Curacaoan social uprising in 1969 (Allen 2010). The movement originally was targeted at “the three-tiered social structure that existed during slavery” in Curacao which has very much had a continuous effect on Curacao’s society today. As Allen notes, “one’s place in society depended primarily on one’s occupation, ethnic heritage, and skin color” (Allen 2010, 119).

The difference in complexion proved relevant over time because gradually certain complexions were associated with specific standings in society. For example, if you were of darker complexion, it was assumed that you were impoverished, while if you were of lighter complexion it was assumed that you were wealthy. This color association is simply an extension of the colonization of Curacao by the Netherlands, and the colorism that resulted as a byproduct of that experience. Allen makes note of this impact by discussing it as the original and continual acceptance of the White elite as racially superior to everyone else. This, of course, gave preference to Dutch settlers and continued the harmful overall narrative of Afro-Curacaoans as second-class citizens, while favoring some complexions of Black Curacaoans over others.

The Yu di Korsou is an ideology that still exists in Curacao today, which I discovered through my fieldwork. On the other hand, unlike Allen’s findings, I was told that anyone from the island of Curacao could be a Yu di Korsou, not just Afro-Curacaoans (though it is undeniable that

they make up the majority of the population). I was told by many people that to be a Yu di Korsou, you must grow up on the island and be proud of it. The way it was explained to me did not give preference to any specific racial group – simply anyone born on the island of Curacao was a Yu di Korsou. I met a woman named Crisen Schorea at her place of employment, called the Kas Di Kultura, not far from the center of Otrobanda on a sunny day.⁴ The Kas di Kultura is a “agency that implements the government’s cultural policy and focuses attention on what is perceived as traditional Curacaoan culture” (Allen 2010a, 120). I drove to her office and parked across the street from the building. She invited me into her office for our conversation, and she sat across from me with her desk separating us. We were surrounded by books – some of which she pointed out held different cultural policies for the island. My first question to her was about the Yu di Korsou ideology and what it meant to her, and her response showed the clear national identity that the ideology sought to provide.

“What is a yu di korsou? Very good question. In the first place, I guess I think about it individually in the sense of... If you ask me “where is home for you” abstractly, the first thing I think is Curacao. So, it’s a place for me where I don’t even have to think if I belong there. It’s a fact that I belong there. I don’t even have to question it. The second thing I’ve discovered is that I’m pretty loyal and pretty protective – not absurdly protective – and so I know like, there are things here that we aren’t doing right and so it’s not blindly. Right now, economically, it’s not the best period. But I wouldn’t even think about leaving.”

While the Yu di Korsou movement did not specifically align with any race, another main criterion was that you spoke the language of the land - Papiamentu. However, this definitely meant that outsiders existed, and immigrants were often seen as these outsiders (Oostindie 2005). It is clear to me that the Yu di Korsou movement and ideology focuses primarily on establishing the

⁴ Translates from Papiamentu to “Cultural House”.

Curacaoan identity at large. It focuses on building the national identity through the providing a sense of belonging to the island and being a part of the people of the island. Nevertheless, this technique to unite seems to have additional non-obvious layers. Not only was the Yu-di-Korsou movement used to provide unity within Curacao, but it also seems to provide an external view of unity to the rest of the Caribbean. Cristen explained to me what this meant to her, after translating the current governmental definition of Yu di Korsou.⁵

“... In the Caribbean we are like strange human beings. In the Caribbean they consider us “the Dutch ones”. A lot of Caribbean islands have mostly French or English heritage. They are small but have their independence. And they think of us as the spoiled children of the Caribbean. It’s true, we have so many elements of Europe... of Holland. We are more European than we are Caribbean. And I think the other Caribbean islands sense it too.”

I was fascinated by her claim of Curacao being so incredibly different than the other countries in the Caribbean. It is true that Curacao has elements of Holland – as do most previously colonized countries. But it is also true that most people do not identify Curacao as a part of the Caribbean, in the same way that many do not readily identify Aruba or Bonaire as a part of the Caribbean. This understanding of being the rejected island of the Caribbean can very much also play a role into the population’s understanding of their Black identity or their Afro-Curacaoan identity. Most Caribbean islands have some sort of African-diasporic presence, and perhaps the

⁵ Verbal translation of the governmental definition of “Yu di Korsou”, provided by the Kas di Kultura: “Respect for human life, respect for everybody, their descendants, and their way of life. Should see cultural diversity as a richness and as a source for union. Should see the importance to live in harmony with nature and the environment. Should love relationships between families, should adopt the values of respect and cooperation as central for family life, groups, or neighborhood association. Should show respect for the elderly because they are the wise ones and have the knowledge of the past. Should see the elderly as contributing to society on the basis of knowledge. Have respect for the cultural heritage and natural heritage, traditions. Have a critical, analytical, and open mind. Be very conscious about the Caribbean Curacaoan identity.”

disconnect with these other islands impact the way that Black Curacaoans understand their own diasporic identity.

Over time, there was a separation within the Yu di Korsou ideology, specifically for the black population of Curacao, where some preferred to call themselves “Nos Bon Yu di Korsow” which was translated to “We, the good Children of Curacao” (Oostindie 2005, 223).⁶ Shifts like these continued to push forward the possibility of people claiming Afro-Curacaoan as more of a legitimate term, mostly due to the collectivity that arose from allowing people to group together and to form a community of Black Curacaoans.

While being a Yu di Korosu or a Nos Bon Yu di Korsou seems like a nice collective community builder, not everyone seems to find this to be the case. From a conversation I had with an interlocutor, he was able to explain to me that there are consistent explicit reminders of what it means to being a Yu di Korsou. He discussed it as less of a grassroots identity formation, and instead as a state mitigated identity formation. He told me that he had seen billboards put up across Curacao, where they distinguished what it meant to be a good “Yu di Korsou” and what it means to be a bad “Yu di Korsou”. He gave the example that the billboards would “explain that a good Yu di Korsou never caused trouble” while a bad Yu di Korsou “would do things such as play their music too loud.” He said that he had seen this done beyond billboards, and that he had even seen commercials talking about these two sides on the Curacaoan National News Channel.

The rise of the Afro-Curacaoan concept also came with the concept of the phrase “Di-nos-e-ta” which translates to “this is ours” (Oostindie 2005, 223). The translation was originally explained to me as the claim for Afro-Curacaoans to begin to “take back what was originally theirs” (Oostindie 2005, 223). This is also echoed by Oostinde in saying that the phrase

⁶ The changing of Korsou is different here due to the different dialects of Papiamentu that include different spellings of words.

“aggressively asserts this claim of a unique Afro-Curacaoan cultural heritage which should be valued as the essence of the island’s culture” (Oostindie 2005, 223). This shows that there are people who are cognizant of the past, and then are using the Afro-Curacaoan identity as a building block and tool for nation building and identity building outside of the government mitigated initiatives.

The African Nature of Identities

An additional building block would be the language of Curacao. In my time in Curacao, I found that Papiamentu was a language that Black Curacaoans were proud to know, understand, and speak. It was clear to me that the language is usually used between Curacaoans, as even doing the interview with Cristen, she stopped to tell me that she had to remember to speak English because when she saw me she automatically wanted to speak to me in “her language”. Another man that I met told me that Papiamentu was one of the easiest languages in the world, and that he had heard that the United Nations had previously been in conversation about making Papiamentu the official language of the procedures of the United Nations. He told me that he was told that the grammar system was simple compared to other languages, and that the language was incredibly easy to learn. While nothing he said I found to be true, it was very telling of the pride that he had for his native language.

As mentioned in the first chapter of this project, Papiamentu is often described as a Caribbean creole language. Some etymologies show that the language has strong roots to the Cape Verdean Creole language, which means that it has African roots. I would like to be critical of myself here, and recognize that I am appearing to seek out the different “Africanisms” that exist within the Afro-Curacaoan identity or exist in the national identity that Curacao is built upon

(Yelvington 2001, 229). Be that as it may, I find that these “Africanisms” are important, because more often than not they appear to be eventually discovered and then seemingly pushed out. It does not seem to me that they are pushed out because Black Curacaoans want them to be pushed out, as much as it seems that Dutch influence has pushed them out. Similar to Tambú, Papiamentu has been a highly contested language in the political sphere of Curacao. While Papiamentu is the local language and is often the language that children grow up speaking, when they transition to school they are expected to speak in Dutch.

An older Black woman named Indira who identified as Afro-Curacaoan, introduced me to this concept when she complained to me about the way that the school system affected young Black Curacaoans. The first time that I met Indira was when I went to Rene Rosalia’s event called “Pan Sera ku Sopi”. The event is hosted every Sunday afternoon at Rene’s Museo di Tambú that was mentioned in chapter one.⁷ They have an old black oven that was placed in their backyard which is supposed to be almost an exact replica of the types of stoves that Afro-Curacaoans used many years ago. The stove is used to create a traditional Curacaoan bread called Pan Será which was being mixed and baked by Rene’s wife and a few other Afro-Curacaoan women.

On these Sundays, they also served soups – one called Karni and one called Mondongo. The Karni soup consists of chunks of beef chunks, vegetables, and spices, while the Mondongo soup consists of goat intestines, potatoes, and additional spices. While I sat in the shade and ate the bread and sipped the Mondongo soup, I noticed many people come and go from the yard. Some would buy bread or soup and then take it home, while others would stay and eat the food in the yard similar to what I was doing. The people here were mostly Black, and it was through this event that I had the pleasure of meeting Indira and her husband.

⁷ Translated to Museum of Tambú.

Indira explained to me how very little time is spent in Curacaoan schools on teaching students Papiamentu, and the time is otherwise spent speaking to the students in Dutch and teaching them in Dutch. This has historically held back Black Curacaoans, due to the learning curve of them needing to learn Dutch quickly, even though as children they never spoke Dutch in their households (Frank 1974). She further explained how doing things like removing the language that a certain group has been taught in their youth, and then replacing it with Dutch by implying that it is the ‘academic language’ fails those students. She explained to me that she believes that the curriculum fails to “teach kids about how [Afro-Curacaoans] live on the island”.

The most notable comment she made, I think, was about how the books in the schools talk about snow. “Snow? Snow? These kids have never even seen snow before. How can we expect to teach them about something they’ve never even seen?” She went on to explain to me how the same textbooks, which are shipped over from the Netherlands, only talk about Africans by contextualizing them as slaves. “Those books only give them negative things to associate with Africa”, instead of providing a fair historical narrative for students to make their own decisions. Indira explained to me happily about how she was a proud Afro-Curacaoan. To her, being Afro-Curacaoan meant that she was rooted into her history. She emphasized to me the importance of teaching children to be proud of who they are, she told me that she was “proud of who [she] was and [what] she was.”

She told me that something she thought affected the Afro-Curacaoan identity in the younger population, was the way that when they are between 18 and 20 they often leave Curacao to go to the Netherlands to study in the universities and colleges. Her own son did the same thing, and she explained how she preferred for him to return to Curacao so that he could “maintain his culture”. This was echoed by Cristen in a separate conversation, where Cristen explained to me

how many people leave and then will not return. Cristen told me that after studying in Holland for eight years, she “[wanted] to feel home and [didn’t] want to be an allochtoon”. Cristen went on to say, “I had that feeling of I want to be somewhere that nobody can call me an allochtoon. I want to go somewhere that I belong.” And for Cristen, just like for Indira, the place they feel that they belong is in Curacao.

The word “allochtoon” came up a few times in multiple interviews, and specifically refers to someone who is an outsider. It is something that people are called in the Netherlands, if they are not born in the Netherlands, and is a Dutch word. I make this point to show that even if Black Curacaoans go through all of the schooling required by the Netherlands, learn to speak Dutch, attempt to remove certain things from their identities to make them seem ‘less African’, they will still be seen as outsiders in the Netherlands. If anything, this reinforces the importance of the Yu di Korsou ideology that Indira cared about. To her, the concept of Yu di Korsou proved important as she passionately told me “we must protect it” while still recognizing the “double history” of Dutch History and Curacaoan history on the island.

I selected to mention Indira, because she raises the important conversation about the way that colonialism still continues to exist in Curacao. It continues to exist through the navigation of language and the way that the language is understood. I can sufficiently argue that if you are consistently seeing all of the indicators of your diasporic past being erased or being berated, then you will make decisions about how to navigate the world accordingly. While in Curacao, the Dutch chose to point out the “Africanisms” that existed, and then effectively demonized them as much as possible.

In order to directly relate this to Tambú, I wish to return to Richard – my informant who taught me about vibrations. Richard informed me that those who refuse Tambú may not realize

that they are pushing away their ancestry and therefore pushing away their past. By following his logic, I believe that it is safe to say that he felt that those with African ancestry who refuse to dance Tambú are simply refusing to acknowledge their African ancestry. This does not necessarily mean that they are not aware of their African ancestry, but it seems to mean that they are not interested in engaging with acts that would push them to be reminded of the past associated with both their ancestry and the dance itself. Around Curacao, the knowledge of Tambú is consistently aligned with Tambú being African and deriving from slavery. Even non-Black Curacaoans had this understanding, even if their exact understanding of the origins of Tambú were not exactly historically accurate.

During my time in Curacao, I interviewed one young man named Dennis. I met Dennis at the Tula Rebellion Commencement Ceremony, after he gave an impassioned speech to the crowd in Papiamentu. We met one evening at the Hilton Hotel dining area in Willemstad. Once I explained my project to him and we began to chat, it was clear to me that he had a different perspective than the other people I interviewed. Unlike any of my other informants such as Cristen or Indira, Dennis had a White Dutch mother and a Curacaoan father. Though he appeared to me to be a Black man, he consistently told me that “I affiliate and I don’t feel the need to affiliate with any group in general.” When I went on to ask him about the way that others likely perceive him (specifically in the context of his race), he told me that he “didn’t know how others perceive him.” He then explained to me about how he believes that there is quite a bit of weight in “acting Black” and explained to me how there is a difference “between skin color and acting in a counterproductive behavior.”

I very much understood that Dennis was trying to say that there was a “correct” way for Black people to act and an “incorrect” way for Black people to act. While offended, I also was

incredibly fascinated since his reasoning was also quite explicitly similar to the original shaming of Tambú many years ago. The Dutch worked to create a negative vision of Tambú – one that was evil, dirty, and was perceived as African. In De Jong’s ethnography, she mentions how she was told that being called *Loango* (Black) was offensive and being called *Preto Loango* (Black African) was even more offensive (De Jong 2012, 79). De Jong later mentions how when her land lady found out that she attended a Tambú event, she asked her to leave the apartment that was being rented and told her that she was “evil and low class” and that she would “bring bad luck” to her family (De Jong 2012, 79).

Ethnicities, Mixtures, and Diasporas

I initially met Gibi at the Saint Tula Commemoration event the first few days of my arrival in Curacao, but I didn’t have the opportunity to interview him until later on. The day I interviewed him, we met at the local library in the center of town. The library was a mostly open-air library, where you could feel the breeze from the ocean throughout the area and you could feel the sun light through the latticed metal that was at the entrance of the library. We sat at one of the tables towards the front of the library, and I could see many students go in and out of the library who had just gotten out of school and either needed a place to do homework or a place to hang out with their friends.

In speaking to Gibi, he expressed to me that more often than not, “people who have mixture”, do not tend to associate with Tambú. He seemed to see himself as a “mixture”, as reflected in the way he described himself when I asked him if he was Afro-Curacaoan. While ultimately his answer was that he *was* Afro-Curacaoan, he made sure to explain his roots by sharing that, “If I say Afro-Curacaoan then I feel at home, but I also feel there is something missing because

in my family I have Dutch too. And that's why I say Yu di Korsou." However, when I asked about Tambú he gave me the example that "the people in [his] family who are more Dutch oriented don't like Tambú" and that Tambú specifically is something that is Afro-Curacaoan and is not something of the entire Yu di Korsou community.

The idea of mixture was presented to me in a way that I had not necessarily expected. I admit that when I typically think of mixture, from my personal American context, I think of people who are biracial. In the Curacaoan context, mixture could mean that one person identifies as Cuban, Surinamese, Dutch, and Curacaoan. Mixture does not only refer to one's race, but also the different ethnicities that they make note of being a part of their identities. In general, I found that very few people selected to identify as "Black". Instead, they would state whatever ethnic groups they affiliated themselves with. I found this interesting, because this showed a sense of understanding of all of the identities that are a part of them, but did not explicitly refer to the different races that are a part of them. Despite this, there is consistently a diasporic undertone that most people seem to understand. No matter what, there seems to be the general acceptance that most Curacaoans descend from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade which is more than likely the reason that they are Black. Even, for example, if they are saying they are ethnically "Cuban", they are usually implicitly saying "Black" without overtly doing so. The connections to the African Diaspora are definitely present, but exist in a different way than I am used to seeing.

From my experiences with my interlocutors, it appears to me that their understanding of the African diaspora could be seen as one of "hybridity" as defined by Stuart Hall. Hall offers a definition of hybridity through the following quote:

These hybrids retain strong links to and identifications with the traditions and places for their "origin." But they are without the illusion of any return to the past.... They are not and never will be unified in the old sense, because they are inevitably the products of

several interlocking histories and cultures, belonging at the same time to several “homes” – and thus to no particular home. (Hall 2005, 361)

Hall’s understanding of hybridity could potentially provide an explanation of the way that some Curacaoans see themselves, especially as many of them are people with identities that “dwell in or on several places at the same time” (Gordon and Anderson 1999, 361). The exception to this, would be the Yu di Korsou movement which has allowed many people to make Curacao their home, and to establish an identity through their understanding of Curacao as the place they were born, even if they see the other parts of their identities as larger parts of their overall identity. In this way, it shows that there is more of a direct connection with an actual location, rather than specifically with the experience of slavery. In summary, I argue that more often than not, the reason that they have the connection with the location is due to the result of the slave trade and the forced migration that came with it.

Mixing Identities and the Diaspora

“We were born with mixture” is what Gibi told me. It made me wonder if being born with that mixture has made it easier to navigate race and relationships on the island. Is it easier to be able to say that you are other ethnicities if it gets you out of saying that you are Black? Even if everyone else is able to see that you are? The reason I think of this, is because I asked Cher if she was “Afro-Curacaoan” and she answered “no”. When I asked her why she didn’t believe she was Afro-Curacaoan, she responded, “because I have a grandmother who is from Florida in America”. I believe that this set of thinking can potentially allow us to think about why Afro-Curacaoan doesn’t really seem to be a term that people find is all encompassing of Black Curacaoans, in the same way that they find “Black” to be all encompassing.

When thinking about the all-encompassing nature of words, I believe that people choose to opt of being “Afro-Curacaoan” because of the African nature of the word and the way that they choose to interpret it word based on their lived experiences. I must admit that to me, “Afro-Curacaoan” simply meant that they were a Curacaoan of African descent which likely also meant that they were Black. To a few Black Curacaoans that I asked, it meant to them that they were African – not meaning that they were of African descent, but that they were directly from a country in Africa.

While the latter is not necessarily false, since more likely than not their ancestors did descend directly from a country in Africa, they did not see themselves in that way. They set internal boundaries that created a distinct separation between themselves and people coming directly from the continent of Africa. In any case, this separation makes sense for them to do – especially if we refer back to the way that they are indoctrinated in school, and what is expressed to them as positive and what is expressed to them as negative. The other side of this consisted of people who told me proudly “YES I am Afro-Curacaoan.”⁸ They commented to me that their ancestors were from Africa, therefore they are Afro-Curacaoan. This was without any direct connection to Africa itself, other than knowing that they must have come from the land at some point in time. At the same time, they still maintained their identity as Yu di Korsou. Despite the words they choose to use, Black Curacaoans are still very much exist as a part of the Diaspora. Stuart Hall goes on to explain:

“Africa, is never unmediated, unchanged, nor completely recoverable for Caribbean people and by extension blacks in the diaspora. It becomes a sort of base for this hybridity, giving it a singular, recognizable form: “Africa, the signified which could be represented directly in slavery, remained and remains the unspoken, unspeakable ‘presence’ in Caribbean culture. It is ‘hiding’ behind ever verbal inflection, every narrative twist of Caribbean cultural life. It is the secret code with which every Western text was ‘re-

⁸ Emphasis here is my own.

read.’ It is the ground bass of every rhythm and bodily movement.
 This was-is-the ‘Africa’ that ‘is alive and well in the diaspora’”
 (Yelvington 2001, 237; Hall 1990, 235)

I felt that this was all important to add because it emphasizes the importance of reaching beyond an “authentic” blackness or an “authentic” Afro-Curacaoan identity. Thinking about mixtures critically further explains the important reminder that there is no one specific African diasporic identity, and that each person’s own understanding of their diasporic identity is reinforced by their lived experiences. But it is for this reason that I find that Tambú plays an important role in Curacao specifically. I truly believe and wish to reiterate that the previous experiences of Curacaoans and the history of Tambú in those experiences are key parts of the way that the identity is formed. I wish to say “formed” as an umbrella term, because Tambú does not only build the Afro-Curacaoan identity, it is also a part of the way people choose to break down the Afro-Curacaoan identity for their own personal navigation. No matter what, the historical memory, as mentioned in the previous chapter, molds the Afro-Curacaoan identity – for better or worse. I did not expect vibrations to be so crucial to the Afro-Curacaoan identity, as much as I expected Tambú to be crucial to the identity.

The aforementioned quote is also important, because I feel that it speaks to the previous chapter. Richard talked about how he believed that there was something inside of people of African descent that assists them with dancing Tambú and with understanding the vibrations of the music and of the experience. If the “unspeakable presence” of Africa exists within people of the African diaspora, then it would not necessarily be an outlandish idea for Richard to feel the way he felt in regards to one’s ancestry existing inside of them (Yelvington 2001). Richard told me that “your body will remember” when it comes to the vibrations of Tambú, and Hall seems to reflect this. If one’s body can “remember” the past and this past is evoked through vibrations, then it implies that this memory is underlying and maybe even “hiding”. Furthermore, the quote addresses the way

that remnants of Africa can live within music through “every rhythm and bodily movement” (Yelvington 2001, 327). In this way, remnants of Africa live on through traditions that support the rhythms and bodily movements in the way that Tambú does. Once again, this is another way in which vibrations are crucial in distinguishing a connection to the past. In addition, what is interesting is that even if Hall is not explicitly saying that the rhythms and bodily movements are connections to Africa through memory or through the natural networks of the world, I very much believe that my interlocutors would take this quote as proof of such. And the unspeakable nature of vibrations is very much a part of this as well in the way that vibrations are unspoken and are experienced in a nonverbal context. While there is often the Tambú singer who adds words to the experience, the people participating through dancing Tambú do not do the same. In addition, vibrations do not talk and are difficult to convey, whereas they are easier to feel and experience.

However, I think that this underlying or unspeakable “Africa” is not one that always goes unnoticed. I think that there is very much another side of it, in which people find ways to work around it which is likely a reason why there is such hybridity to it. In fact, it would somehow be a way that people select to knowingly navigate their diasporic identities, instead of perhaps only doing it unknowingly in the way that Hall suggests. It seems to me that Richard felt that people selected to opt in and opt out of the “Africa” that seems to build the Afro-Curacaoan diaspora. Richard once told me that “it is the people who are not ashamed who preserve Tambú”. He never explicitly told me if it was the people who were not ashamed of their Blackness who preserve Tambú, or if it was the people who were not ashamed of their African ancestry who preserve Tambú. It is clear to me that in Curacao, these are not necessarily one in the same – as I previously mentioned, there are cases where people who identify as Black do not also identify as African. For this reason, I would like to engage with a definition of diaspora. If we take Hall’s quote and

Richard's feelings about Tambú as undeniable fact, then perhaps we should consider a reworking of the definition of what a diaspora consists of.

“Most obvious in these typological lists is the dispersion of a present group or of past ancestors from an original center to two or more new sites. Next is some retained collective memory about the homeland. A further criterion is the maintenance of relations with the departed homeland, at least as an imagined community, which defines in significant ways the contemporary experience of the host land.” (Johnson 2007, 178)

Johnson makes an interesting point that needs to be further emphasized in this paper, where there are maintained relationships with the departed homeland, which I argue is where Tambú definitely plays a significant role, in this case. Through the practice of Tambú, whether it is through singing, dancing, or playing the drums and chapi, there is an inherent maintained relationship with the homeland. And furthermore, there is a maintained belief that by doing rituals associated with Tambú, you are not only maintaining your relationship with the homeland, but also with your displaced ancestors from the homeland as well. Not only do they create an imagined community with other Afro-Curacaoans, but they also add an imagined community of ancestors who can be felt and connected with through the embodiment of vibrations of the earth through one's body and music.

However, I do not bring these points up to argue that people who choose to not participate in the traditions of Tambú are not a part of the African diaspora. This would be essentializing the experiences of people who are a part of diasporas and I think it would also be neglectful of the myriad of experiences that people from diasporas experience. If anything, I think that it points directly to the way that colonialism plays a role in the way that people select to express our diasporic identities. If you are conditioned over time (and still continually conditioned) to believe that a certain part of your identity is wrong or socially understood to be lower than another side of

your identity, then it is no surprise that you would pick the side that has more leverage or is socially understood as higher than the other side.

Because people are able to have agency to make their own decisions in regards to their identity, they are able to make their own specific choices about what parts of their identity they select to make verbally known. The reclaiming and celebration of being Afro-Curacaoan is one that likely takes time and experience in order for it to fully make sense. There needed to be a redefining of the Afro-Curacaoan identity which seems to still actively be happening in Curacao and is not something that I have ignored. In addition, I want to make it clear that the denial of the “afro” prefix is not something that has happened in Curacao. This is also something that the African American community in the United States has also dealt with over time (Thomas 2002). But it is clear that none of these struggles are necessarily static or continuous, and can constantly be “renegotiated” as a community’s conceptualization and understanding of identity continues to change throughout generations.

While I definitely believe that Tambú plays a large role in the mitigation of the Afro-Curacaoan identity, I very much believe that Black Curacaoans simply existing (regardless of if they identify as Afro-Curacaoan or not), is very much a part of the diasporic identity. While some may not choose to actively participate with Tambú, it doesn’t mean that they do not do dances similar to that of Tambú, eat food that has African roots, and nor does it mean that they do not have the experiences with the vibrations or connections of the earth that Richard mentioned.

I do want to be cognizant (and intentional) of the fact that I am defining all Black Curacaoans as belonging to the African diaspora at large. Whether or not they choose to identify with the African diaspora, I find that they somehow still belong to it through their racial categorization. I find that the diaspora and racial identity are very much connected, and by

choosing to say that you're a part of one, does not necessarily mean that you aren't a part of another. But I do want to add that a large part of my perception of this may once again come from my positionality as a Black woman who was raised in the United States and identifies as African-American. My view as an outsider is very much a key role that I play which influences the way that I choose to include a group of people who may not necessarily find themselves aligned in the diaspora. However, I find that there is importance in unity which has been expressed and actively contributes to the identity formation at hand.

Conclusion

In this project, I addressed many different aspects of the Afro-Curacaoan identity through three separate chapters. Each of those chapters contributed to my overall argument of Tambú being an important part of the Afro-Curacaoan identity, and for my argument of the ritual of Tambú as a participating conductor of identity as well. I claim that it works as a conductor because through deciding to accept or deny Tambú, Black Curacaoans are actively defining their identities. I began this project by identifying the relationship between Curacao and the Netherlands and the ways that this relationship is continually defined from the past into the present. The definition of the relationship between the two countries also lies within the way Black Curacaoans remember the past and their colonial history. I conclude that the aforementioned Tula commemoration ceremony and the statues representing the revolt of Tula act as memorials to the past and evoke specific emotions that helps people to recognize their place in Curacaoan society and their past placement in the pre-existing hierarchy. Across the board, I have found that the past very much defines the present in Curacao. The relationship between the past and present is seen through the history of the musical and spiritual tradition of Tambú.

From my findings, I have found that through the use of Tambú, Black Curacaoans are able to connect to their ancestral past by using vibrations of Tambú music and their own bodies. Practitioners of Tambú use their bodies as an embodiment of the past in a collective sense and in an individual sense. Using their bodies as an embodiment of the past is possible due to the interpretation that having African ancestry automatically places memory of the past within your being. The memories of the past are inherently a part of you, and by practicing Tambú it is possible to incorporate these memories as a crucial part of your lived experiences. By using the vibrations of Tambú to connect to the past, those who dance Tambú are able to connect to the natural

networks of the world which allow them to get rid of negative energy through the ability to “seka fuku”, and makes it so that they are also able to have a connection to a practice that originated before slavery. I have found that understanding the origin of Tambú as being before slavery is important because it provides a tool that can be used to overcome the cultural trauma that resulted from slavery. This is the case because I claim that cultural trauma is also collective trauma and this trauma can be better understood through mediums such as music.

Despite the cultural trauma that resulted from the past of slavery, the people of island of Curacao - both Black and non-Black - still very much have a strong sense of national pride. The national identity of being a Yu di Korsou seems to work to more importance on the nationality of a person, rather than the race of a person. While this seems to be a satisfying concept on a surface level, it is undeniable that it created tension and caused erasure of the different cultural traditions of racial and ethnic groups in Curacao. This tension lead to Black Curacaoans having to make an internal accommodation between the Dutch ideals that have been indoctrinated into Curacaoan society and their own African cultural past. This accommodation was necessary as many of the Dutch ideals rejected cultural traditions that were understood to be African, and there is still a collective memory that exists in which Black Curacaoans understand things that seem African to be wrong. Despite this understanding, Tambú continued to exist on the island which allowed Black Curacaoans to maintain their relationship with their diasporic homeland. This experience is reflective of the types of issues that people within diasporas deal with when they have an understood homeland and an actual country that they have nationalistic ties to. Due to the complexities of the relationships of people who come out of the African diaspora, I argue that the rejection of the term “Afro-Curacaoan” is a byproduct of their experiences and doesn’t actually mean that they are not Afro-Curacaoan. Not only is it a byproduct of their experiences, but it is

also a reflection in the hybridity of Curacaoan identity. Much of the hybridity that exists comes from the blend of identities in which Curacaoans often identify with several different ethnic groups due to the identities of their parents or grandparents. My overall conclusion from this project is that vibrations are a new way that we should try to understand people's connections to the world. If we perceive vibrations as a way for people to connect to memories, what does it say about the reactions that we have to different music that we listen to? In addition, I conclude that in the same way that cultural music can be defining to identity, Tambú can work in the same way.

While I am satisfied with my findings for this project, I cannot deny that there are some things that I wish I had the opportunity to do to add to this project. For instance, I wish I had the opportunity to see a complete Tambú festival. Because I didn't have the opportunity to see a festival, I didn't have the chance to observe multiple people dancing Tambú. In addition, I wasn't able to hear live Tambú music which I deeply regret, though I did have the opportunity to hear it through an electronic medium. In addition, I also regret not having the opportunity to speak to more Curacaoans who had a White Dutch parent and a Black Curacaoan parent. It would have been interesting to see if there was any dramatic difference in the way that biracial Curacaoans select to identify. So, if I had the opportunity to add to this project, I would take the opportunity to go back and ask those questions and see those experiences for myself instead of depending on first-hand accounts.

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