6 Investigating the Caribbean's African Past

Kokomakaku Stickdance from Curação

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Investigating the Caribbean's African history is fraught with complexities. Records from the transatlantic slave trade, although a good starting point in studying slave origins, are inconclusive: ship logs were created for reasons of trade, with national backgrounds of Africans recorded as a method for separating battling nation groups during the long voyage to the New World. What is more, misspellings and spelling modifications were frequent, and Africans were often logged into ship documents by the name of the African port of exit, rather than their actual nation of origin. While it is unlikely the region's African history will ever be fully recovered or understood, many ethnologists continue to pursue the challenge, necessarily relying on more non-traditional means for deciphering the evidence. Because African societies generally stored their individual histories within oral forms, music, song, and dance serve as critical resources - they embody the fragments of the African histories that ethnologists seek to re-piece.

One such resource is the Black martial arts, whose observed connections to West and Central Africa provide a medium for rethinking New World African history. Perhaps the most well-known of these is the Brazilian *capoeira*, which has grown into a global icon of African culture in both Brazil and the Americas. Other stickdance examples include the Trinidad *kalenda* (sometimes referred to as *bamboula*) and the Brazilian *maculelê* (from the north-eastern state of Bahia); and the sparring dances that include *maní* from west-central Cuba (in a region known as Bombosa) and *lagya* (also known as *danmyé*) from Martinique. These multifaceted martial arts variations speak to cultural particularities in the Caribbean, revealing a cyclicality that connects them to one another and to African antecedents (see Green 2003; Daniel 2011).

This chapter focuses on *kokomakaku*, a stickfight ritual from the Dutch island of Curaçao. Documenting it has required observing records from colonial slavers as well as the sermons from priests and the laws of censures, all of which provide accounts, however

brief, of stickfighting techniques and the accompanying music. Interviews with elders from across the island were also conducted, which enable a description of modern *kokomakaku*, specifically how it developed to accommodate rules of censure at the turn of the twentieth century. With this data, a timeline of *kokomakaku* can be construed, with the stickdance's different variances and transformations paralleling the changes in Curaçao's social history. To examine *kokomakaku* is to investigate a small segment of Curaçao's African past. The specifics of its development are interpreted through layers of antecedents, which privilege a unique opportunity to acknowledge and begin to re-piece the strength, fluidity, and flexibility of the Black Caribbean experience.

Introducing Kokomakaku as a Chronicle of Slave History

Curação held a unique role during the slave trade. Unlike other islands across the Caribbean, Curação never attained true plantation status: its dry, arid weather and poor soil conditions prohibited successful planting of crops. Spain colonised the island in 1492, to which it quickly ascribed the epithet inutile (useless) in accordance with Curaçao's challenging climate. When gold was discovered in Venezuela and Colombia, Curação went largely ignored until the Dutch took it over in 1634. The Dutch West Indies Company (WIC), which oversaw Dutch participation in the Atlantic slave trade, astutely took advantage of Curaçao's natural harbours and quickly transformed it into one of the Caribbean's most lucrative slave-trading ports, processing approximately half-a-million captured Africans through it during the years of the slave trade. Two African communities developed on the island: the negotie slaven (slaves for trade), those detained on the island only for some three to six months before being sold into slavery elsewhere in the New World; and the manquerons (unsaleable ones), those remaining on Curação permanently, left behind for any number of reasons that made them unsaleable, whose number rarely exceeded 2,300 (Postma 1990; Goslinga 1971).

Most Africans who entered Curaçao in the earliest years came from Angola (Boxer 1957, 106–8; Barlaeus 1647, 206–7). The Dutch had acquired its first plantation colony in the north-eastern region of the Portuguese colony Brazil, which they rechristened New Holland. The WIC realised quickly that the sugar-based plantation economy in New

Holland demanded a huge workforce. As New Holland's first-acting governor bellowed, 'It is not possible to accomplish anything in Brazil without slaves' (Boxer 1957, 83). The WIC was unable to persuade people from the Dutch mainland to relocate to New Holland to supervise the burgeoning sugar plantations. It, therefore, had little choice but to convince farmers already in New Holland working the plantations under Portuguese rule to remain. The farmers agreed under the stipulation that an Angolan enslaved workforce (Angola was a colony of Portugal during this time) be maintained – they were already accustomed to working with Angolan-born labourers and had no interest in dealing with any other African culture group. To meet that demand, the WIC stepped up its exportation of enslaved Angolans to the New World, most of whom were channelled first through Curaçao. The Angolan influence, therefore, manifested itself early on this Dutch island, as evidenced by the presence of several cultural indicators, including *kokomakaku* (Barlaeus 1647; Boxer 1957).

Those ritualised combat dances from Angola that travelled to Brazil during slavery and passed through Curação laid the foundation for the eventual development of the Dutch island's own variant, kokomakaku (Dominguez 1988). Curação's version took its name from the island shrub coco maque, from whose trunks the combat fighting sticks were traditionally constructed. In this game of skill, two contestants sparred within a ring of spectators who sang chants of encouragement and clapped in rhythm to the accompaniment of a single drum, known as a tambú. Contestants' sticks were outfitted with thin straps of woven leather shaped into loops. By slipping their hands through the loops, contestants gained more control over the stick, and avoided having it slip from their grasp. The objective was to hit the opponent on the head with the kokomakaku stick only hard enough to draw blood. The contestant to do so first was named winner as bystanders now shouted, 'Sanger pa tambú!' (Blood for the drum!). Such competitions were frequent between the different enslaved nation groups detained on the island, and, under those conditions, the fights could become fierce. Winning was a source of pride, and winners gained immediate celebrity status among their communities, indicated by their acquired title of 'stick priest' (Brenneker 1971; Juliana 1983; Rosalia 1996).

The music accompanying *kokomakaku* reflected a binary form. Its opening section was steered musically by a lead vocalist, called a *pregon*, who sang special tributes in honour of the individual participants prior to each fight. The purpose of this opening section was to provide a brief biography of each stickfighter, including past fights each had won (or

lost), and any special talents or acrobatic moves that set participants apart. Audience members stood quietly at the side-lines, carefully listening to the singer's thoughtful introductions. Once the *pregon* had finished with the introductions, the battle would commence, with stickfighters jumping into the circle. This marked the start of the second section. The *pregon* continued singing, but now members of the audience joined in, responding in a standard call-and-response manner. The responses offered by the audience served not only to support the solo singer's words, but also to inspire *kokomakaku* participants to maintain even higher levels of energy and creativity (Brenneker 1975; Juliana 1990).

The drummer was called *tambúrero*, taking his name from the drum. The earliest *tambúrero* is believed to have played a standard rhythmic pattern in the first section (shared in Figure 6.1) that remains central to the *kokomakaku* practiced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The *tambúrero* added improvisatory slaps and hits during the dance's second section, which, played at the *tambúrero*'s discretion, helped guide the dancers' movements while also igniting further excitement from the audiences in attendance.

The $tamb\acute{u}$ drum, during slave years, was believed to have been made from a hollowed-out tree trunk, its opening covered with animal skin (De Jong 2012, 97). When it became necessary to invent a more accessible type of $tamb\acute{u}$ drum, however, a new instrument appeared – one constructed from wooden boards gleaned from old fruit and vegetable boxes, carefully cut and glued together to form a cylinder. Sheep skin was then stretched over the top, with a band of tin nailed around the drum to insure its circular design.

The kokomakaku combat game was performed in a variety of settings, and for a variety of purposes. One of the oldest was used as a way to honour and feed the tambú drum. It was believed that the drum held inside it a spirit that, in order to remain healthy and strong, required nourishment of food and water. Its preference was sacrificial blood, believed critical for maintaining its sacred role of communicating with the ancestors. This personification of the drum was further demonstrated by the title of an event organised to 'feed' the drum: 'tambú ta pida sanger' (the tambú drum asks for blood). A spiritual leader usually presided over the event, whose



Figure 6.1 The standard kokomakaku rhythm, played on the tambú (Rosalia 1996, 76)

opening shout, 'sounda di tambú!' (play the tambú drum!), signalled the start of the game. At the leader's call, two men would leave the floor and return with *kokomakaku* sticks, exchanging attacks in an attempt to control the ritual space. The fight would end when blood was drawn, at which time blood from the open wound would be placed into a prepared dirt hole near the drum, which, nourishing the drum, signalled the end of the ritual.

Another popular *kokomakaku* game was 'baila di garoti' (dance with the stick). This event involved two sticks being held low to the ground, horizontally and about one foot apart. Participants would take turns dancing atop the two sticks. Competition between participants revolved primarily around the acrobatic tricks they offered and the agility to which they could dance atop the sticks. Early disqualification would come if a dancer touched the ground prior to the end of the dance. The participant judged the most nimble and dextrous would be deemed the winner.

Kokomakaku was also performed as part of a playful pushing and shoving game between men - a game that continues to be played yet today. Called trankamentu, this game would be used to settle heated arguments, often between two men vying for the affections of the same woman. Should the pushing and shoving get out of hand, the trankamentu would turn into a fight with sticks. The game would also commence if a raucous audience member shouted, 'Sanger pa tambú!' during the trankamentu, which officially signalled the start of a kokomakaku. Opponents were obliged to leave and return with sticks for combat upon hearing that signal. The objective for both trankamentu games, however, was the same: to hit the opponent on the head with the kokomakaku stick hard enough to draw blood. The person to do so first was named the victor of the argument by bystanders. Should a drummer be present, he would be expected to perform at the event and to take charge of the stickfight, controlling the actions with his hits and slaps. Some interviewees explained that, if a drum was not available for these spontaneous events, it was not unusual for a bystander to quickly start playing the familiar kokomakaku drum rhythm atop a table or upon a wooden floor.

Laws of Control and Development of *Kokomakaku* under Censure

Kokomakaku came under scrutiny during slavery when the Dutch, seeking to assume stronger control over the island's slave communities, instituted laws that banned or restricted African-inspired past-times. One of the first

of these laws was introduced in 1740 (OAC 177). Entitled 'Regels tegen Schlecht Gedrag en voor de Betere Discipline van Zwarten en Mulattin' (Rules against Bad Behaviour and for the Better Discipline of Blacks and Mulattos), it prohibited cultural activities from happening in the Black communities that were deemed as 'bad behaviour'. *Kokomakaku* was specifically indicted in this ordinance as leading to *rampzalige resultaten* (disastrous results) when trying to maintain order within the slave communities. Those who dared question the *Regels* or openly disobeyed them faced physical brutality and possible imprisonment.

In 1741, the marker of *schlecht gedrag* was expanded with the institution of a law that prohibited Africans and their descendants from congregating in groups of seven or more. This ordinance, entitled 'Verbod van Vergaderingen door Zwarte Mensen en Mulattin' (Prohibition of Meetings by Black People and Mulattos), proved particularly detrimental to the ongoing practice of *kokomakaku*, since the event required attendance of a large group of people, from participants and audience members to drummer and singers.

In 1766, an ordinance was instigated that attacked *kokomakaku* more specifically. Entitled 'Verbod van het Lopen van de Straten mit een Kokomakaku' (Prohibition of Walking with a *Kokomakaku* Stick), this law, as the title indicates, prohibited anyone from carrying a stick. Even the elderly, who out of necessity may have used walking canes, came under scrutiny with this ordinance – all sticks were considered weapons through it, and anyone carrying one could be punished.

These ordinances did not immediately eliminate *kokomakaku*. Instead, they simply drove it underground – quite an exceptional feat, considering Curaçao's social atmosphere was one of extensive proprietor scrutiny and control. The enslaved community managed to continue *kokomakaku* by moving the combat events to secret locations. Concerned that the accompanying drum rhythms could be swept along with the island's strong western winds, where they could be blown towards the direction of the plantation houses, the practice of *kokomakaku* is noted to have been performed at the westernmost corners of the estates, and only in the late evenings.

In moving underground, *kokomakaku* transformed, with opponents fighting one another not with sticks but with words, which, biting in satire and sarcasm, attacked opponents' real or supposed shortcomings. As was common, a well-respected singer may be hired to perform a song expressly addressing an enemy's foibles. Rules of procedure dictated fairness through the equal opportunity for give-and-take, and those under attack were free

to retaliate with their own singers, often presented with even more cutting mockery. When the battle was all over, attending audiences determined the winner according to whose verbal assault was the wittiest and most effective. The rules further dictated that when the music ended, the former adversaries should shake hands and redefine their friendship.

The challenge of feeding the *tambú* drum under these new restrictions against *kokomakaku* was recognised by *tambú* drummer Mersera. Out of necessity, at the turn of the twentieth century, Mersera created a new version of *tambú ta pida sanger*, for which *kokomakaku* had served a central role. In this revised version, human blood from the *kokomakaku* combat was no longer sought. Instead, Mersera developed a practice that involved the killing of a sheep. Upon sacrifice, some of the sheep's blood would be collected and placed in the dirt hole close to the drum. The sheep's skin from the sacrifice, consequently, would be set aside for the purpose of reskinning the drum at a later time. This revised *tambú ta pida sanger* remains in use today, particularly in the rural outskirts of the island.

The Evolution of Montamentu

A far-reaching influence of *kokomakaku* is found with the evolution of *Montamentu*, a religion that developed on Curaçao during slavery and continues yet today on the island, albeit practiced now in guarded secrecy. Few Curaçaoans today recognise the term *Montamentu* when referring to the religion, as many have adopted the disparaging term *Brua* (translated as 'witch'), which was introduced by Catholic priests and Dutch proprietors during slavery; or by the more general term of *Tambú*, the name of the accompanying ritual drum.

Montamentu continued the distinctly Angolan religious concept of communing with ancestral spirits, and, in accordance with Angolan philosophy, supported the belief that the human soul followed a cyclic evolutionary pattern. Montamentu believers held the notion that, although a deceased person's body may be buried, the individual's spirit remained accessible – where it served as an effective source of power and support. From this perspective, death did not constitute the end of one's existence, but rather marked a period of transition when the soul assumed a new dimension of life. Ancestral spirits became sought in Montamentu as vehicles of sacred guidance and protection; and death, observed more as a kind of freedom, was celebrated as the soul's ascending migration to higher dimensions.

The ritual music and ritual action of *Montamentu* relied on the binary form continued from *kokomakaku*. The first section was performed for purposes of initiating communication with the ancestors, with the *pregon* singing praises not to the stickfighters, but rather to the spirit world. Audience members stood by quietly, carefully listening to the *pregon*'s text. Just as the action of the stickfight occurred in the second part of *kokomakaku*, the sacred form of *Montamentu* too reserved its ritual action for the second part. In this section, audience members assumed states of trance, their human bodies temporarily transformed into spiritual vehicles that ancestors could use to communicate with the human world. The drummer remained the catalyst in *Montamentu*: just as it was the drummer – with his improvised slaps and hits – who guided the stickfighters in battle in *kokomakaku*, it was again the drummer who directed the spiritual connections in *Montamentu*, his mastery of rhythm and touch now arousing or terminating participants' states of trance.

One particularly inventive Curaçaoan variation on the worship of ancestral spirits was the homage that Montamentu paid to the island's original inhabitants - the Indigenous Arawak Amerindians. When the Dutch first took possession of Curação, the island's population consisted of just 32 Spaniards and about 500 Arawaks, 400 of which (along with all the Spanish) were soon forcibly relocated to Venezuela. The 100 or so remaining Arawaks were believed to have refused to serve the Dutch, and were popularly believed to have successfully escaped slavery by fleeing to Venezuela through Curação's twisting system of underground caves. Whatever the actual circumstances of their disappearance, the enslaved Africans idolised the *Arawaks* for their resistance. This is evidenced both by the inclusion of Arawak spirits in Montamentu's pantheon, and the religion's elevation of Curaçao's caves to the status of holy sites. By the same token, Venezuela represented a sort of Mt. Olympus to Montamentu believers: a place where the gods and ancestors lived forever, and where, upon their own death, devotees to Montamentu could, themselves, expect to spend eternity.

When more West Africans were taken to Curaçao after the WIC shifted efforts to the Asiento trade (in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries), *Montamentu* and its accompanying music were again transformed. Iron instruments, important in West African musics, were integrated into *Montamentu*, as were the West African gods, who were now sought alongside ancestral spirits as vehicles of guidance and protection. One of the most popular of iron instruments was the *chapi*, a local instrument made from the metal end of a common garden hoe that was struck

with an iron bar, creating a loud high-pitched tone. While only one drum could be used during the ritual, numerous *chapi* were allowed. Today, it is common for eight or nine *chapi* musicians to crowd around the lone drummer at a *Montamentu* ritual, the piercing sounds of the iron instruments nearly drowning out the pounding rhythms played by the *tambúrero*.

Another complex turn in *Montamentu* occurred in the late eighteenth century, when the WIC established incarceration facilities on Curação. Most prisoners held on the island were Blacks from colonies across other parts of the Caribbean - countries where local politics and plantation economies had established unique and divergent Creole cultures and traditions, including Haiti, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Jamaica, and Trinidad. When these Black prisoners came to Curação, they brought with them the assorted Creole cultures from their New World regions. They were often quartered together with the *negotie slaven*, the result of which had a further broadening effect on Montamentu. Montamentu was suddenly impacted with a number of syncretic religions from each area, including Haitian Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé, and Dominican Santería. Already a refuge for Amerindian spirits, African ancestors, and West African deities, Montamentu now became home also to a rapidly expanding pantheon of Creole deities, including Vodou lwas from Haiti and Santería orishas from the Dominican Republic.

The binary form maintained from *kokomakaku* can be identified as the key to *Montamentu* being able to include in its religious fold both spirits and deities, and to invite both Amerindian chiefs and Haitian *lwas* to its ritual grounds. The first section was used to invite the spirit or deity to the event, while the second was performed for purposes of communicating with the spirit world. These two sections could be repeated as often as desired, but were always presented as a pair – never singly, never out of order. *Montamentu* did not discriminate which deity or spirit would arrive at the event. It was not the rhythm that dictated their arrival, as occurs with many other Afro-syncretised religions of the Caribbean, including *Vodou* and *Santería*. Instead, it is *Montamentu's* binary form that ensures its 'open door policy', empowering participants with near limitless access to the supernatural.

With *Vodou*, *Candomblé*, and *Santería*, these Black New World prisoners often shared their own versions of deities like *Eshu*, the trickster god, and *Shango*, the god of thunder. Duplication – even triplication – of these gods took place. *Montamentu* welcomed any and all deities, explaining why at least four separate *Eshu* gods are present in modern-day *Montamentu*: there

exists *Eshu*, as acknowledged by Curaçao's own *manqueron* community; *Legba*, as borrowed from Haitian *Vodou*; *Ellegba*, from the Dominican *Santería* religion; and *Ellegua*, appropriated from Cuban *Santería*.

This duplication and triplication of gods separated *Montamentu* from other Afro-syncretised religions in the New World. *Vodou* and *Santería* may have embraced variants of the same god, yet, rarely were these variants considered anything but separate personality traits of the same god. As explained by several contemporary *Montamentu* ritual leaders, these do not so much represent different aspects of the same god, as independent deities able to coexist; and each is characterised by distinctly different Caribbean or African origins.

Already a medley of different cultural influences, *Montamentu* blossomed again as it adopted practices distinct to the New World Creole religions introduced by the prisoners. For example, the religious leader in *Montamentu* assumed the title of *Obeah-man* or-woman, a label generally associated with spiritual heads from the syncretised religions of the English Caribbean. In a similar vein, the use of symbolic spiritual drawings towards magical purpose also became integrated into *Montamentu*. Called *vevés*, a term borrowed from Haitian *Vodou*, the emblematic drawings were carefully traced on the ground, or sometimes drawn in cornmeal, coffee grounds, or burnt ashes, near entranceways before *Montamentu* worshippers arrived for services. It was believed symbolic motifs constituting images of the specific deities and ancestral spirits to be invoked might establish a link between the human and the supernatural worlds.

Yet another evolutionary turn in *Montamentu* occurred when pious European colonialists came to the Dutch expressing an interest in purchasing Africans already indoctrinated into Christianity. Seizing the opportunity of adding monetary value to their human commodity, the WIC obliged its paying customers by imposing religious training on all *negotie slaven*. Uninterested in converting the Africans themselves, the Dutch commissioned priests from nearby Venezuela to travel to the island to indoctrinate *negotie slaven* with regular mass services and religious education. Later, the WIC went so far as to authorise Catholic missionaries to accompany its slavers to Africa so that the indoctrination process might commence immediately upon capture.

Although the Dutch did not encourage Catholic training among the *manquerons*, their continuing disinterest was a green light for priests to minister to the *manqueron* community as well as the *negotie slaven*. Writes Charles Goslinga, 'So long as the [indoctrination of Blacks] could be safely ignored . . . Dutch officials were satisfied' (1985, 369). Venezuelan priests

took up permanent and semi-permanent residence on the island, and at least one, a Father Theodorus Browner (who relocated to Curação in 1776), conducted his sermons in the island's Creole language.

When Venezuelan priests distributed woodcuts and lithographs of the Catholic saints, *manquerons* immediately recognised striking parallels between their ancient deities and the powers they possessed with the saints and their particular strengths. Quietly appropriating the saints while continuing to honour traditional African deities, the *manquerons* could follow the demands of the priests while continuing their local African practices. Rather than spelling the end of *Montamentu*, Catholic indoctrination had quite the opposite effect – followers of *Montamentu* not only embraced Catholicism, but added the saints to their existing pantheon of deities. Furthermore, *Montamentu* adopted the Catholic ritual calendar, infusing into existing ceremonies references to both the familiar African deities and the names of saints. It is important to remember that the teachings of Catholicism were not entirely new to most *negotie slaven* or *manquerons*, as they had already learned about it from the Creole prisoners. What was new to the Curaçaoan slaves, however, was the formal training they were now receiving.

When emancipation eventually freed Curaçao's enslaved Africans in 1863, the situation initiated renewed concerns among Dutch colonialists about losing their dominant voice in governing the island. Re-joining forces with the Catholic Church, the Dutch organised an aggressive campaign to abolish *Montamentu*, with the drum becoming the primary focus of the attack. Catholic priests used their pulpits to deliver weekly diatribes against *Montamentu*, specifically citing the 'evil character' of the drum. Furthering their efforts, these priests also instigated the epithet *Brua*, translated as 'witch', to refer to *Montamentu* followers – a label that continues to be used today.

While previous regulation of *Montamentu* had the effect of strengthening its culturally risky forms, metamorphosing them into tools of resistance and empowerment, this latest onslaught of religious sanctions pushed *Montamentu* so far underground that it failed to reappear with prior strength and authority. Gradually, Curaçaoans began to adopt the negative descriptions from Church and State, repeating the complaints that, "Tambú is evil!" and 'Tambú is low-class!' Today they remain quick to ostracise those believed to be *Montamentu* followers by labelling them *Preto Loango* (Black African), a 'fighting expression' considered a degrading insult among young Curaçaoans. *Montamentu* devotees also are known to lose their jobs or places of residence for mere suspicion of involvement. Those brave enough to confront the consequences continue participation, but only in protected secrecy.

Conclusion

An objective of this chapter has been to introduce *kokomakaku* as a historical-cultural-social narrative. Created in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, *kokomakaku* emerged alongside other African combat games that arrived in the Caribbean and developed in accordance with distinguishing colonising powers. As such, *kokomakaku* came to embody the cultural encounters and conflicts marking Curaçao's past and present. It represented localised struggles for status, authority, and identity, its shifts in expression, instrumentation, and purpose exposing some of the varying belief systems and traditions that took root on the island.

Kokomakaku assumed its variation and meaning from a complex convergence of African, European, South American, and Amerindian influences, philosophies, values, and experiences. It stepped up to fill a diversity of social roles and purposes, from sparring ritual among the enslaved communities to a platform for facilitating communion with the deities and ancestors. Within kokomakaku and its sacred counterpart Montamentu exist the hidden transcripts of an African people's account of the past and present. To pull apart those records is to shift our gaze to the *process* of history, with *kokomakaku*'s sacred and secular transformations articulating the struggles African and Afro-Curaçaoan peoples endured as they negotiated and renegotiated lives within and against the constraints of unspeakable oppression. Revealed in an analysis of kokomakaku is a history communicated in chapters, with each disclosing to ethnologists the changing historical contexts of the stickdance's growth and survival. Unravelling its threads exposes veiled complexities distinct to Curaçao's unique cultural encounters, exposing not only the uniqueness of the slave experience but also the continued influence colonial patterns play in the post-colonial world.

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