

2015

Book Review: Tambú: Curaçao's African-Caribbean Ritual and the Politics of Memory, written by Nanette de Jong

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Recommended Citation

Wever, Jerry, "Book Review: Tambú: Curaçao's African-Caribbean Ritual and the Politics of Memory, written by Nanette de Jong" (2015). *Spelman College Faculty Publications*. 28.
<http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/scpubs/28>

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Nanette de Jong

Tambú: Curaçao's African-Caribbean Ritual and the Politics of Memory. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. vii + 163 pp. (Paper US\$ 25.00)

This book tells an extraordinary story of musical and religious creolization in Curaçao. Dutch-American ethnomusicologist Nanette de Jong treats readers to a detailed account of the evolution of *Tambú* via multiple waves of creolization and its struggle to remain viable amidst repressions and other challenges.¹

Tambú, the music of the syncretic Afro-Curaçaoan religion *Montamentu*, evolved from an Angolan stick fighting tradition (*kokomakaku*) to include both secular and sacred forms. Secular forms increased when *Montamentu* was more highly repressed. In a society in which a half million enslaved Africans passed through Curaçao en route to being resold in other New World plantation societies, only some 2300 remained permanently on the island. This resulted in two distinct enslaved populations, one extremely large and in flux, and one tiny and static (p. 17). *Tambú* emerged in this crucible. Starting from 1621 with an Angolan base that included ancestor veneration, there were significant West African overlays from 1663 on, both in terms of iron musical instrumentation and the incorporation of West African deities into the pantheon of *Montamentu*.

In the late eighteenth century the development of Curaçao as a penal colony and the arrival of Catholic priests from Venezuela brought important changes, ushering in multiple new waves of creolization. As an incarceration site, it housed black prisoners from the New World African Diaspora (e.g., Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil) with the enslaved Africans awaiting resale, thus importing already syncretic Afro-creole spiritual traditions such as Vodou, Santería, and Candomblé. Duplication and triplication of deities occurred, and differentiation was maintained. The priests brought in from Venezuela to Christianize the enslaved enriched the syncretic mapping of Catholic saints (and their calendar of celebrations) onto the preexisting Afro-creole pantheon of deities.

A 1795 slave revolt brought a ban on *Tambú* and *Montamentu*, and emancipation in 1863 resulted in a further clampdown. Secularization of *Tambú* grew. Over seventy years of major sugar cane labor migration to Cuba followed emancipation until the 1930s oil exploration (Shell) brought migrant workers back home. The oil boom also led to the arrival of many other migrant laborers

1 de Jong is Senior Lecturer in Music at the International Centre for Music Studies at the University of Newcastle in England. She is an accomplished classical and salsa flautist, subbing with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and “performing with salsa greats such as Johnny Pacheco and Celia Cruz” (p. 163).

with their own contributions, welcomed by Afro-Curaçaoans and integrated in the mix. The Chinese brought Buddha, Indians brought Lord Vishnu, and Surinamese, the largest group, brought *Winti*. “Not only has *Tambú* absorbed some of the lesser gods from *Winti*, many of Curaçao’s current *Tambú* spiritual leaders are from Surinam, where they are recognized as powerful *bonu-men* (*Winti* priests)” (p. 74). The 1969 decolonizing “May movement” championed *Tambú* and Papiamentu, leading to a *Tambú* festival, reduced denigration, further integration, and reclaimed identity (p. 66).

The book, like *Tambú* itself, is divided into two main parts: *Habri* and *Séru*. Part I, “*Habri*: Here It Is, the History of *Tambú*!” includes chapters entitled “The Story of Our Ancestors, The Story of Africa,” “Told through the Fierce Rhythms of the Drum,” and “The Laws Couldn’t Keep *Tambú* Away. The Church Couldn’t Keep *Tambú* Away.” Part II, “*Séru*: Get Ready! Get Ready!” includes chapters entitled “Prepare for the Arrival of Our Ancestors,” “Clap Your Hands!,” and “Come for the Party.”

Habri (which means “open”) is the invitation to ancestors and deities. It depends on the gods as to who shows up. Participants just listen. *Séru* (“closed”) is communication with deities via trance and dance. Dancers’ repetitive foot-stomping (solitary or in pairs) helps to create group trance (p. 50). *Habri* is always heard first, then *Séru*. The heart of *Tambú* is a single drum called *tambú* or *barí* (“barrel”), which is considered spiritual even in secular contexts. New drums are eagerly awaited to see which ancestors will be invoked by their unique timbre. Five types of *herú* (iron) are used. Ethnomusicologists will appreciate useful transcriptions for the *barí* and *herú* which are contrasted for the *Habri* and (the faster) *Séru* sections. Basic transcriptions show how the dance and handclapping interrelate in the *Séru* section (pp. 39–41).

The chapter on “bans” documents the sacred contexts and the history of prohibitions that fostered much of the secular evolution. Five sacred contexts include *Montamentu* funerals (eight-to-nine-day wakes), cleansings (*Manda Fuku Bai*), rituals to bring rain, and others to nourish the soul of the *barí* (via bloodletting from stickfighting). Secularization examples (pp. 54–59) include telling news, a *piconq*-like duel, parties that begin Friday night and go until Sunday night, and two traditions popular at New Years (house to house cleansings utilizing *Manda Fuku Bai*, and a colored paper flag tradition in which people write gossip on a paper, about which songs are then sung).

Overall, this volume in Indiana University Press’s *Ethnomusicology Multimedia* series is an important contribution to Caribbean ethnomusicology and studies of creolization processes. The multiple levels of creolization active in *Tambú* are a challenge to existing models of creolization. Theory sometimes seems tacked on, but at other times effortlessly integrated. Yet the complex

and illuminating story flows. Anthropologist Donald Hill proclaims on the back jacket, “To understand Tambú is to understand Caribbean music.” Indeed, this book helps in both capacities. Anyone who thinks creolization processes can be predictable should read this book.

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