2015

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

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Nanette de Jong


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 Afrocreole spiritual traditions such as Vodou, Santeria, and Candomble. 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).

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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).


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 picont-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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