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## **Beyond slavery: The study of enslavement through post-Abolition memory**

Rose Mary Allen

### **Introduction**

According to JoAnne Banks-Wallace, author of the article 'Talk that Talk: Storytelling and Analysis Rooted in African American Oral Tradition,' African-American oral traditions are highly influenced by cultural contexts and history. Nevertheless, she continues, these oral traditions have not been sufficiently explored to reveal the depth of the lived experiences of African-Americans (Banks-Wallace 2002:410). These statements are also applicable to the Caribbean, and specifically Curaçao, one of the Dutch Caribbean islands that is the focus of this paper.<sup>1</sup> In Curaçao too, oral traditions are fundamental in the social life of people. Oral traditions include stories, songs, proverbs, myths and other information passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation.

In this paper, I analyze the social act of remembering enslavement in Curaçao and the devices that people use to sustain their memory. I illustrate how Afro-Curaçaoans since Abolition (1863)<sup>2</sup> have continued to remember slavery through their oral traditions, for example, by transmitting information about enslavement verbally to members of the younger generations.

### **Remembering the painful past**

When I started my oral history project in Curaçao in 1980 and asked people about enslavement, they were not always willing to talk about it. They would make remarks such as ‘I don’t remember anything’ or ‘why are you interested in this foolishness?’ Some stated bluntly that it was never discussed within the family or that they would rather not discuss it. Some would even express anger at the fact that I was trying to retrieve information which they were doing their best to forget. It seemed as if people had blocked slavery out of their mind. Was it indeed so? Would people erase this information from their memory because it was too painful and traumatic or because they saw it as having little value for their self-identity?

One of the challenges during my research was to overcome the older generation’s unwillingness to talk to me about parts of their history of which they would rather not be reminded, which they would like to erase completely from their memory, or which they seemingly would transmit only to the inner circle of their family. It was here that the guidance of Paul Brenneker and Elis Juliana was useful. Brenneker and Juliana, who were the first to conduct serious historical ethnographic research on the island in the 1960s, had also noticed and commented on the phenomenon that I encountered.<sup>3</sup> They maintained that it was useful to build a sense of trust with the interviewees from the outset. That meant becoming involved with the informants, paying attention to their emotional and social needs, and generally helping out wherever possible. It also meant participating in important events in their life, such as the birth, first Holy Communion, wedding or death of family members. It meant, in fact, using ethnographic research methods to uncover the past.

During one of my meetings an elderly man named Carlos Koeiman, born in 1903, indicated his willingness to transmit his knowledge of the past by stating that ‘You should not forget your roots / You must remember your roots / Because if you remember your roots / You have

safeguarded your conscience.’<sup>4</sup> It is this notion, with perhaps a spiritual dimension, that has kept many memories alive in a society in which the individual and collective memories of male and female descendants of enslaved people were for a long time considered ‘things not worth remembering.’ This notion contains the clue to why people have found it worthwhile to preserve information about enslavement for themselves and to transmit it to the younger generations.

### **Oral history and oral tradition**

Oral sources are central to discovering what James Scott has called the ‘hidden transcripts’. Scott explains that hidden transcripts encompass the various ways in which people behave and think when they are out of reach of those in authority. They include the ‘offstage’ behaviour and intentions adopted to help people (re)gain some kind of power. Sometimes such hidden transcripts are conspiratorial in nature, as they are also a way in which the subjugated group openly expresses its discontent with the behaviour of the dominant class (Scott, 1990: 4-5). Besides providing information on important historical events that have guided the lives of people and on people’s understanding and explanation of their past, hidden transcripts also provide insight into the ideas and values behind people’s actions —both when the dominant institutions allow them space to express their culture and when they are in the privacy of their own group. In that way, hidden transcripts present the symbolic frameworks within which ordinary people defined their lives and the value that they attributed to these symbols. And according to Alessandro Portelli, ‘they provide a window’ for the understanding and interpreting the lives of people who previously were not considered an important element in the historiography (1994: 351).

Most of the oral sources that I use in this paper are drawn from the research that I carried out between 1980 and 1995, when I was working at the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of the Netherlands Antilles (AAINA). The oral research project of the AAINA was a government-supported attempt to document as much information as possible about life and customs in Curaçao in the past by interviewing people who were over sixty years of age. In my research I have sought to make a distinction between oral history and oral tradition. Both consist of oral material, in the sense that they are transmitted verbally and, in this case,

recorded in the context of fieldwork. *Oral history* comprises testimonies and personal recollections of people who have experienced certain events first-hand or who were sufficiently close to the events to recollect them personally. *Oral tradition* embodies stories, songs, proverbs, myths and other information passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. This distinction can be made in theory, but in a field situation the line is harder to draw because it is continually crossed by ‘the bearers of testimonies’ (Dorson 1979: 9). According to Richard Dorson one should not overlook the fact that over time oral history will incorporate both folk elements and folkloric material; stories, songs, proverbs and myths (oral tradition) can all shed light on the historical past (1979: 45).

### **Keeping memory alive: the role of the family and specialists**

The question is: how have Afro-Curaçaoans have been able to retain information about their ancestors within memory? It is important to acknowledge the role of the family in the retention of memory. In the Afro-Curaçaoan case the extended family is very important. Sometimes three or even four generations of a family could be present in a setting. The presence of a member of the older generation was then very important as the principal transmitter of historical knowledge. Informants who were not born during slavery could therefore tell a researcher about slavery based on what they had been told by members of an older generation who had had first-hand experience. For example, Ma Tuda, who was born in 1881 and who was 102 when I interviewed her in 1983, had heard about slavery from her father. As a young slave, her father had to look after the chickens on the plantation. Later, he was sold to a medical doctor in town.

R.A.: How old was your father when he died in 1921?

G.A.: I don't know. In those days people did not know their age. He used to tell us that he was born during slavery (*tem di katibu*).<sup>5</sup> When he was a small boy, a doctor came and asked the owner of the plantation for a slave child. He needed someone to clean his office. The owner asked his mother and she cried out: ‘Oh if he leaves, I will lose him.’ ‘No,’ said the owner, ‘the doctor will take good care of him. He is a doctor.’ My father was a small boy then, he was not going

to school yet, neither to catechism lessons. The doctor lived in the town. Doctor De Veer was his name.<sup>6</sup>

Ma Tuda's story also provides the information that the practice of separating a mother from her children under twelve years of age continued even though laws against it had been promulgated in 1839 (Renkema, 1981: 133). In this case, an oral source shows that those with power did not always abide by the laws regarding the treatment of slaves. Separation of mother and child is one of the recurring themes in Curaçaoan oral narratives.

Repetition of information across generations in the family setting appears to be an important technique utilized by Afro-Curaçaoans. This specific method for reproducing, transmitting and preserving knowledge from the older generations was acknowledged by Eduardo Tokaay, born in 1900, whom I interviewed in 1985. He remembered that when he was small, he and his brothers and sisters would gather at home in the evenings, sitting in a circle around their father, who would tell them stories. During the story-telling their father would suddenly stop and ask them what he had talked about. Those who had forgotten were reprimanded and mocked, while those who remembered were praised. Emphasis was placed on the ability of the person to reproduce a story as verbatim as possible.<sup>7</sup>

The role of certain specialists in retaining memory has also been essential. Most oral cultures have professional poets and raconteurs who perform, wandering from place to place. Specialists have a particular position and recognized narrative or poetic skill that sets them apart from others (Horton and Finnegan 1973: 120). In Curaçao, people such as Cola Susanna (1915-2003), Martili Pieters (Martilio Jacob Thomas, 1901-2000), Imelda Valerianus (1915-2005) and presently Victor Batolomeus (1939-) have long played the role of specialist on oral traditions. They are considered to be very knowledgeable about the past and are often called upon to talk about the past. This can sometimes lead to over-repetition of information.

### **Language as carrier of memory and meaning**

I have learned that the literal transcripts of oral data not only provide historical information regarding certain events and aspects of life, but also help to uncover the ways in which this

information is memorized and transmitted. In *Orality and Literacy* (2002), Walter Ong argues that people develop so-called mnemonic devices to organize and structure their thoughts, in an attempt to ensure that certain information considered essential for the existence of the self and of the community is remembered and transmitted. He discusses some of the psychodynamics of orality that are applied in oral culture to retain information for later recollection. According to Ong, people think in memorable thoughts, which are mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. He gives as examples heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, repetitions or antitheses, alliterations and assonances, epithetic and formulaic sayings and proverbs (Ong 2002: 34).

The following segment of an interview with someone born in 1902 demonstrates the mnemonic pattern of repetition:

R.A.: Did your grandmother work for the *shon* [master]?

I.S.: Let's say, her husband was a *vito* [overseer]. When their children were born, they did not go and live elsewhere. On the eastern side of the *shon*'s house, they built a house in the *shon*'s yard for someone who was named Didi, Didi di Beri. We grew up and found Didi di Beri looking after the animals.

R.A.: Were there more people working there?

I.S.: Yes, they were many. As I can recall, there was Didi, there was our grandmother, the *vito*, there was Dochi, who was my aunt's husband. Dochi used to take care of the *kunuku* [plantation] and looked after the animals. The *shon*'s *kunuku* had delicious mangoes. No servants could eat them. You were not allowed to. You could have eaten one if it had been stolen. [Laughter]. The *shon* did not allow it. You cannot eat it as it belongs to the *shon*. There were very big mangoes and sweet. And they used to call them bull's balls. You had to pick it apart for the *shon*. When you are under a tree, you have to endure what the birds do.<sup>8</sup>

By repeating the words 'there was/were' (*tabatin* in Papiamentu)<sup>9</sup>, the informant ordered her thoughts and remembered the situation as it was. This helped her place the story in the right

perspective. This structuring of ideas was also achieved by the use of sayings, such as ‘When you are under a tree, you have to endure what the birds do.’

Informants would distinguish between what they had heard and what they had experienced themselves. For example, they would distance themselves from the information by saying ‘*segun mi a tende* [as I have heard...]’ or ‘*nan di ...* [they used to say ...], or ‘*mi a lanta tende ...* [I grew up hearing ...].’ But when they wanted to make precise comments, they would say ‘*segun mi mes a mira ...* [as I have seen myself ...]’ or ‘*mi a mir’ele ku mi mes wowo* [I saw it with my own eyes].’ Following Nassehi, Christine Hardung calls these interjections ‘indexical markers’: signs, spontaneously interwoven with speech, that allude to meanings in the narration. They are tied directly to the presence of remembered experiences and are integrated into the perspective of the speaker, emphasizing that what is being described is not second-hand experience (Hardung 2002: 41).

For example, in the next segment the already mentioned Ma Tuda recalls what she had heard about the treatment of the enslaved, but also relates what her own reaction would allegedly be.

You used to get whipped. When I grew up, I heard about it. Not that I have seen it. The owner had a whip and when you did something wrong you would get whipped. He would not pardon you, but would whip you. Some people fled into the woods. Nowadays there is no slavery. If you do something like this with the young boys of today, you will catch hell. If you touch them. Even I myself, because I have not experienced slavery. But if someone puts one finger on me, I will attack them worse than a *gutu* [a local, aggressive fish]. You see me here now; I cannot stand up because I am old. But I have the strength to fight back, if someone were to hold me, tie me with a rope, and prepare me to be whipped. Are you crazy?<sup>10</sup>

### **Conveying concealed meaning through symbolism, songs and secret language**

The interview segment with Ma Tuda about the treatment of enslaved is also an example of concealing information in codes that are introduced from one context into another. She compared herself when angered with the local fish species called gutu, noted for its aggressiveness when attacked. Especially in songs and stories, animal figures are recurring features and may serve to camouflage feelings not meant to be expressed openly. The challenge lies in decoding these messages and discovering the symbolism and metaphorical meaning conveyed through them.

The construction of meaning is also present in the so-called *Luango-stories*. Luangos are a group of enslaved people whose origins were identified on the island and who were portrayed as a supernatural people. They were believed to be small people with wings who were able to fly back to Africa if they did not eat salt. The ability would be lost once salt was consumed. Due to their supposed ability to fly, the Luangos enjoyed a certain prestige; one of my informants referred to them as ‘sabí di e tempunan ayá’ – the wise people of those days. People focused on this ability to fly which represented freedom and independence and thus contrasted with the constraints of enslavement. This theme can be found in the music and oral literature of the Caribbean and the southern United States. In the Caribbean the myth came to imply freedom – either in the sense of escaping from the plantation or as the ultimate act of suicide (McDaniel 1990:29, 38).<sup>11</sup>

Songs are an important source of historical information and they too have functioned as a device for structuring ideas and memories. For example, Curaçaoans generally remember the largest slave revolt of 1795 on the Knip plantation in a very fragmentary way. In 1986 I was able to collect the following song which deals with the 1795 revolt.<sup>12</sup>

*Papa Sewe*

Papa Sewe

*Ata Negru tribí k’a lanta ku Blanku* Look at that insolent Negro who stood up against the Whites

*Papa Sewe*

Papa Sewe

*Ata Negru tribí k’a lanta ku Blanku* Look at that insolent Negro who stood up against the Whites

<i>Hork'é</i>	Hang him
<i>Mat'é</i>	Kill him

The interviewee who sang this song for me was born in 1904 and explained that his mother had told him that some house-slaves had composed this *tambú* song<sup>13</sup> under the order of their master when Tula, the leader of the slave revolt, was hanged. The interviewee mentioned this to show the extent to which these slaves lived both mentally and physically under the rule of their masters. His explanation also suggests that slave-owners were aware of and used the role of the *tambú* as a musical vehicle for transmitting coded messages. In the above song two social groups are identified, 'Negru' and 'Blanku', indicating the importance attributed to skin colour. The song clearly purveys a value judgement regarding Tula's behaviour: he did not abide by the rules of submission but revolted against them. The verb *lanta ku*, to stand up against, has a negative connotation. It is used mostly when a person stands up against someone in a higher social position—for example a labourer against his/her employer, a child against its parents, women against men. In this song Tula is viewed as a *Negru tribí*, a bold and insolent black person man—something contrary to the accepted norm.

In 1959 Brenneker and Juliana collected a song that is similar in text and value judgement to the song about Tula which I collected in 1986. Their variant provides a little more detail about the event in question: the slave revolt of 1795 on the Knip plantation. According to Brenneker, their informant stated that the enslaved threw hot mud in the faces of those who tried to capture them.

<i>Zino papapa zinowé</i>	Zino papapa zinowé
<i>Negru tribi k'a lanta ku Blanku</i>	The insolent Negro who stood up against the Whites
<i>Zino papapa zinowé</i>	Zino papapa zinowé
<i>Tula tribí ku traha papa</i>	The insolent Tula who made porridge out of mud
<i>Zino papapa zinowé</i>	Zino papapa zinowé
<i>Tula tribí ta hala lechi</i>	The insolent Tula carrying milk

The difference between the two versions of the song might be explained by the fact that Juliana and Brenneker's informants were from Banda 'Bou where the revolt occurred, while my informant lived on the eastern part of the island (Banda 'Riba). This would suggest that a geographical dimension may inform the meaning of certain events and influence the manner in which events are remembered and transmitted.

The fact that I was able to record songs in the 1980s which Brenneker and Juliana had collected in the 1950s and 1960s from respondents who were older than mine shows that these songs were communal and passed on from generation to generation, which suggests that the songs remained meaningful for the successive transmitters.

Some traditional songs were in the Guene language. This local language was developed as a medium of communication among the enslaved and persisted until the twentieth century. Today, a few people might still claim to be able to sing in Guene, but they are unable to translate the words into Papiamentu. Nevertheless, they can explain what the songs are about in a general sense. Scholars presume that most of the words forming what people today still call Guene are actually bastardizations of the old language. One of these scholars is Frank Martinus Arion, whose study *The Kiss of a Slave* (1997) deciphers part of the Guene language to analyse its contribution to Papiamentu.

The enslaved sang in Guene to mislead their master. It was used as a secret language in which they could talk about their master. Later some plantation-owners became aware of this phenomenon and prohibited singing in Guene.<sup>14</sup> But it was still used in the period after Abolition to express feelings in a concealed manner. One informant born in 1905 told me that when they sang songs in Guene during work at the phosphate company and the supervisor asked them about the meaning of the songs, they would lie about it. In this way the use of Guene complies with what Michael De Certeau sees as a reaction of the powerless against the action of the powerful. He states that power is bound by its very visibility and that the powerless need to resort to trickery (De Certeau 1984: 35). The use of Guene can be compared to the function of the *kuenta di Nanzi* [Anancy stories]. In these stories, the main trickster figure Nanzi

cunningly outsmarts those higher in the socioeconomic hierarchy. There is also a connection with the behaviour referred to as 'hidden transcripts' by James Scott, as discussed earlier.

## **Conclusion**

The process of remembering through oral traditions is important in Afro-Caribbean social history. A large segment of the Curaçaoan population has safeguarded and transmitted its knowledge of the past orally. The values and ideas of those whom historiography has rendered almost silent are recovered through the social act of remembering and embedded in stories, songs, proverbs, myths and rites (the intangible heritage). When using this oral information for the study of the past, one of the difficulties concerns the matters of veracity and representativeness. In this paper I have therefore tried to describe the mechanisms and structures through which ideas and actions are remembered and passed on among Afro-Curaçaoans, the various linguistic devices and carriers of meaning which are used in the process, as well as the contexts within which this occurs. In so doing, I have sought to offer researchers elements of an effective and responsible methodology for studying the (sometimes painful) past using memory—in this case, studying enslavement using the memory of Afro-Curaçaoans in the post-Abolition period.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Curaçao is an island of about 440 kilometers. It is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands together with Aruba, Bonaire, Sint Maarten, Sint Eustatius and Saba. Curaçao with Bonaire and Aruba are situated in the southern Caribbean (together they are called the Dutch Leeward islands or the ABC islands), while Saba, Sint Eustatius and (Dutch) Sint Maarten are near Saint Kitts & Nevis in the north-eastern Caribbean (known as the Dutch Windward

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islands). At the moment there is a reform process going on that will change the constitutional relationship with the mother country, the Netherlands, and the other Dutch Caribbean islands.

<sup>2</sup> On 8 August 1862 the so-called Emancipation law was passed in the Netherlands: the enslaved in the Dutch colonies would become free on 1 July 1863. Accordingly, the 67 government slaves and 6,958 private slaves in Curaçao gained their freedom on the latter date (Lantèrnu 2003:17). The group of Afro-Curaçaoans comprised approximately 85 percent of the total population, of which thirty-five percent became freed people at this time (Oostindie, 1995:158; Oostindie, 1997:56).

<sup>3</sup> The prime oral history collection of Curaçao is the corpus provided by Brenneker and Juliana. Their body of work is commonly referred to as the Brenneker/Juliana collection. In 1973 they placed them in a foundation under the name of Zikinzá. The corpus of this collection consists of over 1400 songs, stories and short narratives, collected on tape from 267 informants. They are currently stored at the National Archives in Willemstad. A number of interviews are also stored in the Public Library in Willemstad. The corpus of this archive consists of 110 tapes containing information on all aspects of life.

<sup>4</sup> Carlos Koeiman, 83 years old when I interviewed him in 1986, expressed this essential idea behind collective memory in these few words: ‘*Si bo kòrda bo prinsipio, bo tin bo konsenshi wardá.*’

<sup>5</sup> For a long time, the older generations used slavery as an important marker of time. It was referred to as *tem di katibu* (the times/period of slavery).

<sup>6</sup> Interview of Ma Tuda, born in 1881 and residing in Westpunt, by R.M. Allen in August 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Interview Eduardo Tokaai (born 1899), Allen, 12-9-1984 (NatAr).

<sup>8</sup> Interview Inie Sirvanie (born 1-4-1910), Allen, 27-11-1989 (NatAr).

<sup>9</sup> The Papiamentu language is a creole language used in the past as the *lingua franca* among slaves, between master and slave, and even within the master classes. The first available written account in Papiamentu is a letter dated 5-10-1775 from a Curaçaoan Jew to his mistress (Salomon 1982: 368).

<sup>10</sup> Interview of Ma Tuda, born in 1881, by R.M. Allen in 1983.

<sup>11</sup> According to McDaniel this differs from the West African myths, where only witches and spirits are able to fly. This ability could nevertheless also end once salt was eaten.

<sup>12</sup> Interview Nicolaas Petrona (born 1898 in Kent U Zelf, eastern part of the island), Allen, 1986 (NatAr).

<sup>13</sup> The *tambú* celebration takes place in the months around the end and beginning of the year. Compared to other popular celebrations, which have been gradually disappearing, the *tambú* is still alive and present. The name *tambú* refers to the celebration/event itself as well as the drum, the music and the dance. Of all popular customs, it has been the most criticized. During slavery it was feared by the slave-owners, as it offered opportunities to the enslaved to gather and to express their disgust about their situation by means of their songs and their dance. It was also heavily condemned by the Catholic clergy which called the dance lascivious and sexually immoral. Members of the older generation still relate the severe punishment of those found participating in a *tambú* celebration exercised by the clergy. This punishment included confiscation of the drums, whipping, and even expulsion of the participants from the Catholic Church.

<sup>14</sup> This I deduced from an interview with someone knowledgeable about Guene. He stated that on some plantations the inhabitants were prohibited from singing in Guene, as the owners suspected that they were singing about them.