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CONTESTING RESPECTABILITY AND SEXUAL POLITICS IN POST-EMANCIPATION CURAÇAO

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Introduction
Most studies in the Caribbean about the history of sexuality focus predominantly on gender roles in kinship and family. In fact, in the Caribbean, sexuality has been a “taboo subject off-limits for scholarly research” as Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto conclude in their review article “The sweetest taboo: studies of Caribbean sexualities: a review essay” (2006: 247). This is also valid for the Dutch Caribbean islands, where the few studies on sexuality deal with its present manifestations in Curaçaoan society. However, the situation seems to be changing slowly as more empirical studies are being produced that historicize sexuality in Caribbean society.

There is a need to study the colonial history of sexuality in Curaçao, in particular during the slavery and post-Emancipation periods. I endorse historian Patricia Mohammed who asserts in her article Towards indigenous feminist theorizing in the Caribbean that “feminism as an expression of sexual equality must be itself historically located, despite the global discourse which feeds its growth” (Mohammed, 1998: 7). This implicates in particular the intricately complex and contradictory inter-relationships of race, gender and class as they played out in men’s and women’s experiences with sexuality during colonial slavery (Brereton, 2013). What comes out of recent feminist scholarship is that colonial slavery was both a system of exclusion and one of gender supremacy and racialized sexual dominance – a conclusion which the Curaçaoan historians Nolda Römer (1980; 1992), Sonia Cuales (1998) and Jeanne Henriquez (2006) have also drawn.

In this article, I explore the historically specific manifestations of sexuality that have culturally defined or challenged popular conceptions of gender in Curaçao. I look at the cultural politics deployed during colonial times, aimed at shaping ideal male and

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1 This is an adapted version of the Public Lecture titled “Contesting respectability: sexual politics in post-emancipation colonial Curaçao”, delivered in Amsterdam on March 27, 2017. That lecture was part of the NWO program “Cultural practices of citizenship under conditions of fragmented sovereignty: gendered and sexual citizenship in Curaçao and Bonaire”, a partnership between the University of Amsterdam and the University of Curaçao. The lecture was made possible by: Dr. Sruti Bala, Assistant Professor in Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Amsterdam; Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies; the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA); the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis (NICA); the Amsterdam Research Centre for Gender and Sexuality (ARC-GS); and Atria-Institute on Gender Equality and Women’s History.

2 See Shields (2017); Bala (2017-2022); Allen (forthcoming)
female Curaçaoan behaviors in the post-Emancipation period, between 1863 and 1915. I also look at how this was replicated and/or contested by those toward whom it was directed. As a turning point in the history of Curaçao I use 1863 when slavery was abolished and about thirty-five percent of the population became freed citizens (Oostindie, 1995: 56). I apply the term ‘respectability’ – which is expressed in the local creole language of Papiamentu through terms such as hende drechi [respectable people] – to address both the colonial cultural politics of gender relationships and its social implications for the Curaçaoan working class.

It is important to look at how respectability was defined in the colonial policy of westernization as it was implemented within the power dynamics of the state and the Roman Catholic Church after Abolition in 1863. Principally during the 19th century, this Church became a social institution that increasingly played a very important part in the dynamic cultural encounter between enslaved, freed, and free people. After Abolition, while the African descended working class struggled to define the meaning of freedom, the Church, much more than the colonial state, grew to become an important primary institution exercising authority and control over the lives of this segment of the population.

The purpose of this article is to give insight into the ways in which institutions with power in Curaçao approached respectability in the post-Emancipation period, not only as a class and race ideology, but also as one of gender. The paper also aims to illustrate how the popular classes dealt with respectability by replicating and/or resisting it.

Respectable behavior: hende drechi and more
In Papiamentu, the main language in Curaçao, the term hende drechi, meaning ‘a respectable person’, has been and is still used to denote someone who behaves according to certain moral values and norms, such as good manners, piousness and chastity, as well as other good Roman Catholic virtues. The adjective drechi also appears as a verb, drecha, in the expression drecha bida, which literally means reforming or bettering one’s life, in this case specifically as part of the process of becoming a hende drechi: a respectable person. The Roman Catholic Church came to use the expression drecha bida to promote having a ‘proper’ family relationship by regulating one’s sexual life through (monogamous) marriage. An informant born in 1903 explained it explicitly to me during an interview that I had with her in 1983: “In the past the Roman Catholic Church would visit your home and when the priest came to your home and [noticed that] you were living together as man and woman without being married, he would advise you to get married, to drecha bida, i.e. to better your life.³

After the Abolition of slavery, a certain notion of marriage was used to urge cohabiting black, working-class men and women to get married legally as well as in church and in that way become properly married spouses who live monogamously in a nucle-

³ Interview of Severina Valks, born in Kenepa in 1902, by Rose Mary Allen, 8-9-1983.
ar family household (Allen, 2007). In his letter read at the Emancipation of the enslaved in the Dutch Caribbean in 1863, the Vicar Apostolic J.F.A. Kistemaker explicitly emphasized this notion and stated that the formerly enslaved should adhere to the norms of sexual morality and monogamy instead of the less secure and unstable family lives that they had presumably lived during slavery.⁴

So, especially in the post-Emancipation period, the term drecha bida came to hold more meaning than just that of its two constituent words. The term represented an ideology with certain attitudes towards sexuality for the African descended working class and stood for specific patriarchal notions of gender roles and behavior for men and women. Drecha bida became central in the life of the African descended working class who used the term to refer to the ideal family. During conversations with me, elderly people would often say about a couple that had lived a long, married life: “Nan a biba drechi” or “Nan a biba un bida drechi”, both meaning that the couple had lived a respectable life.⁵

Individual members of the working class who adhered to the ideology of drecha bida tended to experience advancement in their status in society. Consequently, for some a bida drechi [respectable life] became an aspiration for social mobility and a way to contest the socially inferior position that the society imposed upon them. In this sense, drecha bida as a process and bida drechi as the result of that process contain elements similar to the politics of respectability – a concept which has become central in African American gender history. Scholars such as Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham (1994) and Victoria Wolcott (2001) have applied the term respectability to refer to a certain way of life of African Americans, in which they adopt the manners and morality of the dominant European descended culture in an attempt to counter the negative image attached to the behavior patterns associated with their own color group. Respectability is seen here to be a coping strategy adopted by African Americans in their efforts aimed at social advancement and at destigmatizing themselves from the prevailing status notions in American society. Higginbotham and Wolcott have applied the term to the attitude of middle-class and working-class African American women who, lacking the phenotypically European physical features preferred by society, may attempt to enhance their status by displaying certain practices (e.g. in terms of clothing and hairstyle), conduct and lifestyles similar to those of the European descended upper classes.

Peter Wilson has also used respectability in his book Crab antics (1973), which is based on ethnographic research on the English and English lexifier creole-speaking Colombian island of Providencia, near the east coast of Nicaragua. Wilson defines respectability as a value system acted out (e.g. through language and lifestyle) by the

⁴ Kerkelijke Courant, no. 368, vol. 30, 16-1-1864; Amigoe, 1-7-1863.
⁵ The concept is still used at present: in 2016, a 55-year-old lady who had cohabited with her partner for over 25 years told me that she had “bettered her life” [drecha bida] through formal marriage.
middle class and by women of all social classes on the island in an attempt to attain a
certain level of social advancement. Wilson considers the Christian Church to be a
principal agent in the formulation and propagation of respectability, as it is the fore-
most actor in the public domain of sociability for the middle class and especially for
women, who are notably more devout than their male counterparts (Wilson: 102).
For the male culture, Wilson coins the counter-concept of ‘reputation’, which points to
autochthonous behavior – the adaptation by men to local conditions, especially by
spending time on the street and, by extension, in the rum shop where an all-male crew
gathers at every opportunity to drink, play games, and above all talk. Qualities that are
important for creating a (male) reputation are fathering children and supporting them
economically, but not necessarily raising them. According to Wilson, reputation also
involves a readiness to fight in defense of one’s honor and a proficiency in the use of
language, notably sweet talk, word games, riddles, storytelling, boasting, puns, insults
and cursing. Musical ability and knowledge of local lore, fishing, carpentry and me-
chanical skills are also essential parts of a man’s reputation and of the ideal masculini-
ty (Wilson: 149, 150). Wilson has been criticized (Boucher, 2003) for reducing a
complex set of behaviors to a binary opposition, since in Caribbean societies, both
men and women adhere to the principle of respectability, as the case of Curaçao also
shows.

The culture of dissemblance as a methodological challenge

Much of the data in this paper is drawn from my oral history research which I started
to conduct in the 1980s to examine how Afro-Curaçaoans journeyed from slavery to
freedom. I have approached this research from a feminist perspective that recognizes
power as a central factor in the lives of the research objects. Such an approach derives
from a need to lend a voice to oppressed, marginalized, excluded and ‘hidden’ groups
in a gender-inclusive way. My feminist approach entails looking at how institutions of
power constructed colonial-based power in the daily lives of marginalized groups. The
approach also requires looking at how these groups contested these power constructs
and articulated resistance. Consequently, in this paper I deal not only with the way in
which the Roman Catholic Church promoted the post-Emancipation politics of re-
spectability, which I have been able to deduce from archival material such as newspa-
pers and letters and other documents written by the religious leaders. Through oral
history research, I also listen to the voices of the people who experienced and re-
sponded to the politics of respectability.

The voices of those historically silenced can be heard through their narratives. What
has struck me is that during oral history interviews, women especially were at first
less likely to cooperate. Fortunately, this has changed in the course of time. But in
particular women born at the end of the 19th or beginning of the 20th century would
initially disqualify themselves as having lived a life that supposedly was not worth
writing about. These women silenced themselves because historically their social lives were not considered important. And when I did obtain their willingness to be interviewed, they would still prefer not to talk about intimate aspects of their lives. In other words, I had to break through several cultural walls behind which these women positioned themselves.

Scholars of African American social life have called this phenomenon the “culture of dissemblance” which is visible particularly among African American women who have in the course of time learned to hide and mask their feelings, secrets and private lives from the prying and judgmental eyes of the dominant classes (Simmons, 2012: 433). Darlene Clark Hine sees dissemblance as a kind of protective shield adopted in particular by African descended women who, while creating an appearance of openness and disclosure, actually shield the truth of their inner selves from the oppressor (1989: 915). According to her, one of the characteristics of the culture of dissemblance is that African American women remain silent about much of what they endure in their lives. They would rather not tell the whole story of their experience so as not to be judged according to the demeaning stereotypes to which they have long been subjected (p. 915). According to Francis White, this behavior became a habit transmitted inter-generationally; painful narratives would not be talked about or would be presented as mere fragments of stories that show more heroism and are less painful (White quoted in Malhotra, 2013: 178).

Attention to body language becomes important when silence is exhibited in relation to inner experiences. An informant born in 1888, while recollecting how she had become pregnant by the overseer of the plantation where she lived and worked, did not use the term pregnancy, but moved her eyes and hands to describe her situation. She said: “The overseer had many children by different women. Once he … [here the informant rapidly closed and opened her eyes several times, while hitting her right fist in the palm of her left hand] … me. After the child was born, I continued to work on the plantation.” As researcher, I became aware of several motions, gestures and noises that were part of the conversations and that were important for understanding the inner experiences of informants.

Informants could also use humor to camouflage certain feelings. This sometimes confused me, as one would rather expect anger to be expressed. However, humor can function as a coping mechanism to release frustration and stress. For some informants, humor provides a sense of power and control over those who view them unquestionably as inferior (Mason, 2009).

Oral narratives have enabled me to submerge myself into the deeper waters of the lives of informants and to bring forward meaningful information that usually does not get mentioned, perhaps not even in conversation with their own relatives. Once trust has been gained, the oral history interviews give women in particular a space to comment upon issues in their life that are relevant to them, to pinpoint values, and to con-
demn what they see as wrong. Their narratives explain how women have understood, negotiated and sometimes challenged dominant societal ideals. It is their oral histories that have allowed them to redefine themselves by voicing their life testimonials and (in that way) construct their selfhood. They also initiated me, as a local researcher, in the ways in which ethnicity, race, gender, class, and in this case also religion, intersect and influence people’s lives.

Creating a bida drechi as a way of life
As mentioned, the years following Abolition provided the paradigmatic context for bida drechi, due to the fact that both the state and the church feared that emancipated Afro-Curaçaoans would slide back into what they called “an uncivilized state”, believed to be the consequence of their African heritage and the destabilizing influences of slavery. The Catholic Church assumed that Afro-Curaçaoans ought to be uplifted especially from their “out of control” behavior consisting of sexual relationships outside the institution of marriage. The above-mentioned letter of the Vicar Apostolic Kistemaker, read aloud on Emancipation Day, placed heavy emphasis on marriage and monogamy in association with moral behavior to temper the so-called hypersexuality of Afro-Curaçaoans.6

In Curaçao, it was the Catholic Church that was significantly involved in the politics of respectability by attempting to instill values and respectable behavior in Afro-Curaçaoans. This does not exempt other powerful institutions from their part in this project. For example, in 1883 and again in 1885, the colonial government passed a decree stating that unmarried women (even those with children) were not to be given a piece of land upon their request. For many formerly enslaved, a piece of land was a much-desired item to seek personal autonomy and escape the dominant power of the plantation owners. This escape was frequently called sali for di pia di shon: coming out from under the ‘fect’ [control/dominance] of the plantation owner. Married women too were denied a piece of land, as such a request could only be made by their husband. In that period, the working class exerted growing pressure upon government to make land accessible for the purpose of agriculture and home construction, and the government indeed increasingly distributed land (Allen, 2007). In making decisions about land ownership, the colonial government applied a gender-biased policy and in essence institutionalized the husband as the head of the nuclear family, in conformity with the teachings of the Church.

Although the colonial state, the local upper classes and the Dutch Reformed Church all benefitted from the politics of respectability upheld by the Catholic Church and had a vested interest in maintaining and promoting it, their involvement was less significant than that of the Catholic Church. The teachings of the Catholic Church – known popularly as lei di pastor [the law of the priests] as oral history has taught us

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6 Kerkelijke Courant, no. 368, vol. 30, 16-1-1864; Amigoe, 1-7-1863.
— were embodied in many rules and measures that were used to exercise strong supervision over the moral lives of the faithful. Conversion to Catholicism was supposed to go along with a transformation of culture. To spread the Gospel among the population, a weekly series of life stories was published in Papiamentu newspapers; moral values were integrated into these stories that dealt with people’s life-situations. Sexuality was viewed in sharply gendered terms and, therefore, sexual culture was structured around a heavily polarized understanding of gender. As part of the religious condemnation of premarital sex, single mothers and their children were especially stigmatized and shamed. For example, in baptism the Church made a distinction between children born in wedlock and those born out of wedlock, which cast shame on the latter. Until far into the 20th century, people born out of wedlock could not be ordained as priests or be trained to work as schoolteachers (Paula, 2005). The following interview fragment gives some idea of how the Church could apply humiliation very directly and personally: “... My first children were twins. I was not married. I went to ask the priest to baptize them. When I requested this of the priest, he walked away and every time I asked he would slam the door in my face. I got many blows with the door from him ...”.

Around the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, young working-class people experienced significant changes in their lives, which threatened the respectability and moral conduct endorsed by the Church as a regulating and sanctioning institution (Broek, 1992; Allen, 2007; 2011). Young men and women would migrate in large numbers from the countryside into town in search of work. Young men were also on the move to work elsewhere in the Caribbean region or as sailors on ships. Migration as a survival mechanism was condemned by the Church as it was deemed to throw these young black men back into a state of “uncivilized rough behavior”, which the Church had tried hard to get rid of during their time in school. Priests frequently wrote about the perils that both sexes, but young women in particular, encountered in town and that impeded them from leading a moral and decent life. In town, young women were easily at risk of being sexually approached. Church archives are replete with letters about young women who were harassed by their employers. Some of these documents are based on complaints by these women or by their families who acted as plaintiffs and presented harassment claims to church or even state officials. The Church made great efforts to educate young women and men in its attempt to create respectable citizens. For women, the Church preached domesticity and purity, which it attempted to instill from an early age through the educational system. Women’s respectability was defined in terms of their location within the domestic sphere as mothers and wives, subordinate to their husband who was the provider and the head of the family. In this way, the Church worked towards engraining the subordinate position of women within the patriarchal structure of the family and the society in the

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7 Interview with Simmons (no Christian name registered; born 1888) by R.M. Allen, 15-1-1980 (NatAr).
popular consciousness. The Church would also react whenever these values were at risk.

Respectability could mean becoming excluded from (segments of) society. For example, young women who joined the Legion of Saint Mary or Kongregashi were placed under tight supervision and stringent constraints. They had to display high moral conduct in terms of dress and action and were kept apart from their age group. They were not allowed to participate in any popular events and could only attend mandatory church activities.

Respectability meant different things for men and women. The Church approached boys and girls in very different ways. Boys were socialized to become responsible and dedicated husbands, providers and fathers who maintained a disciplined sexuality. The Church often complained about having less control over working-class Afro-Curaçaoan males after they left school. It seemed less successful at disciplining males according to Catholic values (Allen, 2007). However, deviation from the dominant codes of respectability was less damaging for men than for women. This position of relative privilege became expressed in the Papiamentu proverb ‘Un hòmber ta kai den lodo, lanta sagudí su kurpa, e ta keda hòmber [A man may fall in the mud, but he can stand up, shake off the mud, and still be considered a (respectable) man].’

The Church created opportunities for both local women and men who abided by the politics of respectability. They were able to get a respectable job, for example in the teaching profession – though sometimes as non-qualified schoolteachers at certain primary schools – and they often obtained work upon the recommendation of a priest. People who lived a respectable life could also make better use of the social facilities which the Church had developed, such as hospital care (Van der Mark, 1999) and social welfare, while their children could attend the best schools (skol di plaka).

Becoming respectable also required downplaying or rejecting one’s own ethnicity as well as Afro-Curaçaoan customs. The expression No hasi kos di bo koló [Don’t behave like a typical black person] explicitly articulates the idea that being a respectable citizen means behaving and thinking differently than the rest of your color or class group. One could argue that respectability meant that people had to engage in a type of mimicry and become what Frantz Fanon would have called people with “black skin, white masks”.

In these ways, the ideology of respectability created a specific class of families that lived according to its rules and who enjoyed the social and sometimes economic advancement associated with it. Consequently, the drive for respectability, powered by a struggle for social advancement, widened the status differences between members of the working class. By linking status (worthiness of respect) to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum and neatness, respectability had a gatekeeping function. Respectability established the right to respect and to full citizenship.

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8 Some were chosen by the nuns while others volunteered. The girls were called kongrenis.
Women deviating from norms of femininity

As mentioned before, men seemed to have more freedom to deviate from the principles of respectability than did women. However, there were women who did not feel compelled to live up to the standards of femininity dictated by respectability. In my research, I have encountered women who resisted and contradicted the dominant ideal of respectable behavior. In town, there existed what was known as the kambrada: an erotic relationship between two women. The kambrada can be compared to the mati relationship between Afro-Surinamese working class women, studied by Gloria Wekker (2006). The kambrada relationship in Curaçao is highlighted in the book E no por kasa [She cannot get married] by Willem Kroon, published in 1923. The author, a devout Catholic, wrote the book to condemn the erotic kambrada relationship. Aart Broek (1992), who has written about the role of the Roman Catholic Church in Dutch Caribbean literature production, states that the Church was aware of the visible existence in the city of this type of relationship and was against it. Oral history contains many memories of women who maintained same-sex relations, either out of preference or because their male partner had migrated or sailed out to sea. Kambrada relationships were not secretive but quite public – which means that they were to some extent accepted or tolerated. Still, while some of these women even adopted children from couples who had many offspring and were not able to take proper care of all of them, they were generally not considered respectable.

Another example of women openly not behaving according to the norms of respectability is provided by tambú – a social event in which drumming accompanied singers who performed kantika di tambú: tambú songs. Tambú was the most persecuted of all African-derived customs in Curaçao. During slavery, slave-owners feared tambú, as it offered opportunities for the enslaved to gather and to express disgust about their situation through the songs. Catholic clergy also heavily condemned the tambú songs and dance, which they saw as lascivious and sexually immoral. After Emancipation, state and church continued to heavily condemn and criminalize tambú, seeing it as a repository of unruly, debased and unmanageable practices and behavior.

Women often served as kantadó di tambú: singers of tambú songs which they themselves sometimes composed. The lyrics of the songs would comment upon current events and had been the object popular disapproval. They could refer to individuals, from one’s ingroup or outgroup, who had misbehaved. A characteristic of tambú songs is the use of cunning word play and double entendre. The composition of the lyrics received much attention; the words were carefully chosen to trigger a response from the chorus singers, drummers, dancers and onlookers. These women composers/singers had the ability to conceive of sharp lyrics that really gave the people to whom the song referred a (verbal) whipping. The women often went beyond the boundaries set by society and showed assertiveness and courage in the composition and presentation of the tambú songs. In that way, they created a certain space for themselves in a patriarchal
society. They would, for example, publicly complain about a misbehaving husband or another male in their household who had taken advantage of the privileges that males enjoyed in Curaçao’s society.

These women _kantadò di tambú_ and the women who participated as dancers and onlookers did not fit the prevailing notions of feminine respectability. No respectable woman could be found participating in _tambú_ events, which were labeled as _ko’i bochincha_ [disorderly events] or even _ko’i diabel_ [gatherings of the devil]. By transgressing the ideological norms of respectability, these women could not be viewed as _hende drechi_, as respectable.

I would like to elaborate on one of these _tambú_ singers, Petronilia Coco, better known as Petoi, whom I interviewed several times in 1992 together with the linguist Ini Statia. In that year, she received an award for her contribution to oral history during the Third Conference of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers, now known as the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars. The award was a conscious decision of the local organizing committee. The committee defied many local prejudices by considering _tambú_ as literature, by recognizing Petoi as an author, and by giving her a prize for her major role in _tambú_. In her acceptance speech, Petoi expressed enormous gratitude and said that she would never in her life had expected to receive such an award. Her life had been full of challenges since the day she was born in 1915. As the eldest daughter in her family, she bore the socio-economic burden of caring for the family. Whenever her mother became pregnant, she as a young girl had to maintain her mother’s work, and after her mother began to work again, she had to care for the young baby. Hence, she could not attend school for very long. She got introduced to _tambú_ at a young age as it was a popular cultural expression in her neighborhood. In one of her interviews she related that when she sang, she would sometimes cry, because the lyrics of the songs were a replica of her own life.

Her looks did not meet the racialized somatic norm; she was often called ugly because of her dark skin color and wide nose. This did not prevent her from expressing herself in public and whenever she was reminded of her physiognomy during public events, she would reply to the person in question: “Looks do not determine who a person is, but their behavior does.” She never got married and had no children of her own, and in this way too she challenged the norms of female respectability which dictated that women should be wives and mothers.

The dominant discourse described her, like all other female _tambú_ singers, as unruly, disorderly and vulgar. These were women who behaved autonomously and defied the submissive ‘feminine’ role imposed by patriarchy. Petoi expressed her autonomous behavior, saying: “_Ami mes ta doño di mi mes, ta mi mes ta skibi mi nòmber, niun hende_”

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9 The interviews were conducted by Rose Mary Allen and Ini Statia in 1992.
10 The president of the local organizing committee at that time was the late Joceline Clemencia.
no por firma nada pa mi [I am my own keeper, I write my own name, and nobody can sign anything for me].”

Petoi’s whole life was burdened by the societal expectations attached to being a ‘good’ woman and her life story gives us some idea of how hard it was to live outside the bounds of gendered respectability. Despite her outstanding role in tambú and even her international recognition, Petoi continued to face many difficulties; until her death in 2001 she depended on a modest government pension and some assistance from people who valued her contribution to traditional culture.

Conclusion

The politics of respectability, for which I have used the local terms bida drechi and drecha bida, focuses our attention on how in the post-Emancipation period, ideology and power influenced unequal social relations in terms of gender, color, religion and class. It also brings to the fore hegemonic notions about sexualities and ‘proper’ gender identities for men and women of Curaçao’s African descended working class in relation to social advancement. Some members of this group appropriated the politics of respectability for their own social advancement and adjusted their identities and self-perception accordingly. However, the notion of respectability was also contested, as people expressed oppositional views and intentionally displayed non-sanctioned behavior.

Respectability resulted in a process of inclusion for those who were willing to adopt this ideology for their social advancement and exclusion for those who challenged this cultural constraint on their behavior. Those who challenged respectability were principally women who chose not to live up to the standards of femininity dictated upon them by the ideology of respectability.

By examining the traditionally unheard voices of counter-hegemonic discourse, I have sought to highlight the opposition and even resistance to the dominant ideals of respectable behavior that have had an impact especially upon women in Curaçao’s patriarchal society. By looking at it in that way, I have tried to discover how historically specific manifestations of discourses on sexuality have defined our conceptions of gender in Curaçao. The fact that even today, 100 years later, kambrada relationships, the participation of women in tambú, and even tambú itself are still not accepted as fully ‘respectable’ by all sectors of society, that women resisting domesticity are still deemed unruly and seen as unfit to be mothers, and that ‘respectable women’ are still judged primarily by their somatic appearance and phenotypical characteristics instead of their intellect or other capabilities suggests that the old politics of respectability is still alive and plays an important role in present-day Curaçaoan society. This is important to take into consideration when trying to bring about changes in attitudes and beliefs regarding gender in society.
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