

What is central to Curaçao's history and national identity?

*A cultural heritage canon as a tool for national identity,
nation-building and nation-branding.*

Richenel Ansano
*Workshop of the NWO Project
Traveling Caribbean Heritage
September 20-21
University of Curaçao*

On this day, September 21, in 1792, the French National Convention voted to abolish the monarchy. And in 1949 this was the first day of the "Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference" organized by the Communist party. This process led to the proclamation, on October 1 of that year, of The People's Republic of China. Much closer by, in 1981, Belize obtained full independence from Britain on September 21. Of special importance to Curaçao, September 21, happens to also be the birthday of Kwame Nkrumah, who was one of the most influential Pan Africanists and was also first Prime Minister and President of Ghana. Besides the fact that some of our ancestors came from Ghana¹ several Curaçaoans have since traveled to Ghana to learn more about that episode of our history. So, in a sense, we are in good company of places all over the globe that defined their political, economic, cultural and historical identity as nations.

¹ There is a myth and romanticism about Ghanaian, and especially Ashanti influence in the Americas and in Curaçao, however. Africa and African ancestry in the USA has been variously identified with the Ashanti, Egypt, Nigeria (especially Igbos) or Angola even though other scholars have had a more nuanced understanding of the provenance and relative influences of different African people. The selective views of some Africanist historiography have been taken over also in Curaçao. As an example, the Wikipedia entry on "Afro-Curaçaoans" mentions that "Most enslaved Africans came from Ghana (15,000 slaves came from this place. Many of them were Ashantis)" even though the article mentions just three lines later that "More than 38,000 Central African slaves were exported to Curaçao". Part of the influence comes from Dutch history: Ghana was highlighted in Dutch historiography because of the great importance Fort Elmina to the Dutch slave trade, the narrative of Johannes Capteyn, the infamous "Gate of No Return", the fact that Elmina became the capital of the Dutch Gold Coast, etc.

Before looking into what might be central to our identity, I want to say just a few words about some of the concepts we are working with.

National identity

The theme of today is: *A cultural heritage canon as a tool for national identity, nation-building and nation-branding*. This may be a very appropriate topic for these times. As we grow more into the post 10-10-10 years of constructing a new society it is normal that questions about identity are asked in new ways. A canon is one of the ways these questions can be entertained, by looking for characteristic elements of the local society. My personal history has pushed me away from canons because of the way in which they may be used to impose orthodoxies (old or new). But the idea of a canon is interesting in that it can also be used to engaged participatory dialogues on how our identity is being shaped daily. Similar ideas were already executed for the Netherlands Antilles while others were done for Curaçao as such. Maybe the more famous examples being the *Cultureel Mozaïek van de Nederlandse Antillen* and the *Encyclopedie van de Nederlandse Antillen*. More recently, initiatives like 1000 awesome things about Curaçao also show similar interests. In a very different way the 2001 cultural policy was an exercise in public participation, with over 400 people contributing to defining the policy through community hearings. Although each of these had different intentions and might not have been conceived as a canon they highlight strategies that ultimately are intended to show what might be emblematic for Curaçao or the Netherlands Antilles.

But culture in a SNIJ (a subnational island jurisdiction)² also always implies danger and many contestations. Especially when that island jurisdiction is a small one (as opposed to, for example Greenland). And even more so when that island jurisdiction has a recent history of official colonialism and a history of slavery and centuries of human trafficking. Exploring such a national identity in the framework of traveling heritage makes the matter even more complicated. Diasporic, migrant, border, cross-border and shared

² A jurisdiction that is part of a larger entity that is the nation. In our case, Curaçao is a subnational jurisdiction because it is a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

culture have become more visible to researchers, social commentators and cultural agents in the age of hybridity. This is very familiar and maybe even old news to a region that has developed a conceptual language that includes notions like creole, creolité, syncretism, magical realism, mestizaje, multiculturalism, plural societies, and rizhomatic experience. A region that has lived through and defined itself through traveling, shifting, fragmented, shared, mosaic, paradoxical, contradictory and rapidly changing culture for at least five centuries. At the same time issues of marginalization and oppression have also been highlighted by globalization and identity has become reshaped by the more conscious internationalization of the use of culture in the areas of economic marketing, international diplomacy and transcultural business management. Since the beginnings of the 20th century there has been a binary narrative that swings between celebrating diversity and highlighting marginalization and structural discrimination. One example is the debate between multiculturalism and racism³. In this context, shared and especially traveling heritage within the Kingdom of The Netherlands, could be a unifying factor of national identity while at the same time being or becoming a factor of contestation if the whole spectrum of this debate is not truly taken into account.⁴

Thirty-four years ago Benedict Anderson captured our imagination with his reformulation of something that some anthropologists, sociologists, historians and others had been saying for a long time: that nations are imagined communities (Anderson, 2006[1983]). Anderson, however, added new depth to this discussion by identifying three paradoxes of nationalism:

³ See for example the powerful critiques of racism by Shon Cola (who was one of our most elaborate social critics of all sorts of issues, not just racism) that existed at the same time that many artists, marketers and social planners were promoting a view that the most remarkable thing about the island is its diversity and harmony.

⁴ Issues like the immense diversity of African people who came to Curaçao are almost never discussed or taken seriously in social analyses. Similarly the still existing linguistic, ethnobotanical and spiritual presence of the native kaketio community is not part of any important discussion on the island or about the island, except in small circles of archaeologists, botanists and others. The narratives are very much framed by twentieth century migrations prompted by the move from an agrarian-commercial society to an industrial capitalist one and keep repeating the logic of capital in a variety of ways.

- i. The historian's view that nations are a modern phenomenon whereas nationalists see the nation as extending towards antiquity. This needs to be qualified, however, because in many cases nationalists choose a specific, narrow timeframe for their identity narratives. And sometimes that timeframe only goes back a few decades or centuries.
- ii. The idea that everyone has/must have a nationality (just like having a gender, primary languages or a known living location) while, at the same time, this nationality is a limited entity (you are member of one specific nation that usually makes it difficult for you to be member of other nations).
- iii. Nationality may be a politically powerful force, even as its proponents struggle to define what it is and how to make it concrete.

We have seen all of this before in Curaçao and they are especially present after 2010. So, whatever results from an exercise about social canons and about what is central to Curaçaoan identity has to take into account that it will be met by a context in which political power becomes more important than intellectual clarity, that national belonging will be a very important issue to contend with and that the timelines of a canon might be contested by anyone who has a serious interest in the topic. Basically, the question is: what nation are we imagining, and who is the “we” that imagines that nation?

An example of the confusing moves of nation building is the recently revived discussion about the statue of Peter Stuyvesant, that was removed from the namesake school, at the time that the school was renamed Colegio Alejandro Paula. It is framed by politics, it deals with a symbol from a very specific time period (mid-20th century) and retakes its longer historic referents to the 18th century while it invisibilizes previous history, and it assumes that any heritage on the island pertains to and should provide a univocal meaning, based on a single narrative to all citizens of the island. The recent initiative seems to mostly respond to previous actions that basically make the same assumptions, but with the opposite outcome: while one group wants to erase the statue's existence the other one wants to elevate it to a national heritage. All this time the statue has exposed two narratives that are not confronting each other in debate. The differences between historical actions and events on one hand and what a nation chooses on the other hand as its common identity for the whole community is not part of the debate.

Nation building

Just like national identity, nation building has had a very rocky presence in our recent affairs. It has been recently interpreted as, and used politically in the form of, engaging elements such as successful sports figures that may rally people, supporting and using established cultural events that draw sizable audiences, or utilizing organizational structures that may deliver political messages to people at the community level. In this process, efforts to define nation building have been derailed, maybe because its instrumental use is too overpowering and does not involve enough community dialogue.

Nation branding As for *nation branding* part of the theme: In the context of heritage I find the concept a little peculiar, even though I think I understand what is meant by it. Tying nation-building to the neoliberal strategy of nation branding⁵ is a very common strategy in the era of marketing and of the dominance of business philosophies. It seems odd, however, compared to the previous efforts of identity construction mentioned for the Netherlands Antilles, which were certainly framed in a language of progress but at the same time also in a language of critical observation of the politics of economics. It might be a sign of the times: in which nation branding promises to , "allow smaller, perhaps even less-developed, countries to participate in the global dialogue and economy, competing successfully with the G7" (Yan, 2009). But it's use is problematic if we see some of the official Dutch government ethnonationalist stances of 2010 onwards, where colonial history was seen as promoting Western Self-hatred and thus having to be wiped from Dutch museums (Kooiman, 2015). Something similar goes for the heavy emphasis on touristic branding happening in Curaçao. With the large machinery and decades long mentality already set it will be a tough task to switch around the thinking around branding to a focus that is not merely on Curaçao as a touristic product. Nation branding can be problematic for heritage consciousness.

⁵ Kerr and Wiseman define nation branding as "the application of corporate marketing concepts and techniques to countries, in the interests of enhancing their reputation in international relations." (Kerr & Wiseman, 2018). Dinnie defines the nation-brand as "the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences" (Dinnie, 2009).

What is central to Curaçao's history and national identity?

With all this background I go back to the question at hand: What is central to Curaçao's history and national identity? This is framed by the theme of *A cultural heritage canon as a tool for national identity, nation-building and nation-branding*. I chose to define centrality as that which might have more prevalence in the community, or else has substantial community commitment for their continued social existence. Because, after all, it is the community that has a national identity. So, in a sense, to answer this question we would have to go back to the community, through hearings, surveys, or other methods. But I am willing to also contribute my perspective in the matter.

Rather than looking at specific items that are central it might be more interesting to locate *places* that would show these community commitments. Some of the areas in which centrality might be located include:

Social narratives that survived their times of creation. These are usually narratives that encapsulate a specific period but have become symbols of the wider historical record and point to social relationships that are considered important. As an example I can mention what has been called folkloric music and dance. Although these have their long history they were not put together under this rubric until the 1950's (Allen, 1996; Ansano, 1996, 2012). Seven decades later we still have folkloric groups, playing music and dancing in styles that are considered to be from that era. This brings together economic, political, cultural relationships that both romanticize history and have problematic overtones of race. However, they are also symbols that are important for the community as an identity marker. As part of a canon they might require description and context. Their importance might require fresh eyes to document. For example: it would be a huge limitation to only see folkloric dances in terms of nostalgia and techniques and not understand the society they reproduce through the political narratives they create (national identity within the Kingdom), the social discussions they voice (both diversity and discrimination) and some of the transformation they represent (touristic showmanship that change the previous performative ethics of gender - as in

the case of waving the woman's behind in the folkloric dances of the tambú) (Ansano, 2012).

Another set of places of centrality might be:

Recurring markers of identity documented by social analysts/critics. One of our interesting issues in social engagement is the neglect or rejection of our own social memories in many public endeavors. One of the places where these memories might be seen are in the works of researchers, social critics, public intellectuals and others. Some of these include:

Elis Juliana and his critical psychology. In his critical work he has singled out a few recurring elements that seemed important at the time, and which are still practiced or engaged in the community. Two of these are Tambú and the Kompa Nanzi character. One of the reasons for these two items to be considered as useful is the attention that researchers like Elis Juliana have given to the historical, cultural, political, psychological, legal and other aspects of these items. Tambú and Kompa Nanzi have deep roots in many aspects of our society.

Paul Brenneker and the quotidian subject. Because of his focus on the daily life and thoughts of the subjects he interviewed, Brenneker was able to pay attention to such items as the *kurá di mata*, which is very important for a large part of our community, but might not make it on a list that looks of national symbols, comparable to some other nations. A focus on the day-to-day life of subjects would also highlight the *snèk* and *trùk'i pan* as possible candidates for a canon.

What I have called the Culturalist School has also created a discourse that would indicate possible areas of symbols of national identity. The Culturalist School started taking shape during and after WWII and picked up steam in the 1960's and 1970's and redefined its focus in the 1980's and 1990's. From the sixties onward it combined the Dutch descriptive sociology of the early to mid 20th century with a much more determined focus on the cultural parameters of the island. Developments in the 1990's

onward created an even less descriptive, and more analytic and discourse-critical current in the culturalist school. Some themes remained common, however, throughout the development of the Culturalist School. A few of these include the emphasis on resistance, protest, colonialism, race and racism, diversity, Africa, the role of violence in our history, and Papiamentu. Names like Allen, Rosalia, La Croes, Weeber, Witteveen, Martinus, Römer, and Roe and, in The Netherlands, Guadeloupe, Hira, and Martina, are just a few who have influenced the field, although outside of Curaçao the influencers are not necessarily of Curaçaoan origin and might not always carry similar agendas or agree with each other. Nevertheless, from Culturalist research items like *tambú*, *seú*, Papiamentu, and more abstract items like "critique in the public space" and "critique of the public space" would be key items to consider for a canon. An abstract notion like "critique in the public space" can be distilled from research, documentation and common knowledge on *banderita*, *tambú* (Rosalia, 1997), *snèk*, public forums like "pueblo na palabra", different talk shows and more specific analysis on public discourse (Ansano, 2016), but also on critical analyses of race and ethnicity.

Social forms that have withstood time are another area of centrality, in my view. These are social institutions, processes and relationships that have a long genealogy in local communities. Some specifics include spiritual practices: intangible heritage such as popular catholicism, with its veneration of saints and attention to ancestors, and *montamentu*, framed by its iconography and rituals; religious spaces of worship and attention to the departed, from different ethnic/religious groups, as built monuments.

Heritage that is consciously being safeguarded in current times is another obvious place where I would look for centrality of identity themes: not only have they been part of community identity for a long time; they are now also consciously being earmarked as icons of national identity. These include 1) colonial architecture, which has been already incorporated into UNESCO's international regime of World Heritage, or The Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1972, 2) small scale architectural monuments from African descendants, which are officially named as monuments in the national monuments protection framework, 3) archeological monuments, 4) cultural heritage like

tambú, ka'i òrgel and Papiamentu, all three of which have been identified both in Curaçao and in the Curaçaoan diaspora in The Netherlands as important intangible Curaçaoan heritage, 5) other cultural heritage like medicinal herbs and seú, which have been identified locally as important intangible heritage.

One additional area of potential national symbols come *from established local/diasporic lines of transmission*.

For African-related items it would be important to look at some insufficiently valued or completely unstudied lines of transmission: These include 1) the *labariano*: major tambú singers. Labariano is derived from the Hausa *labari* for news/information/story/history/tradition as told especially by men. The labariano, then is a keeper of tradition as well as a chronicler of current issues. A major *labariano* was Shon Colá. Similarly, the *cheli* was a keeper and transmitter of tradition. The word is derived from the West African *jeli*, more commonly known in non-African countries as *griot*. Some known men with this title, (which has more recently come to be reinterpreted as a nickname) included the songmaster Cheli Kwidama (one of the teachers of the last great songmaster Martili Pieters) and the Cheli who accompanied Catholic Church resister Katalina Beleku. The *hinchadó di kuenta* or *echadó di kuenta* was another keeper of tradition. Usually women, but also could also be men, these were storytellers. Although many people told stories to their children and grandchildren, the title seemed to be reserved for those who told stories at public gatherings, or were known to tell stories at these public gatherings.

Finally in this list of lines of transmission is the *bas di kantika*, or *bas di guene*, who used to sing work songs, harvest songs, and several other types of songs in traditional genres, different languages including Papiamentu, Guene and Makamba. Part of the contents of their songs have been remembered, recorded, sometimes revived by later generations of researchers, cultural activists, folkloric groups and others.

The content, but, maybe more importantly, the genre and medium of communication that these culture bearers used are prime candidates for any search of symbols of

national identity. The Zikinza Collection of oral history is being nominated to the Memory of the World Registry. An important part of the material in that collection was kept alive and transmitted by *cheli*, *bas di kantika* and maybe also by *labariano*. Besides these practitioners, the spaces they used for transmission were also important, such as the *ocho dia*, the work gangs, *tambú* parties, *chiwewe* presentations, harvest celebrations, etc.

A final area of interest would be *emergent culture*. By this I mean cultural forms that may be relatively new for our islands. Some of these are based on influences from abroad and sometimes they build on traditional forms. Some of the more exciting ones come from the youth. Examples include: spoken word and rap culture, including new forms like *tambú-rap*, *wals-rap*, *tambú kristian*. Experiments like those done by Kuenta i *Tambú* in the The Netherlands, and Data Panic's transformation of the *caha di orgel* in Aruba and international collaborations in Curaçao that produce gems like Santa Electra. Things that might be dismissed too easily include fascinating works like the reworkings of the traditional story of Vlémayo by several artists, including Gideon Chandler, Rendel Rosalia and Izaline Calister into new forms. This is an especially interesting case in which a single story recorded by Elis Juliana can be shown to be a Haitian heritage in Curaçao, but can be shown further to even be based on a Nigerian folk tale (Ansano, 2017). If it had not been for the insistence of Juliana and Brenneker to do the work they did several decades ago, and the genre-shifting work done by those who studied with him or studied his work, this migrant connection with Haiti and Africa might not have been discovered.

Other examples of this emergent culture are several apps about Curaçaoan culture, nature and history. Similar apps exist for Aruba and Bonaire. But perhaps my favorite, very biased example of youth relationship to our cultural heritage is the latest barbershop in Curaçao, in Fuikstraat (Pietermaai), where the barbers are young spoken word artists and singers whose barber chairs are restored chairs from the first academically schooled beautician from Curaçao and who sell T-shirts that say Tula taught me, Elis taught me or Arion taught me. T-shirts produced by another young

creative documentalist who has collaborated with a young anthropologist to produce one of the finest documentaries on race and colorism on Curaçao and who regularly collaborates with Aruban Data Panic and was the filmer of Santa Electra. They were some of the 20 youth who showed up for a series on race and identity in Curaçao at NAAM three years ago. The circle continues. The T-shirts, created by de Wind, are part of the ongoing narrative of *decolonized minds*, youth emphasizing the role of model ancestors who resisted colonialism.

African heritage is one of my main interests, but the same exercise I have done can be done for other groups in the community. Haitian themes can be found for example in cultural spaces like the Haitian radio programs in Curaçao, in celebrations like the Haitian Flag Day and the Creole Languages Day, through the Haitian Creole class, and other spaces, like the informal exchanges at the Mississippi Bar Restaurant. Portuguese historic sports clubs and radio programs, current cultural club, published research and certain cultural exhibits give ample direction in this regards. Similarly the Jewish community relies, among other things, on the Jewish Museum, Synagogues, Historical Cemetery, Mongui Maduro Library and published research for their historical and cultural stories. Ethnicity is one of the big narratives that has come from the 20th century and people still define themselves very much through ethnicity, barrio, and region in Curaçao.

These markers have become interesting in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where one of the ethnic markers is “mixed”, while African Descent has become both more clearly asserted and more explicitly contested; where you can go to Marchena, Otrobanda, Seru Fortuna in the Netherlands; where the recent language of fluidity ignores previous multi-regional, multiracial, multiethnic identities and current gender identities might be fruitfully informed by the gender role defiance of people like Katalina Beleku (Juliana 1989), Tanta Meri and Juana Isabel Curazao (Rupert, 2012:163).

On a final note: history and national identity are, in certain circumstances, opposite to each other in a society with a colonial past and a present that is not its own. History is always written from a specific perspective. We hear a lot that history is written from the perspective of the conqueror, the victor, the one who has the power to make his or her own story become the accepted one. We can see this in so much material that became part of our educational system over the years in the past, where some of us even learned that The Rhine enters our country in Spijk. So, in this view, history is an enemy of true national identity. It is a denial of the many voices, many interests, and especially the rejected and marginalized voices in our community.

If we cling to this view of history, however, we miss very important aspects of our collective identity. We have been writing our history in multiple ways, and the voice of the supposedly voiceless has been present always. We should be careful not to equate the invisibilization of these voices with a lack of their historical presence. In this it becomes very important to become aware of ourselves and how we might play into the strategies that make certain voices invisible, inaudible, unsensed or unfelt. The so-called unvoiced have spoken in popular festivals, entertainment, rebellions, strikes, artistic statements and explorations, in music such as tambú, in popular religious expressions, and also in writing.

And most of these unvoiced ones invoke rejection by some sectors of the community. It does not matter if they are African descendants, women, recent migrants (like the more recent waves of Haitian, Jamaican, Venezuelan and Colombian migrants), the poor, the disabled, the LGBT community, or whichever other group we take, their marginalization calls into question even the idea of centrality: how is centrality defined from the margins? And how do we teach border symbols? In most societies the issue of centrality of themes is continuously revised, contested. If we choose to look at central themes not only does marginality itself become an important category, but the way in which it has informed the fabric of the culture itself becomes central.

References

- Allen, R. M. (1996). The Conceptualization of Folklore in The Netherlands Antilles. In Papers of The Third Seminar on Latin-American and Caribbean Folklore. Curaçao: AAINA.
- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Ansano, R. (2017). *Viémayo ta vle ma yo: influensha di kreyol haitiano den gueni i papiamentu di kòrsou*. Kòrsou.
- _____. (2016). Ku pel fasu: strategia funshonal i desfunshonal den uzo públiko di idioma na Kòrsou. In N. Faraclas, R. Severing, C. Weijer, E. Echteld, W. Rutgers, & R. Dupey (Eds.), *Embracing Multiple Identities: Opting out of neocolonial monolingualism, monoculturalism and mono-identification in the Dutch Caribbean* (Vol. 1, pp. 11–25). Curaçao/Puerto Rico: University of Curaçao/Universidad de Puerto Rico.
- _____. (2012). To question identity: public discourse and transpersonal ethics in Curaçao. *Multiplex Cultures and Citizenships : Multiple Perspectives on Language, Literature, Education and Society in the ABC-Islands and beyond*, 55–67.
- _____. (1996). Folklore and Economic Change in 20th Century Curaçao. In *Papers of The Third Seminar on Latin-American and Caribbean Folklore*. Curaçao: AAINA.
- Dinnie, K. (2009). *Nation branding: concepts, issues, practice*. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Juliana, Elis (1989). Interview with Anecita Martina about the history of Katalina Beleku.
- Kerr, P., & Wiseman, G. (2018). *Diplomacy in a globalizing world: theories and practices*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kooiman, M. (2015). The Dutch VOC Mentality: Cultural Policy as a Business Model. In *Decolonising Museums* (pp. 41–53). L'Internationale Online.

Rosalia, R. (1997). *Represhon di kultura : e lucha di Tambú*. [Curaçao]: Instituto Stripan.

Rupert, L. M. (2012). *Creolization and contraband: Curaçao in the early modern Atlantic world*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Yan, J. (2009). Smaller nations enter the global dialogue through nation branding. In K. Dinnie, *Nation branding: concepts, issues, practice*. Oxford: Elsevier.