

THE RESTORATION OF *BAMBOULA*: A ST. CROIX EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

This article explores aspects of the multi-faceted cultural heritage and folklore within the *Bamboula* tradition as a form of verbal, literary and eclectic communication amongst the people of St. Croix in the Virgin Islands in concert with neighboring Caribbean island nations. An overview of the historic and official banning of *Bamboula* during colonialism's reign in St. Croix and the Virgin Islands as well as critical analysis, folkloric traditions, literature (transcribed oral narratives) and illustrated depictions will be shared explicating *Bamboula* as a form of non-verbal gesture, language and communication amongst enslaved and indentured workers of Afrakan¹ ancestry. Finally, the unique interwoven fabric of *Bamboula* as sacred and secular communicative interaction will be presented in comparison with similar linguistic, artistic and literary forms.

As an international and Caribbean crossroad of commerce, culture, history, folkloric tradition, communicative artistic expression and survival, the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Croix, historically known as 'Ay Ay', has a



unique flavor that has influenced a multiplicity of visual, musical, artistic and spiritual expressions that have endured centuries of misrepresentation and neglect by researchers. This article represents *Bamboula* as a traditional folkloric practice of Afrakan ancestry that has experienced tremendous trans-cultural shifting, modification, revision and adaptation with the cultural heritage and traditional arts practiced in St. Croix. Through *Bamboula* and other genres, St. Croix's culture is being restored, revived and resurrected through the eclectic expressions of a multiplicity of positive



¹ For the purposes of the Per Ankh Institute presentation upon which this article is based, the term "Afraka" and all derivatives thereof (i.e. Afrakan, Afrakans) are spelled as "Afraka" throughout this publication. Asante Sana!

ancestral traditions linking language, dance, traditional healing, spiritual cultural ceremonies and related indigenous knowledges within the context of Afrakan, Indigenous and American history.

Bamboula as presented, ritualized and performed is reflective of the international and Caribbean crossroads of communication, cultural heritage, healing sciences, traditional



folklore and linguistic shifts that form the basis of Crucian culture. *Bamboula* as a sacred art and traditional form of communication amongst Afrakan and Indigenous peoples has remained misunderstood for centuries. It has been associated with dance and musical rhythms used by free and enslaved Afrakans in St. Croix and abroad for communications for uprisings, initiations, celebrations

and secret society gatherings. In the Virgin Islands (VI) and elsewhere, the term used to describe a sacred meeting place for spiritual activities among freedom fighters has been referred to as a *Bamboula*. *Bamboula* is more commonly regarded as a culturally engaging dance step style with vibrant percussion accompaniment that interweaves culture, heritage, language, and sacred spiritual and artistic rites. As a traditional West Afrakan rooted cultural experience that incited the enslaved to become ‘riotous’ or ‘disobedient’, legal ordinances banned *Bamboula* in most European colonies for its ‘sexual innuendo’, and the ‘ungodly’ or ‘vulgar’ movements suggested by *Bamboula* Queens, their male partners and other participants in these dance-drum-song ritual ceremonies.

Bamboula is firmly based in a unique communicative art and science that has influenced a multiplicity of visual, musical, and spiritual expressions that have endured centuries of misrepresentation, negation, and banning from the cultural history, linguistic practices and rich traditions of St. Croix and the VI. *Bamboula* is an interactive folkloric tradition that was historically used to restore strength, order and respect to the interconnection and powerful validity of our Afrakan ancestry, rituals, ceremonies and living sciences in the face of the ravages of colonial enslavement in 18th to 20th century Danish West Indies society. “She pu’ she han’ pon’ she kimbo’ foh we gon do wha’ we gon’ do foh’ we freedom!” (Williams & Christopher, 2003)

In St. Croix, *Bamboula* gatherings commence with the men blowing the conch shells and playing ‘Ka’ drums with ‘Katta’ sticks to call the community to gather in the form of a circle with men dancing and drumming and women dancing and singing as onlookers engage and enhance the spiritual revival-type atmosphere created by the exchange of call and response rhythms and traditional folkloric interactions. This initiates the gathering of material and spiritual resources from within the community. Essentially, the *Bamboula* is a dance of sacred communication that on its’ higher side is designed to assist the participants

to participate in the more positive and uplifting spiritual and social development of the community. Historical and archival records document *Bamboula* dance and musical rhythms as being utilized for ceremonial openings of uprisings, secret meetings, protests and other actions aimed at improving the lives of enslaved Afrakans throughout the Diaspora.

***Bamboula*: Spiritual and Traditional Ceremonial Roots**

Also known as Bambou, Tamboula, Bomba, Boule, Las Damas etc., *Bamboula* has been



integrated into Crucian cultural experiences as ritual and liturgical dances for the performance of birthing, purification, initiation, healing and other ceremonial rites by people realigning with their indigenous, ancestral and/or Afrakan ancestry, heritage and traditions. The interconnectedness and ancestral traditional roots of Masquerade and Mokojumbie with the Caiso and Quelbe dance and music traditions has remained consistent despite the banishment of this art form from Crucian public life by the Danish colonialists, supported by the Christian clergy and strengthened by the force of time.

The impact of community engagement, support and acceptance of misinformation related to the historic heritage and traditional cultural value of *Bamboula* has been reflected in the literary and culturally sensitive publications and presentations of many Virgin Islanders. Eulalie C. Rivera, a Crucian cultural bearer and centenarian, expressed that “I remember standing by the fence looking out when one of the ‘devil men’ came to the fence. I tried to run away but my foot caught on a picket and he lashed at me with his whip. Before Sister Nanca’s time, we were not allowed to look at the masquerade through the picket fence. Not long after she came, she had it torn down and replaced with a wall” (Rivera, 1987). The socio-spiritual significance of masquerading, mokojumbie dancing and *Bamboula* traditions was largely lost to the general community in St. Croix mainly because of a tendency among people of Afrakan descent on the island to gain some measure of acceptance from the colonizers and planter class at different times during the history of St. Croix. This has translated into a contemporary neglect and disrespect of *Bamboula*.

The lack of archival documentation on the *Bamboula* is due in no small part to public rejection of cultural and folkloric traditions that have been regarded as excessively Afrakan in origin and expression. The fact that, especially in St. Croix and other Caribbean islands, religious, educational and most other social institutions have systematically disregarded, disrespected and degraded most contributions to civilization that have come through Afraka and its’ ascendants, is one of the main causes for the neglect, ignorance and marginalization of research and documentation on *Bamboula* and related Afrakan-

rooted folkloric arts traditions and sciences. “It is unfortunate that Afraka (and Caribbean Diasporic Afraka: CDK) must seek foreign approval for anything that its own sons and daughters attempt. Afraka (and her ascendants in CDK) suffers today because she does not want to acknowledge, her own cultural ‘cloth’ (i.e. system, languages, experiential knowledge, and concepts) as *n’kingu mianzingila* meaning ‘principles of life’.” (Fu-Kiau, 1991).

***Bamboula*: Sacred Dance and Ethnomusicology**

Bamboula as a traditional, folkloric and cultural heritage performing art is the sacred precursor to and an Afrakan centered foundation of a ritualistic ‘self-determination’ that permeates Crucian and Virgin Islands’ masquerading and mokojumbie dance step styles,



cultural performances and ethnomusicology. The importance of *Bamboula* as a sacred dance form grounded within ancestral and ancient traditions of communication and rhythmic movement with purpose, are juxtaposed against the old notions that are commonly expressed from the perspectives of non-Afrakan enslavers

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and literary colonizers fixated on presenting this dance style as sexually explicit and demonic in nature, practice and context. Within its use and expression in St. Croix, *Bamboula* reveals the ethno-spiritual connection that dance has had historically throughout humanity’s journey into the 21st century.

In ethnocentric, cosmological and spiritual contexts, sacred dances like the *Bamboula* are used as cultural education forms of preserving the history, traditions and folklore of a community or society. Sacred dance represents initiation gestures and rites in concert with visual movement reflective of the interconnectedness of our body, mind, spirit and consciousness. *Bamboula* in its rudimentary and pre-Caribbean traditional practices has been used as a ritualistic dance for the performance of rites by Fulas, Bambaras, Yoloofs, Mandingos and many other Afrakan and Indigenous communities and ethnic families, including a with a special relationship to the contemporary yet ancestral dance and ethnomusicology of Central Afrakan regions like Congo/Zaire. Dance is defined within the perspectives and cultured vision of the beholder and seeker. *Bamboula*, like most traditional Afrakan dance and methods of communication, continues to be linked with the negative meanings ascribed to Voodoo, Obeah and witchcraft and thus it is shunned or banned within many contemporary communities. The term ‘vudu’ or ‘voodoun’ when viewed in a positive manner simply means ‘spirit’ throughout west and central Afrakan linguistic and socio-cultural communities. Due to a multiplicity of institutional

misinterpretations and overtly Eurocentric paradigms customarily used for intellectual research and analysis, contemporary art and dance interpretation theories are limited in their ability to appropriately study Afrakan-centered artistic expressions like the *Bamboula* progressively, accurately, non-judgmentally and respectfully.

Bamboula represents more than a dance step style for performance and public entertainment. It represents a socio-cultural, socio-political and psycho-spiritual engagement that fuses body, mind, spirit and consciousness with sacred traditions, inspirational vision and freedom from physical, mental and spiritual bondage over a multiplicity of dimensions. The dawn of the 21st century has finally witnessed an increased level of interest by researchers and the development of more eclectic perspectives on *Bamboula*.

“A remarkable feature in the history of writing on dance in the circum-Caribbean is how authors focus on eroticism obsessively, while reducing it to a single sensational image: frenzied black dancers revolving their loins and bumping together. This image appears to have formed fairly early...The historical reasons for such reductionism seems straightforward enough. White colonials created an image of black identity that embodied both their own forbidden desires and their fears.

...*Bamboula* was also reported in Trinidad in the 1700s...and in St. Lucia in 1844...in Guadeloupe *Bamboula* is considered the predecessor of today's gwoka. *Bamboula* existed within living memory in St. Croix, and on St. Thomas is either recently extinct or recently reconstructed...The name is also found in Haiti for a dance performed "on the occasion of building a new house"; in the Samaná region of the Dominican Republic (bambulá), where it is considered to be derived from Haiti... and as one variation (bambulé) of the sicá style of Puerto Rican bomba...The issue of religion is important because those who have attempted to counter the stereotype of hyper-sexuality in black dance have frequently insisted on the art's spiritual, ritualistic quality...ways in which dance served white hegemony as a key trope of black identity, a way in which blackness could be delimited and to a certain extent controlled, although an important aspect of the trope is that black eroticism cannot be entirely controlled...Slaves from the Congo-Angola region or... of Benin brought to the New World dances of successive couples within circles, sometimes using pelvic isolation and contact, as well as challenge/display solo dancing. Both of these types were accompanied by transverse drumming with sticks on the side, or by upright barrel drums played with the hands. The slaves adapted these practices into early transculturated forms known variously as kalenda, *Bamboula*, djouba and chica.” (Gerstin, 2004)

The *gombay* drum is an Indigenous Caribbean derivative of the traditional west Afrakan *djembe* drum that is used in *Bamboula* and other folkloric dances, music, song and ritual. Significant circles of the keepers of ancient and sacred dance movements, ethnocentric music and ancestral Afrakan rhythms, in Kongo-Zaire, Cameroon, Senegal, Martinique, Guinea-Conakry, Burkina Faso, Guadeloupe, St. Lucia, Louisiana, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba, St. Thomas, St. Croix and other regions of the world are revisiting *Bamboula* as a hidden, sacred and secular dance and music tradition that has had a significant role in shaping the folklore, cultural heritage and fine arts expressions of Afrakan, American and Caribbean people.

***Bamboula*: Forbidden and Disenfranchised through Colonialization and Cultural Restrictions**

From the 17th to 20th centuries, laws were in effect banning *Bamboula* or any drumming outside of military trap drumming in St. Croix and the Virgin Islands. This prohibition was



common throughout the Caribbean during the colonial period. For example, the Danish Royal Council passed a law in 1733, which was proclaimed and inhumanely implemented by Danish West Indies' Governor Phillip Gardelin. The 'Gardelin Code of 1733' consisted of "seminal codes...almost half of the proclamation's nineteen clauses dealt explicitly with the subject of *marronage*, and expressed quantitatively the qualitative nature of the white

community's major concern...all dances, feasts, and plays, are forbidden unless permission be obtained from the master or overseer...All dancing, merrymaking or funeral rites, which involved the use of 'Negro instruments,' were expressly forbidden on pain of corporal punishment since they had been the occasion of 'serious disturbances' in the past..." (Hall, 1992) Corporal punishments for an enslaved Afrakan participating in *Bamboula* or related "Negro" activity included torture with hot pinchers; removal of ears, arms, legs or hands; 150 lashes; or public execution.

As *Bamboula* was a group dynamic tool for coded communication, socio-religious introspection, and a sacred gathering space for enslaved people, indentured servants, freedom fighters, maroons and others connected to revolution, insurrection, and riots, it was systematically and institutionally subjected to frequent bans under threat of severe punishment, torture and death by the government of the former Danish West Indies. Aimé Césaire explains

"the fundamental thesis, biased and unacceptable, that there has never been a great tropical civilization...and that if the tropical countries are not under the biological curse of the racists, there at least hangs over them, with the same consequences, a no less effective geographical curse...From the historians or novelists of civilization...their false

objectivity, their chauvinism their sly racism, their depraved passion for refusing to acknowledge any merit in the non-white races, especially the black-skinned races, their obsession with monopolizing all glory for their own race...from the psychologists, sociologists et.al., their views on ‘primitivism’, their rigged investigations, their self-serving generalizations, their tendentious speculations, their insistence on the marginal, ‘separate’ character of the non-whites and –although each of these gentlemen, in order to impugn on higher authority the weakness of primitive thought, claims that his own is based on the firmest rationalism—their barbaric repudiation...we must study how colonialization works to de-civilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred and moral relativism...at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated...at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been instilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds towards savagery.” (Cesaire, 1972: 2-3)

Bamboula as a sacred and ceremonial tradition served as a precursor of the St. Croix *Tea Meeting* as a method of communication, sharing of village news, rites of passage celebrations of birth, funerary rites, marriages, christenings, plans for escape and insurrection, etc. The negative impacts of legal policies, colonial laws, racist educational programs and religious dogma grounded in ignorance and institutionalized discourses created in the 17th century to justify racialized slavery have persisted into the present. J. Antonio Jarvis in *Folk Dancing in the Virgin Islands* explains that: “Drum dancing was forbidden in St. Thomas and St. Croix from the earliest times, and the Negroes were compelled to hide when they wanted to engage in either ritualistic or free dancing.” (Jarvis: 1938)

Despite the official apologies for the demonization of Afrakan culture during the colonial period issued by many of their more progressive leadership bodies, in practice, most contemporary western religious institutions continue to propagate the belief construct that condemns “free dancing” like the *Bamboula* as “ungodly” in spite of the passages within biblical scripture praising those who engage in “worship” or liturgical dance with the Creator for their liberation and freedom from bondage and oppression. This ‘tradition’ of rejecting dances like *Bamboula* continues in the 21st century especially among those who consider themselves to be ‘Christians’, with only the more ‘acceptable’ dance styles like quadrille or Afrakanized ballroom-type couple dancing being considered spiritually and socially appropriate for public presentation in the Caribbean. It is therefore imperative that a rehabilitative and restorative process take place to preserve the positive, regal and ancestral benefits of *Bamboula* as a socio-political and socio-cultural art form deserving of dignity and respect within Crucian cultural life and educational experience.

Bamboula as expressed by Afrakans in St. Croix and throughout the Americas, has been consistently misunderstood, degraded and aligned with paganism in an institutionally racist context.

“It was a frightful triumph of body over mind, even in those early days when the slave was still a genuine pagan; but as his moral education gave him some hint of its enormity, and it became a forbidden fruit monopolized by those of reprobate will, it grew everywhere more and more gross. No wonder the people stopped it in Congo Square. Only the music deserved to survive, and does survive - coin snatched out of the mire...It is odd that such fantastical comicality of words should have been mated to such fierce and frantic dancing, but so it was...The *Bamboula* still roars and rattles, twangs, contorts, and tumbles in terrible earnest, while we stand and talk...The rhythm stretches out heathenish and ragged. The quick contagion is caught by a few in the crowd, who take it up with spirited smiting of the bare sole upon the ground, and of open hands upon the things...and in a moment others have joined in refrain, male voices in rolling, bellowing resonance, female responding in high, piercing unison. Partners are stepping into the ring.” (Cable, 1886: 33)

In St. Croix, *Bamboula* gatherings served as meeting places to distribute news throughout the community - often times some “gossip tun’ trut’ does mek de pe’ple dem run’way mi son!” (Christopher, 2005) Even traditional Crucian songs like *Clear de’ Road* have continued to be linked to lyrical folkloric accounts of plans for insurrection and ‘freedom runs’ shared during the *Bamboula* gatherings which influenced the format, rhythm and components within the traditional community *Tea Meetings* that preceded the near-riotous uprisings that led to VI Emancipation on July 3rd, 1848. This was an historic time when the enslaved Afrakans of St. Croix and the Virgin Islands, predominantly populated with people from all over the Caribbean of Indigenous and Afrakan ancestry, demanded their freedom and the abolishment of institutionalized slavery throughout the Danish West Indies.

Closing

While in the 18th and 19th centuries *Bamboula* was more prevalently practiced in St. Croix, in the 20th century it was celebrated with more frequency in St. Thomas. In the 21st century, however, there has been a new resurgence of respect, acceptance and effective proactive education of the importance of *Bamboula* to the cultural heritage of St. Croix, the Virgin Islands and the entire Caribbean region, and as a result *Bamboula* has been revisited, restored and revived in St. Croix. This excerpt from *The Dance of Souls* represents a contemporary poem that expresses insights into the sacred ancestral intentions of *Bamboula* that seek to elevate the entire community through its embrace of this Afrakan Indigenous Caribbean tradition.

“*Bamboula* reminds me as I reflect...
I know and embrace the dance of the soul
Of hearing our ancestral voices
Wailing for our dancing and liberated souls
To breed life and truth with immunity,
Beyond the physical and mental punishments and impunity,
As we plea
For our survival
For our protection
Of our children, elders and earth community.
I feel your presence like nature
Gyrating and stimulating bodies
As dynamic stellar-bound
Split leaps and prances,
I hear the *Bamboula*, merengue, bomba,
Kalenda and samba rhythms
Coming from afar
From within the womb of our rainforests
That creatively and sacredly womanifest
As quick footed movements
To avoid the sting of acacia...
With vibrant dances...” (Kahina, 2004)

The history, development and use of *Bamboula* has remained hidden hence is open to many interpretations-both positive and negative. It is the hope of the writer that this article will help to promote more research, more frequent performance engagements and further exploration to ensure that the valuable history, socio-cultural experiences and ancestral heritage associated with this sacred art form are preserved, conserved, resurrected and restored for present and future generations as an integral component of Crucian and Virgin Islands culture. *Bamboula* serves as mode of communication that can serve to strengthen ties within the St. Croix and Virgin Islands community. As Eulalie Rivera contends: “...in our cultural heritage, traditions stretching back nearly two centuries, and in our spirit of mutual helpfulness, we were exceedingly rich. ‘Community’ was more than a word. It was a way of life...Much of that has been lost, but it may be that if enough of us care, a little of it may be preserved for the future.” (Rivera, 1987)

Traditional folkloric songs, dances and music like *Roll Isabella Roll*-linked to *Bamboula* Queens of St. Thomas, *Queen Mary*-linked to the Fireburn Labor Revolt of October 1878 on St. Croix and *Clear de Road*-linked to the events of 1848 in St. Croix that led to VI Emancipation, along with other ethno-musicological expressions related to the *Bamboula* tradition are being restored, revived and reinstated in all sectors of our community with the help of our ancestors and elders who have ‘cleared the road’ as well as for the benefit of our present and future generations.

St. Croix and the Virgin Islands celebrate Quelbe music as the national music; Caiso as the principal song tradition; Quadrille as the principal dance tradition; Mokojumbie dance as a “folk” dance tradition; even Masquerade dance is part of Crucian and VI festival and carnival traditions along with a kallaloo of other colloquial traditions. *Bamboula* serves as a conduit for the thoughts, actions, speech and sacred intentions of a community to be expressed implicitly and explicitly. As shared through Mali Griot Mamadou Kouyate and quoted in *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* by D.T. Niane, “We are vessels of speech, we are repositories which harbor secrets many centuries old...without us the names of kings would vanish from oblivion, we are the memory of mankind: by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations...I teach the kings of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old but the future springs from the past” (Niane, 1965). It is time for Crucians and other indigenous Afrakan culture bearers of the Caribbean to embrace and integrate *Bamboula* as a legitimate artistic, literary, cultural heritage tradition particularly in St. Croix and the VI as it is being reinstated within select neighboring Caribbean isle communities like the Dominican Republic, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Martinique and beyond. The Restoration of *Bamboula* is being made a reality by the Joseph Gomez Macislin *Bamboula* Dancers since 1981 in St. Thomas under the direction of Mary Ann Christopher and Isbourne Fredericks and by Per Ankh Neteru Anksamble since 1987 in St. Croix under the direction of ChenziRa Davis Kahina and NebKaRa Christopher, who continue to perform, strengthen, institute, teach and preserve these cultural tradition practices. Both ensembles have intergenerational and ancestral links to *Bamboula* queens, drummers, dancers and folkloric VI, Caribbean and Afrakan cultural tradition bearers. The re-initiation into *Bamboula* as a viable art form and sacred cultural heritage expression amongst people of St. Croix and the Virgin Islands, the Caribbean and Afraka along with all of humanity is happening in an ever more ancestrally inner-attaining, liberating, interactive, institutional, positive, traditional, educational and artistic way.

Afterword

This literary contribution restores the ancient principle of Maat - truth, justice, order, reciprocity, balance and sacred harmony by the author’s extension of respect that is due to native and ancestral Virgin Islanders that have contributed to the preservation of *Bamboula* as a respectable, viable, positive and sacred folkloric cultural tradition of St. Croix and the Virgin Islands: Richard Frett, Miss Clara, Miss “Tini” Frett, Jean Essanason, Leona Brady Watson, Mary Ann Christopher, Wendy V. Coram, ND, Dimitri “Pikey” Copemann and Carl “KaRa” Christopher to name several and the author honors the very real but unstated presence of many more on this list who have remained anonymous by life, death, choice or other circumstances.

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