



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Erotic Synergies and Variances in the Sexual Vernacular of Postcolonial Dutch Caribbean

Isenia, W.J.

**DOI**

[10.1215/07990537-11382543](https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-11382543)

**Publication date**

2024

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Small Axe

**License**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/policies/open-access-in-dutch-copyright-law-taverne-amendment>)

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Isenia, W. J. (2024). Erotic Synergies and Variances in the Sexual Vernacular of Postcolonial Dutch Caribbean. *Small Axe*, 28(2 (74)), 130-146. <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-11382543>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

# Erotic Synergies and Variances in the Sexual Vernacular of the Postcolonial Dutch Caribbean

Wigbertson Julian Isenia

In the field of Caribbean studies, there is a notable omission: the Dutch Caribbean islands are frequently overlooked in scholarly analyses of sexuality.<sup>1</sup> This keyword essay argues that the sexual idioms unique to half of the Dutch Caribbean islands, especially those prevalent in Curaçao, have the potential to challenge and expand established theoretical frameworks.<sup>2</sup> To substantiate this argument, the essay employs a diverse array of sources.<sup>3</sup> It draws on travelogues and manuscripts that focus on exploring the colonies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Additionally, it utilizes newspaper articles, novels, erotic dictionaries, and sociological studies from the twentieth century. These historical documents are complemented by interviews conducted in the twenty-first century with contemporary activists. Through this eclectic mix of sources, the essay seeks to uncover and articulate the erotic synergies and divergences present within the sexual vernaculars of the (post)colonial Dutch Caribbean.

1 For a broader discussion of the exclusion of the Dutch Caribbean in Caribbean studies, see, for example, Margo Groenewoud, "Decolonization, Otherness, and the Neglect of the Dutch Caribbean in Caribbean Studies," *Small Axe*, no. 64 (March 2021): 102–15.

2 For a brief sketch of Caribbean studies on sexuality, see Kamala Kempadoo, "Caribbean Sexuality: Mapping the Field," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, no. 3 (2009): 28–51. For a review of literature on Curaçao, see Wigbertson Julian Isenia, "Studies on Trans\* and Same-Sex Loving People in Curaçao: A Review Essay," in Rose Mary Allen and Sruti Bala, eds., *Handbook of Gender Studies in the Dutch Caribbean* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 426–39.

3 Portions of this essay are derived from my unpublished dissertation, Wigbertson Julian Isenia, "Queer Sovereignities: Cultural Practices of Sexual Citizenship in the Dutch Caribbean" (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2022).

By integrating these varied perspectives, this study endeavors to provide a more nuanced understanding of the sexual dynamics within this region and offer insights that contribute to Caribbean studies and that enrich broader discussions on sexuality in postcolonial contexts.

This essay aims to shed light on the historical usage and practice of *kambrada* in Curaçao. Comparable to *mati* and *zami* (“friend” in Sranan Tongo and English Creole, respectively), the concept of *kambrada* encapsulates a spectrum of relationships among women, ranging from purely platonic to sexual.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the term and its associated practices, which are non-identitarian by nature, find their roots in the cultures of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao, where the Papiamentu/o language is predominant.<sup>5</sup> In modern times, the term *kambrada* has seen a decline in usage and has largely been supplanted by more identity-specific terms, such as *lesbian* in English, *lesbiana* in Papiamentu, and *lesbisch* in Dutch. These newer terms reflect a shift toward more identity-focused language when describing sexual orientations. However, as this essay discusses in its concluding sections, there is a growing movement to reclaim the term *kambrada*. This resurgence reflects a broader cultural and social dialogue about the nature of sexual identity and relationships in the Caribbean. This essay posits that the reemergence of *kambrada* speaks to a deeper yearning for a more fluid, less rigidly defined understanding of relationships and sexual identity, particularly in the context of Caribbean societies.

This keyword essay traces the genealogy of *kambrada* across four historical periods, mapping the evolution of its usage. The first period, spanning from 1882 to 1923, is marked by three seminal texts that discuss women in *kambrada* relationships in Curaçao. These accounts cast such relationships in a derogatory light, branding them as immoral, nonmodern, and requiring civilization. Despite their pejorative tone, these texts constitute the earliest recorded reflections on women in *kambrada* relationships, making them invaluable for historical scholarship.<sup>6</sup> The subsequent period, stretching from the 1950s to the 1970s, witnessed a reexamination of *kambrada* relationships through the lens of sociology and anthropology. This reevaluation accounted for the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century context of these relationships, including factors such as the dearth of men—many of whom migrated in search of employment—and the advent of industrialization. In the penultimate period, between 1980 and 1990, the burgeoning women’s movement catalyzed open discussions among women about same-sex desire, prompting an engagement with Creole words relating to sexuality,

4 See Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Rosamund Elwin, “Introduction: Tongues on Fire, Speakin' Zami Desire,” in Rosamund Elwin, ed., *Tongues on Fire: Caribbean Lesbian Lives and Stories* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1997), 7–10; and Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (New York: Crossing, 1982).

5 Papiamentu, a Creole language that mixes Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish, among other languages, is spoken in Curaçao and Bonaire, while Papiamentu is spoken in Aruba. Papiamentu employs a phonetic orthography, while Papiamentu utilizes an etymological approach to its orthographic system.

6 In the 1950s and 1960s, Father Paul Brenneker and Elis Juliana documented songs, music, stories, and events of the elderly about everyday life on the islands of Curaçao and Bonaire. However, themes of sexuality were not recorded. A vast collection of artifacts, recordings, and transcriptions published between 1969 to 1975 is held in the National Archaeological Anthropological Memory Management (NAAM), a cultural heritage resource center in Willemstad, Curaçao (naam.cw). It is now digitally accessible for research via sambumbu.com.

such as *kambrada*. These discussions were furthered by academic research and the term's visibility in public records. The essay culminates in the contemporary era. Following significant constitutional reforms in 2010 that gave Curaçao increased autonomy within the Kingdom of the Netherlands without leaving it, a women's activist collective reclaimed the term and named its organization Kambrada in 2021. This act of reclamation signifies a meaningful turn in the term's genealogy, highlighting its enduring resonance and adaptive capacity within Curaçao's sociocultural landscape.

Prior to the historical analysis of the four periods, this essay sets the stage by juxtaposing the Dutch Caribbean terms *kambrada*, *mati*, and *kachapera*. These terms, which were prevalent within the Dutch Caribbean islands and former Dutch Caribbean colonies, such as Suriname, exhibit both synergies and divergences that warrant detailed examination. Understanding the unique cultural and historical backgrounds from which these terms arose is vital. Each encapsulates specific sociosexual dynamics that are integral to the fabric of Caribbean societies. The term *mati* is predominantly conceptualized within Afro-Caribbean communities, while *kachapera*, which stems from the Spanish word *cachapera*, is thought to originate from South American, Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and Indigenous Caribbean communities. This essay reflects on navigating the analysis of these three terms with a critical awareness; it eschews the premise of an "essential native sexuality," which can be reductive and homogenizing.<sup>7</sup> The inquiry into *kambrada* involves a conscientious approach to understanding the term's creolization—a synthesis of West African and Indigenous practices.

### *Mati, Kachapera, and Kambrada*

An intriguing question emerges from a review of the existing literature: What is the relationship between the terms *mati*, *kachapera*, and *kambrada*?<sup>8</sup> This discussion establishes a linkage of *kambrada*, a term with Spanish and Portuguese etymology rooted in *camarada*, to the Surinamese *mati*. The latter denotes a social construct wherein women partake in intimate relations with partners of both sexes, whether concurrently or sequentially.<sup>9</sup> Gloria Wekker and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley trace *mati* to *mate*, *comrade*, and *camaraderie*, accentuating its Afro-cultural lineage and the "West African grammatical principles" that underpin both

7 Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 2. See also María Lugones, "El pasar discontinuo de la cachapera/tortillera del barrio a la barra al movimiento [The *chacapera/tortillera's* discontinuous move from neighborhood to bar to movement]," in Bat-Ami Bar On and Ann Ferguson, eds., *Daring to Be Good: Essays in Feminist Ethico-Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 156–67; and Joceline Clemencia, "Women Who Love Women in Curaçao: From *Cachapera* to Open Throats; a Commentary in Collage," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 1 (1996): 82. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

8 See, for example, Shana L. Calixte, "Things Which Aren't to Be Given Names: Afro-Caribbean and Diasporic Negotiations of Same Gender Desire and Sexual Relations," *Canadian Woman Studies / Les Cahiers de la Femme* 24, nos. 2–3 (2005): 128–37; Tinsley, *Thiefing Sugar*; Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); and Kamala Kempadoo, "Sandoms and Other Exotic Women: Prostitution and Race in the Caribbean," in Manning Marable, ed., *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 75–89.

9 See Wekker, *Politics of Passion*, 2.

the term and its associated practices.<sup>10</sup> These terms hark back to the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade, echoing the erotic bonds that formed among women held in captivity.<sup>11</sup> *Kambrada*, in its historical essence and its confluence with the practices encapsulated by *mati* and *zami*—the latter a term from the English-speaking Caribbean that signifies a woman partnered with another woman instead of a man—resonates with both.<sup>12</sup>

The lexicon of the Dutch Caribbean islands and the broader South American region offers a rich weaving of linguistic interplay that is exemplified by terms such as *kachapera*—which is evocative of the Venezuelan maize dish *cachapa*—and *kachapera*, which has been used pejoratively to describe women who engage in same-sex relationships. María Lugones has engaged in the scholarly reclamation of *kachapera*, potentially infusing the term with new valence and agency.<sup>13</sup> These terms may bear imprints of pre-Hispanic or Indigenous contributions to the Papiamentu language and other South American Spanish dialects, suggesting a rich synergy. In Papiamentu, several terms, particularly those pertaining to cuisine, flora, and fauna, trace their lineage to Indigenous roots. *Kachapa*, for instance, has been recognized as having an Indigenous etymology.<sup>14</sup> The geographical proximity of the islands to Venezuela could have facilitated the movement of Indigenous populations there from Venezuela, thereby transplanting and assimilating culinary traditions.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, establishing a definitive link between the term *kachapa* and Indigenous connotations of female same-sex relationships remains challenging.

This analysis reveals a nuanced distinction between the term *kambrada*, which embodies concepts of camaraderie and friendship and possesses ties to the transatlantic slave trade and West African cultural principles, and *kachapera*, which instead relates to culinary traditions and Indigenous cultures of the Americas. This dichotomy underscores the historical overshadowing of Indigenous languages and cultural practices in the Caribbean, with a pronounced focus on the Dutch Caribbean islands. Historical accounts of the Dutch Caribbean often provide only cursory mention of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, with an overemphasis on the assumed comprehensive genocide of these populations.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, as Stuart Hall articulates, Indigenous culture maintains “a ghostly presence” within the Caribbean narrative,

10 Wekker, 72.

11 See Wekker, 256; and Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar*.

12 Elwin, “Introduction: Tongues on Fire,” 22.

13 See Lugones, “El pasar discontinuo.” Indeed, research on Venezuela’s culinary culture suggests that the pre-Hispanic inhabitants primarily sourced their diet from hunting and fishing, supplemented by gathering plant species, including maize. See Bertha Rivas Alfonso, “El casabe y la arepa: Alimentos prehispánicos de la culinaria indígena venezolana” [Casava and arepa: Pre-Hispanic foods of Venezuelan Indigenous cuisine], *Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural* 12, no. 2 (2014): 433–42.

14 See Pierre Lauffer, *Mi lenga* [My tongue], vol. 1 (Willemstad: Stencil-Offset Centrale, 1970).

15 Corinne Hofman and Jay B. Havisser, *Managing Our Past into the Future: Archaeological Heritage Management in the Dutch Caribbean* (Leiden: Sidestone, 2015).

16 As Henri van Kol writes, “Spanjaarden vermoordden er de Indianen”). Henri van Kol, *Naar de Antillen en Venezuela* [To the Antilles and Venezuela] (Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1904), 9. For an exp (“Spaniards murdered the Indians there” loration of how Indigenous peoples and cultures have been omitted from the historical narratives of the Americas, see Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

a fragment of the scarcely discernible and seldom engaged past.<sup>17</sup> In light of this context, *kachapera* could be posited as a linguistic vestige of this “ghostly presence,” perhaps signaling the continuity of Indigenous same-sex desires throughout history. At the very least, as Judith Misrahi-Barak suggests, the persistence of this word could indicate the enduring presence and resilience of Indigenous languages within the fabric of contemporary Curaçaoan culture, defying the narrative of total erasure.<sup>18</sup>

The concurrent examination of *kachapera* and *kambrada* serves as a methodological approach that circumvents the perpetuation of an “essential native sexuality.” These terms often denote an oversimplified and reductive view of the complex and diverse sexual expressions and desires among Caribbean people, inaccurately portraying them as a homogenous and static entity. Instead, this inquiry proposes a creolized fusion of West African and Indigenous sexual customs and idioms, each with distinct lineages. Such a perspective actively counters the historical invisibility of Indigenous peoples and their cultures, which is frequently perpetuated to uphold postcolonial narratives of sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> It opens up a space to reconsider and potentially restore the roles that Indigenous cultural practices may have played in shaping contemporary sexual practices, intertwined with West African principles and Western identity-focused terminology. By embracing this analytical stance, we give due recognition to the diverse cultural legacies of Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean communities, thus enriching the collective understanding of sexuality and culture within the Caribbean context. This analysis underscores the critical importance of acknowledging multiple cultural currents in the discourse surrounding the evolution and lexicon of sexual practices.

## Early Writings on Kambrada, 1882–1923

By examining descriptions from male writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—specifically those addressing kambrada relationships—and engaging in a critical reading along and against the archival grain of these raced and classed narratives, we gain insight into women’s cultural practices and lives in kambrada relationships, as documented solely through the lens of male writers in the archive.

### Class Tensions and Cultural Anomalies: Brusse’s Critique of Kambrada Relationships in Nineteenth-Century Curaçao

The first book to mention the term *kambrada* is Antoine T. Brusse’s 1883 *Curaçao en zijne bewoners* (Curaçao and its inhabitants). Born into a Dutch Reformed family, Brusse discusses kambrada relationships among Caribbean women, emphasizing their cultural specificity and

17 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in Padmini Mongia, ed., *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), 401.

18 Judith Misrahi-Barak, “Amerindian Ante-coloniality in Contemporary Caribbean Writing: Crossing Borders with Jan Carew, Cyril Dabydeen, and Pauline Melville,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47, no. 3 (2011): 309–19.

19 See Ana-Maurine Lara, *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 10.

class-based nature. He critiques the intimate connections between women of different social classes and their potential to introduce “onaangenaamheden” into the home.<sup>20</sup> As he writes in old Dutch:

Hierom moeten wy dan gewagen van een gewoonte, welke wy slechts hier waargenomen hebben. Onder zekere klasse bestaat namelyk de gewoonte om er een *kambrada* (kameraad?) op na te houden. Deze is, ofschoon altyd van een lagere positie, de boezemvriendin van haar, die zy op hare beurt als haar *kambrada* gekozen heeft. Welke slechte gevolgen er meestentyds uit die intieme betrekking ontstaan van vrouwen en meisjes van verschillende opvoeding, sfeer en zeden, laat zich gemakkelyk gissen. De ouders moesten er hun werk van maken, zulke anomale vriendschap tegen te gaan en de *kambradas*, met wie dikwerf een massa onaangenaamheden het huis binnenkomt, doodeenvoudig de deur uitzetten, met de warme aanbeveling, niet terug te komen.<sup>21</sup>

(Therefore, we must mention a custom only observed here. In a particular class, there is the custom of having a *kambrada* (companion?). This bosom friend, whom [the woman] has chosen as her *kambrada*, is always of a lower class. The adverse effects of this intimate relationship between women and girls of different upbringing, atmospheres and morals are easy to guess. The parents must take it upon themselves to prevent such anomalous friendships, and the *kambradas*, with whom a mass of unpleasantness often enters the house, simply must be put out of the door with the warm recommendation not to come back.)

In his writing, Brusse narrowly defines *kambrada* relationships as exclusive to Curaçao, thereby culturalizing same-sex relationships. This portrayal positions *kambrada* as a cultural anomaly not only diverging from the norms of the Netherlands and other regions Brusse encountered but also appearing as a culturally determined phenomenon within Curaçao itself. However, Brusse does not clarify the relationship of *kambrada* to other Curaçaoan cultural traditions. Brusse characterizes *kambrada* relationships as intimate friendships between women of disparate social classes, suggesting a “bosom friendship.” Yet he remains unclear about whether these bonds are erotic or platonic.

Brusse’s critique focuses less on the intimate nature of the *kambrada* relationships and more on the class disparity they represent, which, he contends, introduces “a mass of unpleasantness” into the household. The paragraph after the quote above extends this preoccupation with class dynamics. Brusse critiques Curaçaoan society for its lack of cohesion, noting the fluidity of its class structure—in contrast to Europe—where individuals can ascend to higher social circles. He observes a social penalty for those bold enough to traverse these class boundaries, likening them to “een ongenoodige gast behandeld wordt en als een geslagen hond met de staart tusschen de beenen afdruipe[n] moet.”<sup>22</sup>

20 “Unpleasantness”; Antoine T. Brusse, *Curaçao en zijne bewoners* (Willemstad: Internationale drukkerij, 1882), 55. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

21 Brusse, 54–55.

22 “[One who] should be treated as an uninvited guest who slinks off like a beaten dog with its tail between its legs”; Brusse, 55.



Brusse's observations offer a glimpse into the complex power structures of preindustrial Curaçao, particularly highlighting the intense regulatory focus on the social and economic activities of the lower classes, which predominantly consisted of Afro-Curaçaoans during that period. This context is critical for understanding the role of power in the creation, dissemination, and archiving of knowledge. The narratives that shape society are profoundly influenced by these dynamics, as various groups, especially those in positions of power, significantly determine what is collectively remembered or omitted from the historical record.<sup>23</sup>

To analyze the passages about kambrada, we can employ Christina Sharpe's annotation method and Saidiya Hartman's close narration.<sup>24</sup> This dual-pronged approach involves a critical reading practice that engages with historical texts both "against the grain," that is, questioning and challenging the established narratives, and "along the grain," that is, acknowledging the context of the writer or examining the reasons why authorities might remain invested in sustaining unintelligibilities and how power structures perpetuate certain normativities within society.<sup>25</sup> Employing this approach to scrutinize Brusse's account compels us to confront and question the embedded assumptions regarding personal agency, social hierarchy, and interracial relationships that shape his portrayal of kambrada. It allows for a disruption of the surface narrative and provides an avenue to expose the subtleties and hidden complexities of these women's experiences. This analytical perspective endeavors to deliver a more layered and profound comprehension of the intricate realities that these historical figures navigated.

Brusse contends that, in kambrada relationships, invariably, upper-class women select partners from the lower class, a choice that indicates the power dynamics at play: the decision-making agency and dominance seemingly rest with the woman of higher social status. This dynamic points to an inherent hierarchy within the relationship structure. Brusse juxtaposes these women with the "zorg- en werkzamere huisvrouwen en liefdevollere moeders," implying that the latter, who conform to traditional roles of heteronormative domesticity and motherhood, are the societal ideal.<sup>26</sup> Intriguingly, Brusse's critique is less about the same-sex nature of the relationships and more about the transgression of established gender, social, and racial boundaries that these relationships represent.

Examining this book along the grain exposes its depiction of economically disadvantaged individuals as lacking agency and submissively accepting the entrenched social class hierarchies of the time. This viewpoint also highlights the power dynamics involved in the creation of knowledge about preindustrial Curaçao, especially concerning lower-class Afro-Curaçaoans.<sup>27</sup>

23 As Rose Mary Allen argues, these knowledge productions constitute "an important aspect of the differential power relations that determine what the dominant groups in societies want people to remember and forget." Rose Mary Allen, "Women Making Freedom: Locating Gender in Intra-Caribbean Migration from a Curaçaoan Perspective," *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 33, no. 3 (2018): 704.

24 See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 12; and Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

25 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 53.

26 "Caring and working housewives and loving mothers"; Brusse, *Curaçao en zijne bewoners*, 54.

27 See, for example, Allen, "Women Making Freedom," 704.



This portrayal of lower-class Afro-Curaçaoans' lack of agency should be problematized when considering their strategies for navigating their circumstances. In her analysis, which I interpret as reading against the grain, Rose Mary Allen describes how Afro-Curaçaoans successfully shaped their material, social, and spiritual lives both within and beyond the realms of the government, former enslavers, and the Roman Catholic Church, despite enduring economic, social, and racial inequalities.<sup>28</sup>

### Colonial Perceptions and Misinterpretations: Van Kol's Analysis of Kambrada in Curaçao

The second book to mention *kambrada* is Henri van Kol's 1904 *Naar de Antillen en Venezuela* (To the Antilles and Venezuela). Van Kol was then a member of the Dutch House of Representatives and later the Dutch Senate for the Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij (the Social Democratic Workers' Party).<sup>29</sup> In his discussion, Van Kol refers to Brusse's *Curaçao en zijne bewoners*, characterizing *kambrada* relationships among girls as inherently perverse. Van Kol expresses concern regarding interracial relationships between girls and disapproves of homosociality—nonsexual or nonamorous same-sex relationships—for young girls:

Brusse beweert in zijn *Curaçao en zijn bewoners*, dat hij [de Curaçaoënaar] de deugden der vreemdelingen overnam, doch hun ondeugden verwierp, wat ik maar niet zoo klakkeloos zou durven onderschrijven, want maar al te gretig nemen primitieve volken de vele verkeerde hoedanigheden van het blanke ras over. Eenmaal opgehitst neemt de woede bij den Neger van Curaçao den vorm van razernij aan, komt de wreedheid van het Afrikaansche bloed weer tevoorschijn, en is hij bij het vechten gevaarlijk. Bij het kabi-sja weet hij dan door het boksen met zijn hoofd met zijn harden schedel den tegenstander ernstige kwetsuren toe te brengen, soms met doodelijk gevolg. In den regel bepaalt zich zijn twisten echter tot een strijd met woorden, en bij het schelden is hij onovertreffbaar, waarop ik reeds elders heb gewezen. Zijn zinnelijke aard uit zich meer door perverse neigingen (vooral bij de meisjes, die zich maar al te dikwijls "kambradas"—boezem vriendinnen—kiezen), en bij den tamboerdans, dan in het groot aantal natuurlijke kinderen, waarvoor in de sociale toestanden en hun verleden een verklaring is te vinden.<sup>30</sup>

(Brusse claims, in his *Curaçao en zijn bewoners*, that [the islander] took over the virtues of the strangers but rejected their vices, which I would not dare to endorse so indiscriminately, for primitive peoples eagerly take over the many poor qualities of the White race. Once roused, the anger in a Curaçaoan Negro takes the form of a frenzy, revealing the cruelty of his African blood, making him dangerous in combat. During "kabi-sja," he skillfully uses his head to box, inflicting severe, sometimes even fatal, injuries on his opponent with his hard skull. Generally, however, his conflicts are limited to verbal altercations, and in this domain, he is unsurpassed

28 Rose Mary Allen, *Di ki manera? [In which manner?] A Social History of Afro-Curaçaoans, 1863–1917* (Amsterdam: SWP, 2007), 191.

29 Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, "Het imperialisme-debat in de Nederlandse geschiedschrijving [The imperialism debate in Dutch historiography]," *BMGN* 113 (1998): 56–73.

30 Van Kol, *Naar de Antillen en Venezuela*, 353–54.

in his invectives, as I have previously pointed out elsewhere. [The Negro of Curaçao's] sensual nature expresses itself more through perverse tendencies (especially among the girls, who too often choose “kambradas” —bosom friends) and in the tambú dance, than in a large number of natural children [children born out of wedlock], for which an explanation can be found in the social circumstances and their past.)

In his analysis, Van Kol primarily describes kambrada relationships among young girls but notably omits their ages, suggesting a potential lack of continuity across generations. This contrasts with Brusse's portrayal of kambrada relations occurring between women from different social classes. Brusse depicts the sensual nature of the Curaçaoan Black population, especially among girls, as inherently perverse. According to his portrayal, they choose “bosom friends” based on sensual reasons.

Van Kol implies that Black individuals exhibit “many poor qualities of the White race,” though he refrains from specifying those qualities. The passage under examination serves as a quintessential example of racial stereotyping and dehumanization. It depicts the “Curaçaoan Negro” in a state of frenzy and cruelty, a portrayal that perpetuates damaging myths about inherent violence in African or African-descendant populations. This portrayal, emblematic of Van Kol's Eurocentric perspective and a recurring theme in colonial literature, starkly dichotomizes “civilized” European traits against “primitive,” non-European ones, thereby reinforcing a deeply problematic binary that positions colonized peoples as inferior or savage, a reflection of entrenched colonial biases. The focus on physical violence, notably the utilization of the head in combat, mirrors colonial apprehensions regarding the colonized body and potentially justifies oppressive colonial governance. This portrayal, which lacks contextual understanding, erroneously frames reactions to colonial oppression and cultural practices as intrinsic traits, thereby constructing an evolutionist perspective that suggests intrinsic differences between races, such as disparities in blood or cranial density.

His particular focus on girls, especially in interracial contexts, signifies a deep-seated concern. For instance, he notes later: “Veel meisjes dansten samen, zij waren vaak van verschillend ras, sommigen nog zeer jong en enkelen hadden nog kort geleden in het kerkkoor meegezongen.”<sup>31</sup> This seemingly innocuous observation reveals much upon closer examination. His bewilderment at the sight of young, racially diverse girls engaging in both church activities and communal dancing reveals a profound fascination with and disapproval of youthful homosociality, which reflected the absence of stringent racial and class divisions in society.<sup>32</sup>

31 “Many girls danced together at a party with organ music, often of different races, some very young and some recent participants in the church choir”; Van Kol, 355.

32 Harry Hoetink initially posited that preindustrial Curaçao was marked by rigid societal segregation. Ethnic and religious groups were stratified into separate, hierarchically organized entities. Affluent Protestants topped the social pyramid, succeeded by their lower-class counterparts and Sephardic Jews. Enslaved individuals, the manumitted, and other people of color, predominantly Catholics, occupied the lowest tier, further stratified by socioeconomic factors and skin color, with lighter complexions correlating with higher social standing. However, in his 1987 revised edition, Hoetink presents a more nuanced view, depicting Curaçaoan society's segregation as more permeable. Even in the first edition, he highlighted the interactions among various population groups, mainly through sexual relations characterized by power imbalances. Hoetink notes how Protestant and Jewish men often had their first sexual encounters with Black women, relationships considered as supplementary or alternative to official marriages, given the prevailing disapproval of interracial and

Van Kol's depiction of *tambú*, an Afro-Curaçaoan music and dance form, further reflects colonial perceptions that intertwine sexuality, race, class, and religion. As the primary cultural expression of the island's largest demographic, the formerly enslaved and their descendants, *tambú* was perceived as embodying "perverse tendencies." Van Kol attributes these tendencies to the sensual nature of Afro-Curaçaoans, interpreting their sexuality as deviating from the norm and linked to specific cultural practices. He views the prevalence of a "large number of natural children" not as a consequence of this perceived sensuality, but as a product of historical and social issues like poverty. His use of the phrase "primitive people" carries implicit racialized connotations. The *barí* dance, a cultural practice among Afro-Curaçaoans that, along with *tambú*, was prevalent in Aruba and Bonaire, faced stringent prohibitions from the Roman Catholic Church and colonial authorities, reflecting broader themes of religious condemnation, gender discrimination, and social ostracism.<sup>33</sup> The prohibition of *tambú* and *barí* by the Roman Catholic Church—which denounced these dances as savage, vulgar, indecent, and non-Christian—led to gender-biased restrictions and widespread gender discrimination, curtailing women's participation in public life.<sup>34</sup> Women associated with *tambú* faced severe social ostracization, including the denial of sacraments and exclusion from church cemeteries. The colonial government also prohibited *tambú* on state and state-rented properties.<sup>35</sup> Van Kol focuses on Afro-Curaçaoan sexual practices, particularly among women, while ignoring male same-sex relationships, which reflects the gendered and sexual biases inherent in European colonial morality. This bias is particularly evident during the preindustrialization period, which was marked by male migration that resulted in gender imbalances, a situation that likely intensified the scrutiny of women.

Brusse and Van Kol, writing from positions of assumed authority and objectivity, offer insights into the lives of these women, albeit within the confines of the colonial narrative. Their accounts, especially Van Kol's, reflect social anxieties after the abolition of slavery. Van Kol's views can also be contrasted with those of Brusse, who focused more on the island's class system and social mobility. For Van Kol and Brusse, *kambrada* was considered a vice and was not confined to any particular racial group. Their accounts provide insights into a

interclass unions. Angela Roe critiques Hoetink's reliance on male-dominated sources like travelogues and colonial reports, questioning the consensual nature of these relationships due to the power imbalances. Complementing this analysis, Rose Mary Allen interrogates the potential material and social benefits for women in such liaisons, suggesting possible routes to wealth, power, and manumission for their offspring. See Harry Hoetink, *Het patroon van de oude Curaçaoose samenleving* [The pattern of old Curaçaoan society] (1958; repr., Amsterdam: S. Emmering, 1987); Angela E. Roe, "The Sound of Silence: Ideology of National Identity and Racial Inequality in Contemporary Curaçao" (PhD diss., Florida International University, Miami, 2016); and Allen, *Di ki manera?*

33 See Rene V. Rosalia, *Tambú: De legale en kerkelijke repressie van Afro-Curaçaoose volksuitingen* [Tambú: The legal and religious repression of Afro-Curaçaoan folk expressions] (Zutphen: De Walburg Pers, 1997); Allen, *Di ki manera?*; Nanette de Jong, "The Tambú of Curaçao: Historical Projections and the Ritual Map of Experience," *Black Music Research Journal* 30, no. 2 (2010): 197–215; and Shulaika Girigori, "Beat the Drum and Break the Silence: Constructing a Collective Ethnic Identity for Curaçao through the Tambú" (master's thesis, University of Utrecht, 2010).

34 See De Jong, "The Tambú of Curaçao," 209. For instance, girls between fourteen and sixteen, as Rose Mary Allen explains, were prohibited from engaging in local cultural festivities like *tambú* and *Ocho Dia*, which were considered representations of an immoral and pagan lifestyle (*Di ki manera?*, 165).

35 See Rosalia, *Tambú*.

world where these women defied the Dutch colonial norm, or at least the norm as perceived by these two authors.

### Challenging Norms and Power Dynamics: Kroon's *E no por casa* and the Complexity of Kambrada Relationships

The third book to mention *kambrada* is the 1923 novel *E no por casa* (She cannot marry) by the Curaçaoan writer Willem Kroon.<sup>36</sup> The novel is a product of the societal changes that came after the establishment of a Shell oil refinery in Curaçao in 1915. The book reflects the moral panic around industrialization and labor migration in colonial Curaçao.<sup>37</sup> The Roman Catholic Church used didactic novels like *E no por casa* to teach moral values and instruct the Afro-Curaçaoan community on their religious and social duties.<sup>38</sup> The narrative revolves around two orphans, Cecilia and Henry, and their encounters with Josefa, an older woman with an undisclosed same-sex desire for Cecilia. The novel's portrayal of *kambrada* relationships reveals the author's normative frameworks and connects homosexual desire to "madness," a link that resonates with the pathologization of homosexuality in the 1920s.

In Kroon's novel, the term *kambrada* appears three times, and each instance reveals critical aspects of how the narrative portrays it. Initially, it appears in a letter from Eloisa, a friend of Josefa's; Eloisa cautions Cecilia about Josefa's character, explicitly mentioning Josefa's long-standing inclination toward *kambrada*, a term she negatively associates with vice. This reference also indicates an assumption that such relationships span across generations, involving younger and older women. The second mention occurs when Eloisa confesses to Cecilia her past involvement with Josefa in a *kambrada* relationship. Eloisa describes herself as a victim of this relationship, imbuing *kambrada* with negative connotations of harm. Finally, the term resurfaces during a poignant scene at Josefa's deathbed, where Josefa expresses hope for divine forgiveness for her involvement in *kambrada*. This moment underscores the moral and religious condemnation of such relationships within the context of the novel. Eloisa's

36 The novel was initially serialized in weekly installments in Papiamentu from 10 January to 14 March 1923, in the Roman Catholic weekly newspaper *La Cruz*. The Roman Catholic's (vicariate) printing house published it as a book in 1927. Willem Kroon, *E no por casa* (Willemstad: Imprenta di Vicariato, 1927).

37 See Allen, *Di ki manera?*; Margo Groenewoud, "Nou koest, nou kalm": *De ontwikkeling van de Curaçaoase samenleving, 1915–1973* ["Hush now, calm down": The development of Curaçaoan society, 1915–1973] (Leiden and Willemstad: University of Leiden and Curaçao, 2017); and Chelsea Schields, *Offshore Attachments: Oil and Intimacy after Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).

38 Aart G. Broek contends that the literature of this era, penned by male writers linked to the Roman Catholic Church, aimed to caution against the perils of contemporary life. These hazards were partially ascribed to immigrants from other Caribbean islands, who, devoid of a Roman Catholic upbringing, were purportedly characterized by "alternative lifestyles." Authors such as Ernesto Petronia, Manuel Fray, Miguel Suriel, Emilio Davelaar, Jozef Sint Jago, and Willem Kroon actively disseminated the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church through their writings. Other writings by these authors focused on the theme of incest, as Curaçao gradually became a haven for "sinners" and the "corruption" of souls through money and mass immigration. Aart G. Broek, "A Paragraph in the Unwritten History of Lesbian Love in the Caribbean: Amor Di Kambrada," in Richenel Ansano et al., eds., *"Mundu yama sinta Mira": Womanhood in Curaçao* (Willemstad: Fundashon Publikashon, 1992), 52. In the 1930s, Kroon grew increasingly critical of the Roman Catholic Church, accusing it of excessive interference in the political affairs of the islands and of fostering societal divisions based on race and class. For an analysis of Kroon's practice of compliance and contestation to the Roman Catholic Church, see Groenewoud, "Nou koest, nou kalm," 85–86.

vow to dissuade others from engaging in *kambrada* emphasizes the perceived moral gravity of these relationships.

The novel raises questions about the possibility of reading Josefa as engaging in a counter-hegemonic practice. It questions whether women in *kambrada* relationships do more than lead themselves and others to an inevitable ruin. Indeed, what some view as doom may be perceived as pleasure or possibility by others. As I and others indicate, this novel affirms that the Roman Catholic Church held the view that female same-sex relationships were in conflict with their ideology.<sup>39</sup> In the depiction of Josefa's *kambrada* practices as disorderly and bound to cause immeasurable destruction, one can identify behaviors that defy conventional norms, as well as what society deems normal and what it deems imaginable. *Kambrada* relationships contest established ideas of gender and sexual normativity and how women support each other in these relationships. Although Kroon originally created Josefa to support the Roman Catholic Church's moral doctrines, a modern reinterpretation imbued with a more compassionate perspective positions Josefa not merely as a narrative tool, but also as a potent symbol of resistance and defiance. This interpretation, which diverges from Kroon's original didactic purpose, highlights her participation in *kambrada* relationships as an indicator of their widespread existence and cultural relevance in that historical context.

Kroon's fictional account provides a window into *kambrada* practice, which is characterized by matching attire, transactional relationships, and power imbalances.<sup>40</sup> Such attire is emblematic of unity and is also present in *mati* relationships among working-class Afro-Surinamese women.<sup>41</sup> While both *mati* and *kambrada* relationships can demonstrate power hierarchies, with a dominant partner often emerging, *kambrada* is distinctive because of its possibility of interracial and interclass dimensions.<sup>42</sup> This distinction underscores the importance of considering the specific social and cultural environments in which these relationships are embedded. The relationships between gender, sexuality, class, and race in *kambrada* descriptions are unclear or incoherent. This is owing to the colonial archive's lack of transparency and the power dynamics that shaped the archive's content. Despite this, studying these sources can still provide valuable insights into women's self-determination and the strategic intimacies in *kambrada* relationships.

The three books provide us with three meanings of *kambrada*: a platonic, nonsexual relationship between women, or homosociality; an erotic relationship between women; and female same-sex desire. This difficulty in distinguishing between homosexuality and homosociality in the context of *kambrada* relationships invites us to study sexuality autonomously and in conjunction with different forms of everyday life.

39 See Wigbertson Julian Isenia, "Looking for *Kambrada*: Sexuality and Social Anxieties in the Dutch Colonial Archive, 1882–1923," *Tijdschrift Voor Genderstudies* 22, no. 2 (2019): 125–43; and Broek, "Paragraph."

40 See Clemencia, "Women Who Love Women in Curaçao," 82.

41 Wekker, *Politics of Passion*, 5.

42 Wekker, 194.

## Explaining Kambrada through Sociological and Anthropological Works, 1950–1970

Later scholarship has built upon these early texts, particularly those of Brusse and Van Kol, to explore various dimensions of Afro-Curaçaoan society, including matrifocal families, kinship structures, Afro-Curaçaoan nannies, cultural expressions, and religious syncretism.<sup>43</sup> We can trace these studies within the evolution of social scientific research on Black kinship, emphasizing that racial knowledge has always been a tool of transnational colonial governments, even after decolonization.<sup>44</sup> We must place these scholars' analyses of kambrada within this emerging scholarship on the Afro-Curaçaoan community. For instance, the anthropologist Harry Hoetink notes that Protestant women from the elite upper class lived primarily in isolation, with an Afro-Curaçaoan clerk and a Black nanny (*yaya*) performing outside daily tasks.<sup>45</sup> According to Hoetink, these staff members' interactions with upper-class women led to kambrada relationships; this claim echoes Van Kol's assertion that such relationships originated in lower social classes and subsequently influenced upper-class women through interracial and cross-class relationships.<sup>46</sup> Although there are discrepancies around the question of who established these relationships first, these descriptions suggest that they were commonplace between formerly enslaved people and Protestants in Curaçao.

Other male sociologists, including A. F. Marks, Rene Römer, and Rudolf van Lier, have discussed the large number of men who migrated to nearby islands for employment in the early twentieth century, resulting in a gender imbalance. This shift led some in the community to speculate that female same-sex relationships flourished.<sup>47</sup> Marks observed that this imbalance, together with challenging economic conditions, profoundly influenced sexual behavior patterns on the island.<sup>48</sup>

These sociological framings, like the early writings, represented ways of understanding that were historically and socially constructed. They concentrated solely on female same-sex sexuality; male homosexuality and gender transgressions were not mentioned, reinforcing female same-sex sexuality as deviance from a patriarchal and heteronormative perspective. This perspective becomes apparent through the implication that a scarcity of men led to

43 See Hoetink, *Patroon*; Arnaud Marks, *Male and Female in the Afro-Curaçaoan Household* (The Hague: KITLV, 1976); and Rene Römer, *De curaçaose samenleving* [The Curaçaoan society] (Willemstad: Amigoe NV, 1998).

44 Chelsea Schields, "A Science of Reform and Retrenchment: Black Kinship Studies, Decolonisation, and the Dutch Welfare State," *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 1 (2024): 4–22.

45 Hoetink, *Patroon*, 54.

46 Hoetink, 54. Hoetink's explanation also relates to a prevalent belief throughout the Dutch colonies that the colonized possessed lax sexual morals and that interracial and inter-class relations would result in the degeneration of the White race. For the Dutch East Indies, see Gert Hekma, *Homoseksualiteit in Nederland van 1730 tot de moderne tijd* [Homosexuality in the Netherlands from 1730 to modern times] (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2004), 64; and Ann L. Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 634–60.

47 See Rene Römer, *Cultureel mozaïek van de Nederlandse Antillen: Constanten en varianten* [Cultural mosaic of the Netherlands Antilles: Constants and variants] (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1977); Marks, *Male and Female*; and Rudolf van Lier, *Tropische tribaden: Een verhandeling over homosexualiteit en homoseksuele vrouwen in Suriname* [Tropical tribulations: A treatise on homosexuality and homosexual women in Suriname] (Dordrecht: Foris, 1986).

48 Marks, *Male and Female*, 332.

“unfavorable” social and sexual behaviors and is evident in the framing of female same-sex relationships as predominantly oriented around men.<sup>49</sup> This shortage of men, however, does not explain how women conceptualized their sexuality in such relationships or the interdependence between women as a result of economic hardship, such as Sam (a savings cooperative), cohabitation, and mutual childcare.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, these sociologists categorize these practices in an intelligible and explicit register that differentiates same-sex erotic relationships from mixed-sex (heterosexual) relationships. As demonstrated by Wekker and Rosemond Elwin, same-sex-loving Caribbean women do not consistently avoid intimate relationships with men, whether for economic reasons or for having children.<sup>51</sup>

The interdependence of women caused by economic hardship in early twentieth-century Curaçao should not be associated exclusively with same-sex desire. Challenging such a transparent interpretation of these women’s sexuality, which is hastily attributed to a shortage of men, can be viewed as reading against the grain.

However, reading along the grain of this literature, which suggests that kambrada relationships were the result of a shortage of men because of labor conditions, leads to a reading of such relationships as a response to a loss of the primary income providers in a patriarchal community, such that these women began supporting each other in innovative and radical ways through networks of interdependency—the severe economic conditions facilitated the development of practices that operated outside conventional frameworks.

Furthermore, according to these sociological perspectives, kambrada relationships post-1915 appear to be entrenched in urban capitalism, reflecting earlier apprehensions expressed by the Roman Catholic Church. The need for manual labor on the island led to a surplus of migrants from varied and often conflicting backgrounds, beliefs, and values.<sup>52</sup> Nonnormative practices like kambrada relationships should not be viewed solely as socially disruptive consequences of capitalism.<sup>53</sup> Instead, they offer a lens through which to examine critical commentaries on both capitalism and patriarchy. This perspective is enriched by considering the unconventional methods these women employed to save money, their material support for each other, and their deviation from traditional kinship models. This approach shifts the focus from mere social disruption to a nuanced understanding of how these practices challenge and offer alternative insights into prevailing economic and social structures. Such an

49 See, for example, Römer, *Cultureel mozaïek*, 64–65.

50 As Gloria Wekker contends in the context of Suriname, the lack of men does not explain women’s own perceptions of their sexuality. See Gloria Wekker, “What’s Identity Got to Do with It? Rethinking Identity in Light of the Mati Work in Suriname,” in Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa, eds., *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices across Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 437. This savings system, also prevalent in Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean communities, is recognized as the *sousou*, merry-go-round, or *pardner* scheme. See Michel S. Laguerre, *Urban Poverty in the Caribbean: French Martinique as a Social Laboratory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 18, 113, 127, 132; Brian Meeks, “Envisioning Caribbean Futures,” *Social and Economic Studies* 52, no. 4 (2003): 165–87; and Lynda Ince, “Kinship Care: An Afrocentric Perspective” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham: 2009), 2.

51 See Wekker, *Politics of Passion*; and Elwin, “Introduction: Tongues on Fire.”

52 See Schields, *Offshore Attachments*; and Groenewoud, “*Nou koest, nou kalm.*”

53 See Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 9.



analysis provides a framework for viewing these relationships “as potential sites” for challenging heteronormative standards and developing new perspectives.<sup>54</sup>

## The Women’s Movement and Kambrada in Curaçao and the Netherlands, 1980–1990

To discuss how an analysis of the cultural practices of the Curaçaoan artist Fridi Martina can contribute to this emerging vocabulary, let us revisit the ideas of male sociologists and early authors, writing against them and complicating their arguments by discussing language transformations. Martina’s work and legacy go beyond sexuality studies, since she also contributed through her performances, poems, and public appearances to studies on race, colorism, and the postcolonial sovereignty of the Dutch Caribbean. Martina does not identify as a lesbian and questions the importance of doing so even though she openly lived and worked with a woman; she has argued that sexual markers should not define one’s entire life and that the term is unclear.<sup>55</sup> She has also criticized limiting terms, such as “migrant theater” and “lesbian theater,” that tend to pigeonhole artists by labeling their art by their cultural background or sexual orientation.

Her viewpoints have resonated broadly and garnered widespread agreement. Around the time Martina was criticizing the focus on identitarian terms, there was a public conversation in Amsterdam in 1986 between the Surinamese writer Astrid Roemer and the American writer Audre Lorde, who expressed differing opinions on the importance of self-identifying as lesbians. Roemer argued that naming something could “kill” or constrain its complexity, while Lorde believed that speaking one’s name was a threat to “the powers that be” and could show others that it was possible to live openly.<sup>56</sup> Instead of relegating one position to the realm of the “political” and the other to the “personal” as a means of survival, Roemer and Lorde each called for a dual acknowledgment and widening of what constitutes Blackness.<sup>57</sup> Each in her own way championed the view that minoritarian and marginalized sexualities are an essential part of the collective Caribbean identity. The differing perspectives of Martina, Roemer, and Lorde open up valuable avenues for investigating the role of language, practices, and categorizations in female same-sex relationships and kambrada in particular.

Martina questioned the assumed universal use of the term *lesbian* and did so in the context of the Dutch Caribbean and its diaspora in the Netherlands. Such terms, which stem from a Euro-American context, often lack cultural and historical relevance to the Caribbean, and they contribute to the erasure of Caribbean terminology and cultural expressions related to gender

54 Ferguson, 10.

55 Wigbertson Julian Isenia, “Queer Sovereignities: Re-imagining Sexual Citizenship from the Dutch Caribbean,” in Chelsea Shields and Dagmar Herzog, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 274–82.

56 Cited in Gloria Wekker, “Mati-ism and Black Lesbianism: Two Idealtypical Expressions of Female Homosexuality in Black Communities of the Diaspora,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 24, nos. 3–4 (1993): 154.

57 Wekker, 157.

and sexuality. Simultaneously, Martina did not propose a homogenous idea of sexual cultures in the Dutch Caribbean. Instead, she acknowledged the existence of Dutch Caribbean Black lesbians and the complicated nature of sexual identity and practice in the region.<sup>58</sup>

Martina's approach of critiquing, rejecting, or disrupting the use of Western terms by adopting a theorization from the margins expands our understanding of sexual practices and orients our political and intellectual pursuits in directions that diverge from the mainstream LGBTQIA+ movement. Her approach to sexuality, which does not align strictly with specific identity labels, draws on erotic traditions found in the Dutch Caribbean and beyond, including those of *kambrada*. Her remarks in interviews suggest that while she did not explicitly use the term, elements of *kambrada* practices might have persisted into the 1990s and possibly migrated from the former colony to the metropolitan center, similarly to the transnational phenomenon of *mati*.<sup>59</sup> Crucially, Martina reimagined same-sex intimate relations by refusing to add *kambrada* into the LGBTQIA+ mix and stirring it. This approach underscores the material component of intimate same-sex relationships among women, characterized by labor and mutual dependence. Martina's assertion during a lesbian festival in Amsterdam in 1986—"I live and work with a woman, but don't call that lesbianism"—challenges traditional labels and highlights a nuanced understanding of her relationships.<sup>60</sup>

Martina's critique of identitarian terms—in this case, the Dutch *lesbisch*—aligns with a broader discussion of women disavowing these terms. In 1996, Joceline Clemencia emphasized the significance of embracing culturally sensitive language when discussing women who engage in same-sex relationships. By prioritizing the use of descriptive, inclusive, and empowering language (such as women who love other women), she resists the oppressive silencing that stems from reliance on stigmatizing terms while amplifying the voices of these women and their diverse experiences.<sup>61</sup> As Martina's discussion emphasizes, the terms *lesbian* and *gay* may not adequately capture the cultural and historical specificity of the Dutch Caribbean. Local words and culture regarding gender and sexuality should not be erased. Martina and Clemencia, rejecting the term *kambrada*, proposed a departure from the mainstream chorus of opinion in favor of a more heartfelt communication that could cultivate a new language. Such an evolution in discourse highlights the importance of ongoing conversations that respect and value a multitude of experiences and identities.

## After the Constitutional Reform, 2010–Present

Historically, the term *kambrada* bore negative connotations and was linked to vulgar practices, which was particularly evident in the literary and scholarly works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, a significant shift in its usage and perception occurred

58 See Isenia, "Queer Sovereignties."

59 Wekker, *Politics of Passion*.

60 Fridi Martina, quoted in Isenia, "Queer Sovereignties," 276.

61 See Clemencia, "Women Who Love Women in Curaçao."

in the decades following the pivotal workers' strike on 30 May 1969. This event catalyzed a cultural revolution, ultimately contributing to recognizing the Creole language Papiamentu as an official language in 2007. During the 1970s and 1980s, a cultural movement emerged. Within this movement, efforts to understand *kambrada* manifested through a nuanced retrospective of historical narratives, often drawn from oral histories, and through its intentional integration into literary works, with poetry serving as a notable medium.<sup>62</sup> In these instances, the term evolved to assume a neutral connotation, referring to a platonic friend of any gender without any erotic implications.

By the end of the twentieth century, the erotic usage of *kambrada* had notably declined, particularly in written expression. The underlying factors contributing to this linguistic transition remain unclear. In a contemporary context, the term has undergone further evolution. In 2021, an LGBTQIA+ group in Curaçao adopted the name Kambrada; it operates under the auspices of the Fundashon Orguyo Kòrsou (The Curaçao Pride Foundation). This group's efforts are directed toward reappropriating the term, reflecting its ongoing linguistic and cultural transformation. The founder, Nelly Rosa, draws inspiration from Gloria Wekker's work on *mati* and Joceline Clemencia's essay on *kambrada*, utilizing these texts to articulate contemporary issues. Rosa emphasizes that *kambrada* signifies freedom, self-determination, and decolonization—the last of which moves away from Western standards. In a sense, the Kambrada collective drew inspiration from a project that materialized in the 1990s, subsequently expanding upon and refining this initiative to address and challenge the prevailing biases surrounding terminology and same-sex practices in Curaçao.

This reclamation strikes against the condemnation of *kambrada* in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century sources; however, it flows naturally out of the counter-archive contained in these texts that highlights the grounding of these women's sexuality in practice and their refusal to make distinctions between different aspects of their relationships. The members of the contemporary Kambrada group determined that they needed to become more familiar with the term's history, suggesting that reclaiming the word also requires education and knowledge-sharing. By using the term *kambrada*, the group rethinks contemporary cultural and sexual practices and collectives, resists Western male gazes, and employs the term as an umbrella for nonnormative sexualities and practices.<sup>63</sup>

62 See, for example, Elis Juliana, "Plasa Nobo," *Amigoe*, 27 April 1974, 11; and "Nostalgia," *Amigoe*, 2 February 1975, 9. See note 6 for the oral history project by Juliana and Brenneker.

63 In advancing the field of linguistic and cultural studies within the Dutch Caribbean there is a compelling need for further research on the nuances and evolution of terms in Papiamentu, such as *mariku*, used to denote transgender individuals or males perceived as overly effeminate. This exploration should extend beyond mere translation, delving into the sociocultural connotations and the implications of such terms within the community. Additionally, a comparative study is warranted to examine the circulation and adaptation of Euro-American terminologies like *homosexual*, *gay*, *lesbian*, *lesbisch*, *faggot*, and *flikker* across the Dutch Caribbean. Crucially, this research should highlight the distinctions in how these terms are integrated and understood in the English-speaking islands of Sint Maarten, Sint Eustatius, and Saba, in contrast to the Papiamentu- and Papiamentu-speaking islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. Such studies would enrich our understanding of linguistic diversity and shed light on the broader sociocultural dynamics at play in these diverse Caribbean communities.