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Isenia, W.J.

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## Looking for *kambrada*

*Sexuality and social anxieties in the Dutch colonial archive, 1882–1923<sup>1</sup>*

Wigbertson Julian Isenia

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### Abstract

How can we embrace the appeal to use Caribbean terms for same-sex erotic relationships when we work with archives—such as the colonial archive—whose subjects are spoken about and do not speak back (at least not in a way that is understandable or recognisable to us)? This article deals with the term *kambrada* in Papiamentu in the context of Curaçao. The term can be translated as *zami* in Caribbean English Creole and *mati* in Suriname's Sranan Tongo. The Caribbean terms *zami* and *mati*, like *kambrada*, can refer to a (non-sexual) female or male companion as well as to female same-sex erotic relationships. I trace the appearance of *kambrada* in the Dutch colonial archive by looking at the first three (known) sources that mention female same-sex relationships in the Dutch Caribbean in general, and *kambrada* relationships in particular. These are the anthropological study *Curaçao en Zijne Bewoners* (Curaçao and Its Habitants, 1882) by Antoine T. Brusse, the travelogue *Naar de Antillen en Venezuela* (To the Antilles and Venezuela, 1904) by Henri van Kol, and the novel *E No Por Casa* (She Cannot Marry, 1923) by Willem Kroon. I do not approach these texts as sources for the recovery of the voices of women who engaged in *kambrada* relationships. Rather, I group them together as part of a 'cultural archive' to show how, as cultural articulations of sexuality, they simultaneously articulate colonial domination, social anxieties, and patriarchy. By deducing the ideological statements of these male authors, I take up Ann Stoler's invitation to read *along* the grain of the colonial archive.

**Keywords:** Caribbean, female same-sex relationships, Dutch colonial archive, histories of sexuality and gender, social anxieties, imperial archives

What are local terms in Curaçao, a small island in the Caribbean, to denote female same-sex relationships? How are these terms used? Moreover, what is the history of these terms and what can their usage tell us about the social anxieties and social relations of specific periods? As Caribbean scholars Rosamond King and Angeliqve Nixon provocatively argue, researchers of sexuality must resist the easy and uncritical use of Western terminology in the Caribbean context. According to them, Western terms such as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people) are not only often imprecise or inappropriate in that they ‘invoke particular places, histories, and circumstances’, but also deny Caribbean subjects’ agency to name and define themselves on their own terms—or *not* to name and define themselves (Nixon & King, 2013, p. 9). However, the use of local terms can prove to be as uncritical as the use of a Western sexual language albeit for different reasons. How can we embrace this appeal to use local terms when we work with archives—such as the colonial archive—whose subjects are spoken about and do not speak back (at least not in a way that is understandable or recognisable to us)? Furthermore, what should we consider ‘local’ and how are these ‘local’ terms influenced by processes of enslavement, colonialism, and globalisation?

In this article, I engage these questions through what can be termed a decolonial or postcolonial turn in queer and sexuality studies. This perspective, at a very general level of abstraction, critiques the Western imperialist gaze within studies of homosexuality in non-Western cultures. It points to the authority of Western scholarship on sexuality, which not only replicates imperial constructions of modernity and backwardness and centre and periphery (the metropole and the colonies), but also (unknowingly) supports nationalist projects in non-Western societies that frame homosexuality as alien and imported (Massad, 2007; Rao, 2014; Hoad, 2007). A decolonial or postcolonial approach demands that scholars look, amongst other things, at practices, terms, and beliefs that question hegemonic Euro-North American understandings of sexuality (Wekker, 2006; King, 2014). It argues that the allure of archival recovery of sexual minorities and transgender people might occlude other (sexual and gendered) lives and perspectives. Finally, this discourse critiques a use of the *archive*—even when supplemented with oral histories, ethnography, popular culture, and performances—that develops ‘a telos of knowledge production’ heavily relying on the act of recovery (Arondekar, 2009, p. 6). Within this logic, only what can be found can be legitimised, and only with archival evidence certain truths can be claimed. However, as Suzanne LaFont warns in the case of Jamaica, the lack of proof of same-sex desire

in archival records does not reflect its nonexistence (LaFont, 2001). The challenge then is to disturb this promise of archival claims and to question the possibility of an easy recovery of marginalised subjects from the archive.

This article deals with the term *kambrada* in Papiamentu.<sup>2</sup> The term can be translated as comrade in English, *maatje* in Dutch, *zami* in Caribbean English Creole, and *mati* in Suriname's Sranan Tongo (Elwin, 1997; Wekker, 2006; Tinsley, 2010). The Caribbean terms *zami* and *mati*, like *kambrada*, can refer to a (non-sexual) female or male companion as well as to female same-sex erotic relationships.<sup>3</sup> These terms, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, following Gloria Wekker (2006; 1994), argues, 'are used more frequently in verbal constructions than in nominal ones. Women do *mati* work or make *zami*, verbalising sexuality not as identity but as praxis, something constantly constructed and reconstructed through daily actions' (Tinsley, 2010, p. 7). These languages and practices, sometimes, leave eroticism 'unnamed or undifferentiated' from other types of relationships between women as well as other aspects of their lives (Tinsley, 2010, p. 7).

In what follows, I trace the appearance of *kambrada* in the Dutch colonial archive by looking at the first three (known) sources, written in 1882, 1904, and 1923, which mention female same-sex relationships in the Dutch Caribbean in general, and *kambrada* relationships in particular in Curaçaoan society. These are the anthropological study *Curaçao en Zijne Bewoners* (Curaçao and Its Habitants, 1882) by the Dutch school teacher Antoine T. Brusse, the travelogue *Naar de Antillen en Venezuela* (To the Antilles and Venezuela, 1904) by the Dutch parliamentarian Henri van Kol, and the novel *E No Por Casa* (She Cannot Marry, 1923), written by the Curaçaoan writer Willem Kroon. Although the novel, the travelogue, and the ethnography belong to distinct genres, I group them together to show how, as cultural articulations of sexuality, they simultaneously articulate colonial domination, social anxieties, and patriarchy.<sup>4</sup>

The three books can be divided into two crucial periods within the history of colonial Curaçao. The first period is the pre-industrialisation era (before 1915), when the economy of the island consisted of trade and commercial exchanges. The books by Brusse and Van Kol (written in Dutch) fall into this first period and show how Europeans in the colonies dealt with the aftermath of slavery through their descriptions of *kambrada* women. After the abolition of slavery, the Roman Catholic Church felt the need to educate Afro-Curaçaoans, especially children and women, how to be 'respectable' (Allen, 2007, p. 163). Although *kambrada* women only appear as small notes in the two books, I argue that these traces are significant as they articulate through sexuality the idea that the recently freed could not

handle their freedom and needed to be civilised. The second period is the post-industrialisation era (after 1915), which was marked by the introduction of the oil refinery in Curaçao. With the arrival of the refinery, a rush of newcomers from the neighbouring Caribbean islands followed to work on Curaçao. The book by Kroon (written in Papiamentu) shows how female same-sex erotic relationships and immigrants to the island became indicators of moral decay and how the Roman Catholic Church played a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards *kambrada* women.

I do not approach these texts as sources for the recovery of the voices of women who engaged in *kambrada* relationships. Rather, I read them as part of a 'cultural archive' (Wekker, 2016) that can tell us how sexuality played a role in cultural articulations in the late colonial era. In that sense, if Gloria Wekker, following Edward Said (1993), defines the cultural archive as a 'repository of memory [...] in the heads and hearts of people in the metropole [...] based on four hundred years of imperial rule' (Wekker, 2016, p. 19), I am then particularly interested in the cultural articulations that those heads and hearts of people produced. By deducing the ideological statements of these male authors, I take up Ann Stoler's invitation to read *along* the grain of the colonial archive; that we pay attention to 'its regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake' (Stoler, 2002, p. 100). I use this colonial archive then, again in the words of Stoler, not as a site of 'knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production', not 'archive-as-source' but 'archive-as-subject' (Stoler, 2002, p. 87). Thus, I mean to conceive the colonial archive not as a place where we should necessarily go to find the 'truth' but as a place where we might learn how certain knowledge is produced.

### Traces of *kambrada*

An early mention of the word *kambrada* occurs in the book *Curaçao en Zijne bewoners* (Curaçao and Its Habitants, 1882) by Antoine T. Brusse (1833-1895). Brusse was born in Amsterdam in a Dutch Reformed Church family and was the son of a water distillery factory owner. Brusse moved to Curaçao when he was 22 years old and married Elisabeth Hoyer eight years later. In 1857, he became the headmaster of the boarding school named after him, *A.T. Brusse*, and worked there until 1871. In 1871, Brusse became one of the directors of *Colegio Brusse & Leon* and kept that role until the school closed in 1894. Both schools were situated in the Willemstad city centre and

could be considered to be elitist schools given their considerable annual tuition fees (Rutgers, 1994, pp. 111, 117).

In his *Curaçao and Its Habitants*, after complimenting every 'Curaçaoan woman from the civilized class, in recognition of the virtues which adorn [her]', Brusse goes on stating that the only thing one can accuse Curaçaoan women of, at least in certain classes or groups (i.e. the lower classes), is a 'vice d'education', or a lack of education, 'which implies a reticence, a far-reaching timidity, especially among the girls' (Brusse, 1882, p. 54). But nowhere, Brusse says, 'would one be able to find more care and work-loving housewives and more loving mothers. The Curaçaoan woman is the personification of all domestic virtues' (Brusse, 1882, p. 54). He continues:

However, we have promised the truth and will give it. For this reason, we have to mention a custom which we have only observed here. In a particular class, there is the custom of having a *kambrada* (comrade?). This [...] bosom friend, whom [the woman] has chosen as her *kambrada*, is always of a lower class. The adverse effects that most often arise from this intimate relationship between women and girls of different upbringings, atmospheres and morals, is easy to guess. The parents had to make it their job to counter such abnormal 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. (Brusse, 1882, pp. 54–55, my translation)

First, by mentioning that the custom of *kambrada* relationships is only practised in Curaçao, Brusse ends up culturalising *kambrada*. However, how this custom relates to other cultural traditions in Curaçao remains unclear. Second, Brusse explains the *kambrada* relationship as an intimate friendship: a bosom friendship (or camaraderie?, as he asks in his attempt at translation) between two women of different classes. He does not make clear whether the women have an erotic relationship or a non-sexual relationship. Third, he explains that the women of the upper classes always choose a woman of a lower class as a *kambrada*. This can imply that the *kambrada* woman of the higher class determines the *kambrada* and not the other way around. In other words, the woman of the higher social class seems to take the dominant role in the relationship, or at least in choosing to enter a *kambrada* relationship in the first place. Fourth, Brusse juxtaposes the *kambrada* women with the 'work-loving housewives' and 'the loving mothers'. The latter are presumed to be exclusively heterosexual and are attached to the normative idea of procreation and domesticity.

Also, there seems to be an age difference between the two women if we interpret his description: 'the adverse effects that arise most often from this intimate relationship of women and girls of different upbringings, atmospheres and morals, is easy to guess', as one between women and girls and not a relationship that happens at all ages (Brusse, 1882, p. 55). Finally, the quote by Brusse does not seem to condemn the fact that two women have an intimate relationship with each other *but* the fact that the intimate relationship takes place between women of different classes, which results in 'a mass of unpleasantness' (Brusse, 1882, p. 55).

A second early mention of the word *kambrada* can be found in the book *Naar de Antillen en Venezuela* (To the Antilles and Venezuela, 1904), written by Henri van Kol (1852–1925). Van Kol was born in a Roman Catholic family and was the son of a hotelier and merchant. In 1883, he married Nellie Porreij, a writer and founding member of the Dutch and Belgian biweekly socialist feminist magazine *De Vrouw* (The Woman). In 1897, Van Kol became a member of the House of Representatives in the Hague for the Social Democratic Workers' Party (SDWP). He was re-elected three times and remained in that role until 1909. He subsequently became a member of the Senate from 1913 until 1924. The SDWP and Van Kol were critical of the colonial expansion and modern imperialism (Kuitenbrouwer, 1998; Tichelmans, 1988). For example, Van Kol demanded the termination of the Atjeh War, a military war between the Netherlands and the Sultanate of Aceh, in the modern-day province of Aceh in Indonesia. He wrote that the selfish management of the colonies driven by capitalist greed must give way to a policy of moral responsibility. The ultimate goal, for him, was the development of colonial management in the direction of decolonisation. However, the SDWP occupied only a small number of seats in the House of Representatives and these ideologies failed to translate into action.

After a budget deficit of more than five million Dutch guilders a year in the colony of Curaçao and Dependencies,<sup>5</sup> as well as a critical political note he wrote titled *Een Noodlijdende Kolonie* (A Distressed Colony, 1901), Van Kol set out with a team to devise a plan to bring the economy of the islands back on track. It was during this trip that he wrote *Naar de Antillen en Venezuela*. The book contains several photographs and descriptions of the islands he visited, including their history, geography, and demography.

Van Kol references the book *Curaçao en Zijne Bewoners* by Brusse when he discusses Curaçao:

Brusse claims, in his *Curaçao en zijne 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 wrong qualities of the white race. [...] [The islander's] sensual nature expresses itself mostly through perverse tendencies (especially among the girls, who too often choose 'kambradas' – bosom friends), in the *Tambú* dance and in the large number of natural children, which can be explained by [their] social milieu and their past. (Van Kol, 1904, pp. 353–354, my translation)

Van Kol, in contrast to Brusse, does not remark in his description that the *kambrada* relationship is a relationship between two women of different classes. However, in his description he does mention the *Tambú* dance, which is an Afro-Curaçaoan music and hip circulating dance popular amongst the largest group of the population, namely the formerly enslaved and their offspring. With this note, Van Kol suggests that the 'perverse tendencies' of the *Tambú* dance, the *kambrada* relationships, and the 'large number of natural children' were characteristics of the lower class (Van Kol, 1904, p. 354). Studies of *Tambú* confirm that the dance was practised amongst Afro-Curaçaoans but was also common in Aruba and Bonaire, where it is called the *Barí* (Rosalia, 1997; Allen, 2007; De Jong, 2010). The Roman Catholic Church forbade the *Tambú* and the *Barí* dance because it was perceived as a form of savagery, vulgar, indecent, a 'sexual act', and 'movements that are not Christian' (De Jong 2010, p. 209). This placed restrictions particularly on women and girls and resulted in constructions of gender differences and unequal access to the public sphere.<sup>6</sup> Women who attended or danced at a *Tambú* party were ostracised from the Roman Catholic Church community, were refused any sacrament, and eventually would be consigned a grave outside of the church's cemetery. The colonial government prohibited *Tambú* festivities on governmental grounds and grounds rented by the government (Rosalia, 1997).

The gendered and racial persecution of *Tambú* and the social restrictions imposed by the Church sought to shape 'the ideal male and female Curaçaoan behaviors' (Allen, 2017, pp. 99–100). The repression of different cultural practices of Afro-Curaçaoans was part of the so-called civilising mission that heavily relied upon the forging of the respectable citizen (Allen, 2017, 2007). A respectable citizen (in Papiamentu, *hende drechi*), or a respectable life (*bida drechi*), 'became an aspiration for social mobility and a way to contest the socially inferior position that the society imposed upon [Afro-Curaçaoans]' (Allen, 2017, p. 101). Other terms, such as *drecha rasa* (improving the race) (Roe, 2016) or *drecha famia* (bettering the family, or becoming a more respectable family), necessarily implied doing away with Afrocentric cultural practices such as the *Tambú* (Allen,



2017, pp. 101). It is not surprising that, in his book, Van Kol highlights Afro-Curaçaoan practices relating to sexuality, for sexuality played a key role in modern colonial European thought as a measure of morality and civility.

Both Brusse and Van Kol wrote their works from a standpoint of assumed authority, supposed knowledge, and presumed objectivity.<sup>7</sup> To question such a standpoint, however, is not to say that these works are simply untrue. In fact, learning to read the colonial archive, it is possible to get a glimpse of some crucial dimensions of the lives of the women these male writers explained and described *despite* and *in excess* of the colonial narrative.<sup>8</sup> The most apparent dimension of *kambrada* relationships is the unequal power relations between the women involved, a characteristic that we can also find in the descriptions of *mati* women in Suriname. As Gloria Wekker (2006) argues in relation to *mati*, the women who engage in these relationships appear to have large age differences and to maintain polarised roles in relation to each other. Wekker explains:

The woman who made the first move indicating her interest in the other had staked a simultaneous claim to the 'male' role. The roles say something about the sexual division of labor in the relationship; the 'male' lies on top or can tell the 'female' to be on top. Among couples who have an outspoken division of roles, there are also often differential entitlements, in the sense that the 'man' can demand more privileges and freedoms. (Wekker, 2006, p. 194)

The woman of the higher class in the *kambrada* relationship seems to take the more active role of the 'male', if we project on *kambrada* the framework of the *mati* relationship; the woman of the higher class chooses her *kambrada*. An interesting deviation from the *mati* model, however, is that *kambrada* relationships, at least in Brusse's description, are relationships between women of different classes. Instead, Wekker argues that *mati* relationships are practised amongst working-class Surinamese women (Wekker, 2006, p. 5), which is more in line with the description of *kambrada* offered by Van Kol. The relationship between working-class *mati* women is more reciprocal, as these women aid each other financially and share resources (Wekker, 2006, p. 46). If we imagine that *kambrada* relationships are also relationships across different classes, this might imply a particular transactional exchange or relationship between the two women, where there is a material gain at stake for the woman of the lower social class. Also, both Van Kol's and Brusse's remarks clearly indicate that the practice of living in *kambrada* was widespread and was not entirely disapproved of by the local population.

Finally, in these writings, the two authors do not separate the idea of homosexuality from homosociality when discussing *kambrada*. This imbrication of homosexuality and homosociality is also reflected in later novels (Rosario, 1977; Lauffer, 1962, 1970) as well as in sociological studies discussing *kambrada* women (Hoetink, 1958; Marks, 1976). The word *kambrada* is explained as follows in the erotic dictionary compiled by Tip Marugg:

Kambrada: 1. with reference to two women who have an intimate relationship with each other. 'And talking like two kambradas in their jolliness, Chenda and Brenda walked into the room, where Estelita was sleeping in pain.' – P[ierre] L[auffer]. 2. with reference to two women in a homosexual relationship with each other or the partner of a homosexual woman. To have a kambrada relationship. (Marugg, 1992, pp. 46, my translation)

Here a difference is made between the homosocial and the homosexual. In the first meaning, the term *kambrada* alludes to the homosocial, indicating two women who have an intimate relationship but do not necessarily have a sexual relationship with each other. In the second meaning of *kambrada*, Marugg indicates two women who have an erotic relationship with each other. The explanatory quote is taken from a short story by Pierre Lauffer, 'Doló di Tata' (Pain of a Father) in the collection *Raspa* (1962). In this short story, a soon to be first-time-father is uttering his worries about the fact that his wife wants to give birth at home. The character considers this to be an old-fashioned and hazardous practice and is particularly annoyed at his mother-in-law and the midwife who persuaded his wife to give birth at home. The explanatory quote in the dictionary—'and talking like two kambradas in their jolliness'—refers to the mother-in-law and the midwife, Chenda and Brenda, who apparently talk or interact intimately with each other. *Kambrada* here does not refer to the fact that the two women are sleeping together but to the way they interact socially with each other. Unlike Marugg, who writes in 1992, the two colonial writers Van Kol and Brusse do not distinguish between homosociality and homosexuality amongst women, in fact confounding a clear distinction between gender and sexuality as categories of analysis for an understanding of *kambrada*.

As the discussion so far shows, the lines between gender, sexuality, class, and race do not surface clearly or coherently in the descriptions of *kambrada* to be found in the Dutch colonial archive. As the precise sexual nature of these relationships amongst women remains unclear, so does the specific classed and racial configuration of *kambrada*. These zones of

opacity should not surprise, as the colonial archive is not a transparent site for the extraction of knowledge, but rather a site imbued with power. In other words, we cannot expect Dutch colonial writers to deliver us the truth about same-sex female sexuality in colonial Curaçao. Yet, as I already mentioned and as I have begun to show, this does not mean that we should stop reading the colonial archive. Instead, we should learn how to read it—first and foremost by abandoning fantasies of transparency, access, and recovery. In the next section, I continue to read along the archival grain, as Ann Laura Stoler (2009) puts it, by looking at yet another cultural articulation of *kambrada*, this time written in Papiamentu and in a radically transformed (yet still colonial) Curaçaoan society.

### ***Kambrada* in a changing social landscape**

The third cultural articulation I discuss is the fictional novel *E No Por Casa* (She Cannot Marry, 1923), written by Curaçaoan writer Willem Kroon (1886–1949). Kroon was the son of a carpenter and contractor. He married Julia Nicasia Inesia at the age of 40. The novel *She Cannot Marry*, as Broek argues, forms part of a body of work in the 1920s and 1930s that emerged after great societal changes following the introduction of Shell, the oil refinery in Curaçao (Broek, 1992). In turning from a small agrarian and mercantile society during the slavery period into a capitalist and industrial country through the introduction of the oil refinery in 1915, socioeconomic conditions and upward social mobility improved on the island. Broek argues that novels of this period written solely by male authors associated with the Roman Catholic Church meant to warn people about ‘the dangers of modern life’ (Broek, 1992, p. 54). These dangers were partly attributed to the immigrants from other Caribbean islands, who lacked a Roman Catholic background and allegedly exhibited ‘alternative lifestyles’ (Broek, 1992, p. 52).<sup>9</sup> Ernesto Petronia, Manuel Fray, Miguel Suriel, Emilio Davelaar, Jozef Sint Jago, and Kroon were writers who consciously worked to spread the message of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup> Their didactic novels were written to instruct the Roman Catholic Church community, which was predominantly comprised of formerly enslaved Afro-Curaçaoans, regarding their religious and social duties. Other works by these writers revolved around incest as well as Curaçao becoming ‘a refuge for sinners’ due to the mass immigration and the corruption of souls due to money, amongst other themes (Broek, 1992, p. 52).

The novel *E No Por Casa* first appeared in weekly instalments in Papiamentu between 10 January and 14 March 1923, in the Roman Catholic weekly newspaper *La Cruz*. It was later published as a book in 1927. *La Cruz*, just like its predecessor *La Union*, was published in order to spread the message of the Roman Catholic Church amongst the population (Allen, 2007). This novel was didactic or instructional, as Rose Mary Allen argues, in the very way it was written—a ‘simple narrative form’ to make the Catholic ‘moral teachings more accessible’ to the lower class of the Afro-Curaçaoan community (Allen, 2007, p. 161). Even though the circulation of these didactic novels was hindered by the lack of literacy of the population at the time, people would read these stories aloud to others to spread the message (Allen, 2007, p. 161). Although not much more is currently known about the circulation of these novels, the regular visits of Roman Catholic priests to family homes in addition to the weekly masses would presumably guarantee that the lower social classes would be instructed on appropriate sexual relationships, that is, monogamous heterosexual relationships in marriage and with children (Allen, 2007, p. 94).

The narrative in *E No Por Casa* revolves around two poor orphans, Cecilia and Henry, who live with a wealthy, elderly woman, Josefa, after their parents die. Josefa, the main antagonist, has ‘un amor loco e imposible’ (a mad and impossible love), which later turns out to be her secret desire for a *kambrada* relationship with Cecilia (Kroon, 1927, pp. 58–60). Cecilia, however, falls in love with the shoemaker Guillermo, who declares his love and proposes to Cecilia. Josefa is against this marriage because Guillermo is from a lower social class and a craftsman. Therefore, to end the relationship, Josefa asks Adela, a poor woman in the neighbourhood, to leave an envelope containing money at Guillermo’s house, who will be later accused of having stolen it. When the money is found, Guillermo is given the choice by Josefa to either leave Curaçao or be handed over to the authorities. Guillermo decides to leave for Venezuela. After that, Adela blackmails Josefa to give her money to keep her secret safe; hence Josefa decides to poison Adela. Cecilia and Henry later find Adela passed out in the garden. Adela confesses her deed when she wakes up and accuses Josefa of attempted murder and slander. When confronted with the accusations by Cecilia and Henry, Josefa is struck by a heart attack. On her deathbed, Josefa pleads forgiveness for her sins, one of which is the *amor di kambrada* (love of *kambrada*)—in this case, not the practice of sexual or non-sexual relationship of *kambrada* women, but her desire for Cecilia—which was the genuine motive behind her interference with the marriage. As Josefa states:

‘Guillermo, I confess to you before three eyewitnesses that I defamed you [in such a manner] that Cecilia would not marry you. In my craziness, I figured that a man would never love me like a woman [would] and that is the reason why I always had an aversion towards [men]?’ She takes a breath and continues. ‘My scandalous life contributed to the doom of several young women, and humanity suffered because of this, the whole world needs to despise me’. She falls back, and starts to lose her strength. They help her, and she improves a little. She continues to talk with a fragile voice: ‘Forgive me, Guillermo, forgive me before Cecilia, the virtuous soul, [that even though I have graced her] with my goodness, my affection and my seductive words, I could not corrupt. Oh! The damn vice that ends with your soul and body’ [...] ‘Cecilia forgive me [...], come closer so I can bless you, although my hands are impure’. (Kroon, 1927, p. 74, my translation)

The word *kambrada* is used in the novel three times. First, in a letter written by Eloisa, a childhood friend of Josefa, to warn Cecilia about Josefa. Here, Eloisa talks about Josefa, who she says is ‘a soft-hearted woman [...]’. However, [her] greatest defect, is the damn forbidden friendship, the *kambrada* relationship, vulgarly said, that young women and even [older] women have. Since [she was] a young girl, she likes the vice, which boiled in her blood’ (Kroon, 1927, p. 60). Second, Kroon uses the word when Adela confesses to Cecilia that she also had a *kambrada* relationship with Josefa: ‘My whole life I was her victim, since she insisted on having the damn *kambrada* with me. Then she despised in me, and she left me, abandoned, inculcated with evil and vice’ (Kroon, 1927, pp. 69–70). And lastly, Adela speaks the word again on Josefa’s deathbed: ‘Josefa, I hope that God will forgive us as Guillermo did, so that you can die more relieved. I will ask this priest to let me confess so that I can renounce my sins. I promise to dedicate my life to discourage others who might be tempted to fall in the vice of *kambrada*’ (Kroon, 1927, p. 74). Here three meanings of *kambrada* can be discerned, although it is not very clear every time to which one Kroon alludes to: *kambrada* as a (non-sexual) relationship between women, *kambrada* as an erotic relationship between women, and *kambrada* as female same-sex desire.<sup>11</sup>

Kroon depicts the antagonist Josefa through a common ageist and misogynist Caribbean trope, that is, the sexual non-conforming ‘postmenopausal and thus postreproductive’ older woman who feeds on the blood of young bodies similar to the Trinbagonian *soucouyant*, the Dominican *lazaroon*, the Guyanan, Jamaican, and Bahamian *old hag*, the Saint Lucian *duppy woman*, the Haitian *volant*, and the Surinamese

*azeman* (Gill, 2018, pp. xxvii–xxx; see also Anatol, 2000, p. 45).<sup>12</sup> The novel reproduces this trope by commenting on Josefa’s ‘untidy’ appearance—‘her hair [...] hasn’t been combed since yesterday morning’ (Kroon, 1927, p. 12)—but also contrasting the young Cecilia (‘the flower’) with the elderly Josefa (‘a snake’), Josefa being ‘perverse’ while Cecilia ‘being a dove in a golden cage, with its feet tied up with a silk ribbon’ who falls into Josefa’s hands (Kroon, 1927, pp. 16, 20 & 27).

Like Brusse and Van Kol, Kroon uses the term *kambrada* to denote something vulgar and to be condemned (Kroon, 1927, p. 60). The novel shows—beyond legislative gestures<sup>13</sup>—how cultural processes and articulations and their circulations, in this case by the Roman Catholic Church, produce normativities and non-normativities. However, even as same-sex configurations such as *kambrada* play a key role in articulating the boundaries between the normative and the non-normative, the latter exceeds the domain of same-sex practices and desires. For example, the description of the childless Josefa in the novel is juxtaposed with the happily married and reproductive couple formed by Cecilia and Guillermo, reinforcing the way unmarried and childless women, as well as childless married couples, were chastised in the Roman Catholic community. As the priest and Apostolic Vicar Michael Gregorius Vuylsteke wrote in the Curaçaoan Roman Catholic newspaper *Amigoe* in 1920, ‘a house family without children is not a perfect household’.<sup>14</sup> Once again, the disciplining of gender and sexuality cannot be kept apart, as *both* Josefa’s childlessness and her involvement in *kambrada* relationships qualify her as an aberration vis-à-vis the sexual regime imposed by the Roman Catholic Church especially on the lower classes of Curaçaoan colonial society. The ongoing construction of such a sexual regime, in turn, cannot be abstracted from the historical transformations taking place on colonial Curaçao at the time, that is, the emergence of new social segmentations and consequent moral panics brought about by industrialisation and labour migration. Margo Groenewoud also notes that the Roman Catholic Church, jointly with the support of the colonial government, has had a significant influence on the consolidation of the social order that existed before industrialisation and during slavery times and an inhibiting impact on social mobility of Afro-Curaçaoans in the period 1915 to 1973 (Groenewoud, 2017, p. 44).

What remains invisible in the discussed accounts of these male authors, not surprisingly, is how their authors gained access to these women’s lives. Possibly, these narratives were dependent on the observation of native informants who were rendered invisible in the process. These three books were written by men who worked within or in close collaboration

with powerful institutions at the time. Brusse was a school teacher at an elite school in Curaçao, Van Kol was an elected member of the House of Representatives in the Netherlands, and Kroon was a prolific writer. They all had access to publishing houses that made sure that these cultural articulations were selectively and accurately reproduced and distributed. Two of these works, *Curaçao and Its Habitants* and *To the Antilles and Venezuela*, were written in Dutch, a language that was only accessible to a small elite minority who had received some education in Dutch. In fact, these two works have not been accessible on the islands themselves. As Rutgers argues, books such as the ones by Van Kol and Brusse were not available in the public library on Curaçao. To read them at the time, you had to be dependent on a few private collections or travel to the Netherlands (Rutgers, 1994, pp. 177). This means that these works were written for a metropolitan readership or elite members of the local colonial society.<sup>15</sup> The work by Kroon, instead, was written in Papiamentu and effectively distributed. Indeed, it was intended for the lower classes of the local population, in order to ‘educate’ them into a Roman Catholic sexual regime and, more broadly, to teach them the dangers of modern life. Despite their different languages, genres, and goals, the three texts constitute cultural articulations of the sexual politics of colonialism, for their discussions of sexuality—and of *kambrada* relationships in particular—illustrate the colonial attempt to discipline sexuality at the same time as they reveal broader social anxieties about gender, race, and class in the Curaçaoan society.

## Conclusion

These three early articulations help us understand how ideas of heteronormativity and their (binary) gender expectations were entangled with social anxieties around sexuality at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in Curaçao. They also shed light on how the Roman Catholic Church and the colonial government conceived ideas of heterosexuality as the norm and ideas of same-sex sexualities as an aberration. These articulations (and their circulations) produce and reproduce power imbalances and dispossessions. Finally, these three articulations allow a historicised contextualisation of the usage of terms relating to female same-sex sexualities such as *kambrada*.

Two insights follow from this analysis of descriptions of *kambrada* women in the colonial archive. First, from these descriptions, one cannot



conceptualise the sexual acts and practices of these *kambrada* relationships in terms of sexual identity such as lesbianism. The verb *tene e kambrada* or *tene kambrada* (have *kambrada* relationship) implies a conceptualisation of sexuality that points to behaviour. Women have *kambrada* relationships or choose someone for a *kambrada* relationship, and these authors do not articulate these practices in terms of sexual identity (I am or she is a *kambrada*). Furthermore, the adjective *e vicio di kambrada* (the vice of *kambrada*) or, in the quote by Kroon, ‘the *kambrada* relationship, vulgarly said’, implies a slur or disapproval. It is not clear from the descriptions whether these women have reclaimed the term *kambrada* at that time.

Second, through the retrieval of these sexual practices, we cannot expect a transparent and unobstructed access to these women’s lives without lapsing into notions of an ‘essential native sexuality’ (Kempadoo, 2004, p. 2). This would imply paying more attention to the way *kambrada* appears in historical texts, without assuming that by ‘recovering’ the experiences of women involved in *kambrada* relationships, the latter can come to speak or articulate their own subjectivity (Spivak, 1988). There are no book-length case studies or written documents in which the voices of these women can be ‘recuperated’. We should look elsewhere, through songs they sang and stories they told, in which these women enunciated their sexualities more vaguely and less explicitly. This will have to be the starting point to write the archival silences of the colonial past.

## Notes

1. This article is part of my ongoing PhD project that examines cultural practices and cultural articulations of gendered and sexual citizenship. This project is part of the NWO funded project *Cultural Practices of Citizenship under Conditions of Fragmented Sovereignty: Gendered and Sexual Citizenship in Curaçao and Bonaire*, a collaboration between the University of Amsterdam and the University of Curaçao Dr Moises da Costa Gomez. An earlier version of this article was presented at the workshop *Our (Queer) Caribbean* in 2018 organised by the Race in the Americas (RITA) group in collaboration with University College London.
2. Papiamentu is a creole language of a mixture of Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, and Taino Amerindian and is spoken by the majority of the population on the Caribbean islands of Curaçao and Bonaire. In 2007, Papiamentu became the official language next to Dutch. In Aruba, they speak Papiamentu. Papiamentu has an etymologically structured spelling, and Papiamentu has a phonetically structured spelling.
3. Here, I specifically refer to the term *mati* as it is used in Suriname. In Papiamentu and Papiamentu, the term *mati* is only used to mean a (non-sexual) male friend. The term *mati* in Suriname is also used to refer to male same-sex erotic relationships (See Wekker, 2006, pp. 82, 176).

4. In this article, I do not focus on what some would call 'actual archives'. While this indeed is an important and necessary endeavour that I inevitably will pursue in the future, due to the length of this article it is impossible to incorporate it here. Such a comprehensive analysis, although considering the limits of the archive, might help us to understand how the meanings of the term *kambrada* changed over time up until the present day and historicise and contextualise a longer trajectory of cultural articulations that discuss *kambrada* relationships.
5. The colonies of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao were grouped as 'Curaçao and Dependencies' from 1815 until 1828 and then, from 1845 until 1936, St Eustatius, St Maarten, and Saba were added to 'Curaçao and Dependencies'. Suriname was classified as a separate colony during both periods except between 1828 and 1848. During this period, all the Dutch Caribbean colonies were grouped together due to austerity measures.
6. See, for example, how girls between fourteen and sixteen, as Rose Mary Allen argues, 'were not allowed to participate in local popular cultural events and happenings, such as the Tambú and Ocho Dia, representations of an immoral and pagan way of life' (Allen, 2007, p. 165)
7. Most of the works that reference Van Kol and Brusse take the works as an accurate representation of that time. However, some authors do critique the work by Van Kol. As an article in the newspaper in Curaçao writes, 'with less rushing so much better could be achieved, the short duration of the journey, the volatility of the impressions and the accidentally conversations with persons. (...). In his book, one cannot always distinguish where the compendium (the best sources) and the sound observations cease or where the writer builds on what the man in the street told him' (my translation). 'Van Kol'. *Amigoe di Curaçao: Weekblad voor de Curaçaosche Eilanden*. Willemstad, 30-04-1904. Retrieved from <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010279978:mpeg21:a0012>. Interestingly, in this quote 'actual archives' are referred to as proper sources, namely, the compendium, which is 'the best source' as the writer L.C. van Panhuys clarifies. Subsequently, 'actual archives' are juxtaposed with 'what the man in the street told [Van Kol]', which, in his comparison, is believed to be inferior.
8. Ineke van Wetering mentions in the case of mati women in Suriname that we should critically engage with colonial texts discussing female same-sex relationships 'despite [their] biases or other conspicuous shortcomings and omissions', since these works provide us with 'historical material on women's lives that would be hard to retrieve now, by means of oral history for instance' (1998, p. 133).
9. See Allen (2018). Rose Mary Allen analyses how ideas of respectability were used to restrict entry of women from the British Caribbean that came to Curaçao to work as domestic workers at the beginning of the twentieth century.
10. Interestingly, in the 1930s, Kroon became much more critical of the Roman Catholic Church as he accused the church of meddling too much into the political issues of the islands and that it created differences within the society based on race and class (See Groenewoud, 2017, pp. 85–86). So, even though Kroon went on to become critical of the institute of the Roman Catholic Church, the novel can be placed within the sexual mores of the Roman Catholic Church at that time.
11. Through this particular novel, we can likewise observe crucial dimensions of *kambrada*. Kroon describes the practice of twin clothing and the transactional aspects of such a relationship. First, in the introduction of the book: 'the woman [Josefa] shows a love for Cecilia, that let people believe [that their relationship] is more than paternal. For instance, they [Cecilia and her brother] even live for free on the second floor of the women's house. Moreover, Josefa has the pretences of having two of the same dresses

- made so that they can dress like twins' (Kroon, 1927, p. 6). And, lastly, when Cecilia starts suspecting Josefa of wanting a *kambrada* relationship with her: 'Josefa says: "I am going to sew it under one condition; that you will wear the same [dress]"' (Kroon, 1927, pp. 62–63). Joceline Clemencia in the late 1990s also writes about the twin clothing of *kambrada* women in Curaçao in her essay 'Women Who Love Women; From "Cachapera" to Open Throats. A Commentary in Collage' (1996), a practice that also appears in descriptions of *mati* relationships (Wekker, 2006, p. 194).
12. These descriptions of zeh are similar to the Afro-Caribbean goddess Ezili, 'the beautiful femme queen, bull dyke, weeping willow, dagger mistress [that] [...] protects madivin and masisi, that is transmasculine and transfeminine Haitians' (Tinsley, 2018, p. 4). In the case of Curaçao, the figure is called zeh, èzè, or lèngè but is not gendered or given a negative connotation to age as Rose Mary Allen notes; zeh is an evil spirit 'who can remove a person's skin and fly through the air at night in search of a newborn child from which it can suck blood. It was believed that by throwing salt on the skin of zeh or èzè (or lèngè), it would leave and never return' (2007, p. 244).
  13. The Dutch Caribbean did not inherit colonial laws that criminalised same-sex behaviour like other Caribbean islands in the Caribbean Archipelago. Jacqui Alexander, amongst others, studied how state power and Caribbean state nationalism are produced and reproduced through technologies of control, the criminalisation of non-normative sexualities through legislative measures, and the sexualisation of particular bodies (Alexander, 2006). Although some cases, such as the Dutch penal code 248bis that was translated to local laws in colonial times (Suriname's penal code 303 and Curaçao's penal code 255), need more attention. This penal code criminalised with a maximum prison term of four years, any adult who had same-sex sexual intercourse with a minor (below the age of 21), while the age-limit for heterosexual sexual intercourse was 16 years.
  14. 'Fr. Michael Gregorius Vuylsteke, van de orde der predikheeren, doop de genade Gods en de gunst van den h. Stoel Tit. Bisschop Van Charadras en Apost. Vic. V. Curaçao, aan de Geestelijken en Geloovigen Van zijn Vicariaat, zaligheid in den heer'. *Amigoe di Curaçao: weekblad voor de Curaçaose eilanden*. Willemstad, 21-02-1920. Retrieved from <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010280690:mpeg21:a0001>
  15. The work by Van Kol, for example, was meant to familiarise people in the Netherlands with the situations in the Dutch colonies and to help Curaçao and Dependencies due to their poor economic situation. Several advertisements promoted the book in newspapers. The book cost four Dutch guilders and a bound book f 4,90. The book was to be obtained, according to the advertisement, in 'all booksellers [in the Netherlands]' (my translation). 'Advertentie'. *Het Nieuws van Den Dag; Kleine Courant*. Amsterdam, 09-01-1904. Retrieved from <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010128649:mpeg21:a0051>

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## About the author

**Wigbertson Julian Isenia** is a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam in an NWO-funded research project on gendered and sexual citizenship in the Dutch Caribbean. His first book, *The Question of Dutch Politics as a Matter of Theatre: Theatre and Performance after the 2008 Financial Crisis*, was published in 2017 (Marburg: Tectum Verlag).

E-mail: [w.g.s.j.isenia@uva.nl](mailto:w.g.s.j.isenia@uva.nl)

