

**The Bishops of London, Colonialism and transatlantic slavery**

**Isaac Crichlow**

**The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, University College  
London**

## **Kalenda: Movement and Resistance to enslavement in the British West Indies**

This paper seeks to briefly outline the historical impact of an African derived cultural practice to the lives of the enslaved in the British Caribbean. Although the enslaved were packed on ships without any material possessions, the majority had already reached adulthood, and as such took lived experiences from Africa to the Caribbean. Embedded in these experiences was a diverse range of knowledge and skill. There would have been blacksmiths, farmers and merchants, scribes, spiritualists, warriors and all manner of other experts amongst the enslaved. These possessions were invisible, intangible and immaterial, and therefore of no interest to colonisers willing to sacrifice their own spiritual wellbeing for material profit. The enslaved were able to draw on their past experiences in a variety of ways to affect their new lives. Some who carried useful skills which could benefit plantation owners became artisans and craftsmen, who often held elevated positions amongst the enslaved and were sometimes able to take on paid work. Others who had experience marketing goods in Africa (particularly women), sold produce from their provision grounds at Sunday markets or on the docks to sailors and soldiers. Those with leadership experience in Africa were made drivers, responsible for 'gangs' of enslaved plantation labourers. But there were also skills which did not directly benefit colonisers but proved useful to the enslaved. These skills would have made enslaved people better equipped to combat their oppressors, to defend their honour, or to get justice for a wrong done to them. One of these is the topic of this paper: Kalenda, a stick-fighting martial art derived from African traditions, which was used to gain mastery in swordplay, for recreation, and to defend honour.

### **Kalenda**

The subject of this report is Kalenda, a stick fighting tradition brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans. This section will answer a series of questions relating to the practice of martial art Kalenda in the Caribbean. Namely, what is Kalenda? What African martial traditions was it based on and how were they transported to and transformed within the Americas? What role did it play in resistance to colonialism by the enslaved? And finally, what were its legacies in the period following emancipation in 1838?

### **Methodology**

The basis of this report is a book by historian T.J Desch Obi entitled, *Fighting for Honor*, which is a history of African martial arts in diaspora. The reliance on this work is due both to its brilliance, and the relatively slim historiography on this topic. I have used primary sources where possible to draw out examples of the use of African martial arts during the period of slavery within the Caribbean. These include descriptions written by European observers of the

practice of African martial arts in the Americas, but also paintings made by European artists, which depict bouts between enslaved practitioners. Key to this topic is understanding the way different martial traditions brought by different peoples blended within the context of Caribbean Slavery. As such, I will refer to not only the stick fighting martial art Kalenda, but also other African derived martial arts, particularly Damnyé and Capeoira, in order to understand the way different cultural influences and styles were combined. There are a variety of stick fighting traditions which survive in the Caribbean today. They carry different names, and are markedly different in their forms and the contexts in which they are practiced. The final sections of my analysis will address these different traditions, to understand their cultural influences and how the historic context in each case influenced the character of the martial art. Evidence for this section will be videos of these martial arts being performed, which I will reference as time stamps to allow the reader to find the exact moment in the video to which I refer. This will bring these living traditions into full focus, and provide for us a demonstration of the practical skills which were carried to the Americas and transformed by enslaved Africans.

### **What is Kalenda?**

Kalenda is an African derived martial art used within the Caribbean by the enslaved and their descendants. It is a stick-fighting art, practiced as a form of self-defence, to improve efficiency with bladed weapons, and to defend honour. The ritual context in which Kalenda was usually practiced has much in common with West Central African traditions, and originates specifically amongst a group of people called the Kunene. They were known contemporaneously, along with other groups from West Central Africa, as Angolas. They had a martial tradition called Kandeka, which involved slap-boxing and stick-fighting.<sup>1</sup> When people from this group were enslaved and transported to the Americas they took their stick-fighting skills with them. In the Caribbean, particularly the French speaking islands, these skills re-emerged and were combined with other West and Central African stick fighting traditions to create the martial arts which are still practiced in the Caribbean today.<sup>2</sup>

### **Stick fighting traditions in Africa**

Although Kalenda bears much similarity with Central African traditions, many different cultures had stick fighting martial arts that may have influenced the practice of Kalenda. The Fulani, like the Kunene, were a pastoral people and therefore needed to use sticks to control their cattle. Their stick duelling

---

<sup>1</sup> T.J Desch Obi, *Fighting for Honor: The History of African Martial Art Traditions in the Atlantic World*, (Columbia, 2008), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 143.

probably grew out of this familiarity with the weapon.<sup>3</sup> In the Biafra region, amongst the Igbo, spilling the blood of other Igbos particularly relatives was forbidden. Therefore, warfare in the interior regions of Igboland was fought with sticks called 'nkpo' or wooden machetes called 'abariba'.<sup>4</sup> Amongst the kingdoms of Oyo, Dahomey and the Sokoto Caliphate, sticks were also used as weapons.<sup>5</sup> A European traveller Willem Bosman who visited the Gold and Slave coasts in the late seventeenth century, recorded the use of fighting sticks amongst the Kingdom of Allada. He writes '...the principal weapon and on which they most depend, are a sort of clubs about a yard long, and five or six inches thick, very round and even, except a knot at the bottom...'. He continues 'Every Man is provided with five or six of these.' Although Bosman describes the sticks as being 5-6 inches in thickness, I find this unlikely. Any weapon of that size would be unwieldy for a normal human. What is clear, however, is that the stick was an important weapon to many peoples within Africa, and these varying stick fighting practices were brought with the enslaved to the Americas.<sup>6</sup>

In West and Central Africa, martial training would have begun at a young age. Boys were taught by their fathers or uncles on an informal basis, bouts were fought between peers -using smaller and more supple sticks to spar- and graduation rituals provided more structured training in preparation for entry into adulthood. Amongst the Kunene a training game called "ombundje" provided the first experience of stick-fighting. This game was played with '...switches covered with soft leaves...', which allowed youth to trade blows, practicing attack and defence, without risking injury.<sup>7</sup> As the game progressed and the leaves fell off, blows would gather more speed increasing the difficulty of the exercise. In addition, group fights took place between young people, which provided a simulation of the real battles these boys would encounter once they reached adulthood. These were not formally organised, but spontaneous, resulting from challenges exchanged between different groups who were in the fields tending their cattle. The Kunene were a pastoral people, and their familiarity with the stick was a result of this lifestyle. They were essential while tending herds, in order to control the cattle who were invariably heavier than their guardians.<sup>8</sup>

As the boys reached adulthood, they would undergo a rite of passage called an "ekwendje". This ritual took place away from Kunene settlements in specially prepared camps, where the boys were first circumcised, before

---

<sup>3</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 143.

<sup>4</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 143.

<sup>6</sup> Willem Bosman, *A new and accurate description of the coast of Guinea, divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory coasts*, (London, 1907), 396.

<sup>7</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 33.

they were taught history, songs, dances and various military skills.<sup>9</sup> They entered adulthood, therefore, with the benefit of years of experience in more or less formal matches with sticks, well capable of defending themselves against their cattle and their cattle against any potential raiders. Spontaneous bouts, which were common for young people, became more restricted amongst adults due to the increased risk of injury. However, men would compete against each other in stick-fighting dances called “okutana”, which were more for exhibition and limited by ‘...ritual and aesthetics.’<sup>10</sup> If an adults honour was challenged, however, a duel was fought with sticks between the two parties to resolve the issue. This aspect of the Kunene martial tradition was recreated in the Caribbean.

### **Kalenda in the Caribbean**

One such duel was captured by the Italian artist Agostino Brunias on the island of Dominica. The painting from 1779 entitled ‘A cudgeling match between English and French Negroes’ depicts two men circling each other,



Figure 1: Two stickfighters circle each other, holding a defensive posture.

<sup>9</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 27-28.  
<sup>10</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 33.

holding their fighting sticks at each end in a defensive posture.<sup>11</sup> The title of the painting assumes the enslaved are recreating the English martial art of cudgels, which was also a form of stick fighting, however, the stance of the two men appears to be an indication of the inheritance of central African culture. Holding the stick at both ends, was intended to protect the body '...physically and spiritually simultaneously.'<sup>12</sup> This posture despite having Central African origins was adopted by enslaved practitioners from many backgrounds and is still integral to Kalenda today. Dominica largest cultural group at the time were Biafrans, with imports from that region of West Africa between 1750 & 1779 making up nearly fifty percent of the total- 11,789 from the port of Bonny alone.<sup>13</sup> Amongst the men were undoubtedly some members of the paramilitary closed societies, who taught initiates military skills, including concealment, tracking and the art of headhunting with a machete. Wooden machetes were used by Igbo peoples in training and may have provided them with a cultural reference for Kalenda. It is also entirely possible that Brunias witnessed two Central Africans fighting, despite the fact that only 811 enslaved Central Africans arrived in Dominica during the same period.<sup>14</sup> Also visible in the painting are two other stick fighters, each holding their weapons, perhaps awaiting their turn to challenge the winner of the contest, or acting as seconds for the two fighters. The one on the right is being held by two other people, maybe trying to dissuade him from participating. Victory was generally awarded to the first who drew blood, which is still the case in Kalenda fights in present-day Trinidad.<sup>15</sup>

Kalenda was most widespread among the French islands. Even Dominica, which by the time of Brunias' visit in 1779 was under British control, was initially colonised by the French. Similarly, Trinidad had an influx of enslaved people from French islands. An English traveller called William Butterworth, witnessed the practice of Kalenda on the island of Guadeloupe in the late eighteenth century. He describes the art as 'single sticks' and details how it was performed as a sort of recreation during the downtime granted to the enslaved on Sundays. Butterworth witnessed a group congregate in a clearing and form circles according to their region of origin, in which they began to sing and dance. A circle was also formed for stick fights, '...the person who proved victorious the preceding Sunday...' would enter

---

<sup>11</sup> "Stick Fighting, Dominica, West Indies, 1779 ", *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*, accessed November 26, 2022, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/1024>

<sup>12</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> Slave Voyages database, accessed November 25, 2022, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#tables>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> In Trinidad hole is sometimes made within the ring, for the vanquished to bleed into.

'...strutting about in fancied greatness...'.<sup>16</sup> This display of bravado was key to the practice and can still be observed today. Also integral was the musical accompaniment which was played throughout the fight- Butterworth writes '...the music playing all the time, and keeping the whole in good humor.'<sup>17</sup> A challenger would join last week's champion in the ring and then '...two tellers are appointed, who act as umpires.'<sup>18</sup> This element could have been adopted from European duelling culture, in which it was customary for participants to choose a "second" who would ensure the fairness of the contest.<sup>19</sup> Butterworth continues 'The combatants, after taking up the sticks, approach each other very gracefully, shake hands cordially, separate, take their ground, and commence the contest...Men of equal science often contend a considerable time, without either obtaining any advantage over the other, hitting stroke for stroke...'.<sup>20</sup> It is from this type of stick fight that the martial art gets the name Kalenda. This word was used, interchangeably with 'Bamboulas', to refer to the type of festivities described by Butterworth, encompassing not just the fight itself but the circle formed by onlookers, the music and the dancing.<sup>21</sup> Bamboula was the name of the drum used on such occasions.

Other martial arts were also practiced in the same ritual context, including Danmyé, which is an unarmed martial art found in Martinique. It bears much resemblance to Brazilian Capoeira, both having roots in the Central African martial art Engolo, and dancing is integrated into its performance. The image below produced by Austrian artist Rugendas whilst on a visit to Brazil, depicts two men playing Capoeira. The drum, providing a musical accompaniment can be seen lying on the floor, with the musician sitting on top. In Obi's view both the drum '...and style of play are strikingly similar to those used by the Kunene at times to accompany Kandeka and Engolo.'<sup>22</sup> Danmyé has many of the same moves as Capoeira, including spinning attacks, inverted kicks, and acrobatic evasion. Both martial arts, along with Kalenda, also utilize '...another aspect of the Central African aesthetic, the theatrical breaks and feigning of disinterest in order to fool one's opponent and gain the element of surprise.'<sup>23</sup> Examples of this will be seen in the videos analysed below. Danmyé also employs headbutts, hand strikes and grappling techniques. The latter are believed to have been incorporated by enslaved Biafrans,

---

<sup>16</sup> William Butterworth, *Three years adventures of a minor, in England, Africa, the West Indies, South-Carolina and Georgia*, (London, 1831), 302.

<sup>17</sup> Butterworth, *Three years adventures*, 303.

<sup>18</sup> Butterworth, *Three years adventures*, 302.

<sup>19</sup> For a brief explanation of European duelling culture see Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 145.

<sup>20</sup> Butterworth, *Three years adventures*, 303.

<sup>21</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 136.

<sup>23</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 137.

although, almost every region of West Africa has its own style of wrestling.<sup>24</sup> The blending of cultures we see manifested in the moves of Damnyé is a physical embodiment the creolisation of different enslaved peoples which created Caribbean identity. Martial arts were a universal language which facilitated this cultural amalgamation, with the help of music and dancing at bamboulas and Kalendas across the Caribbean.

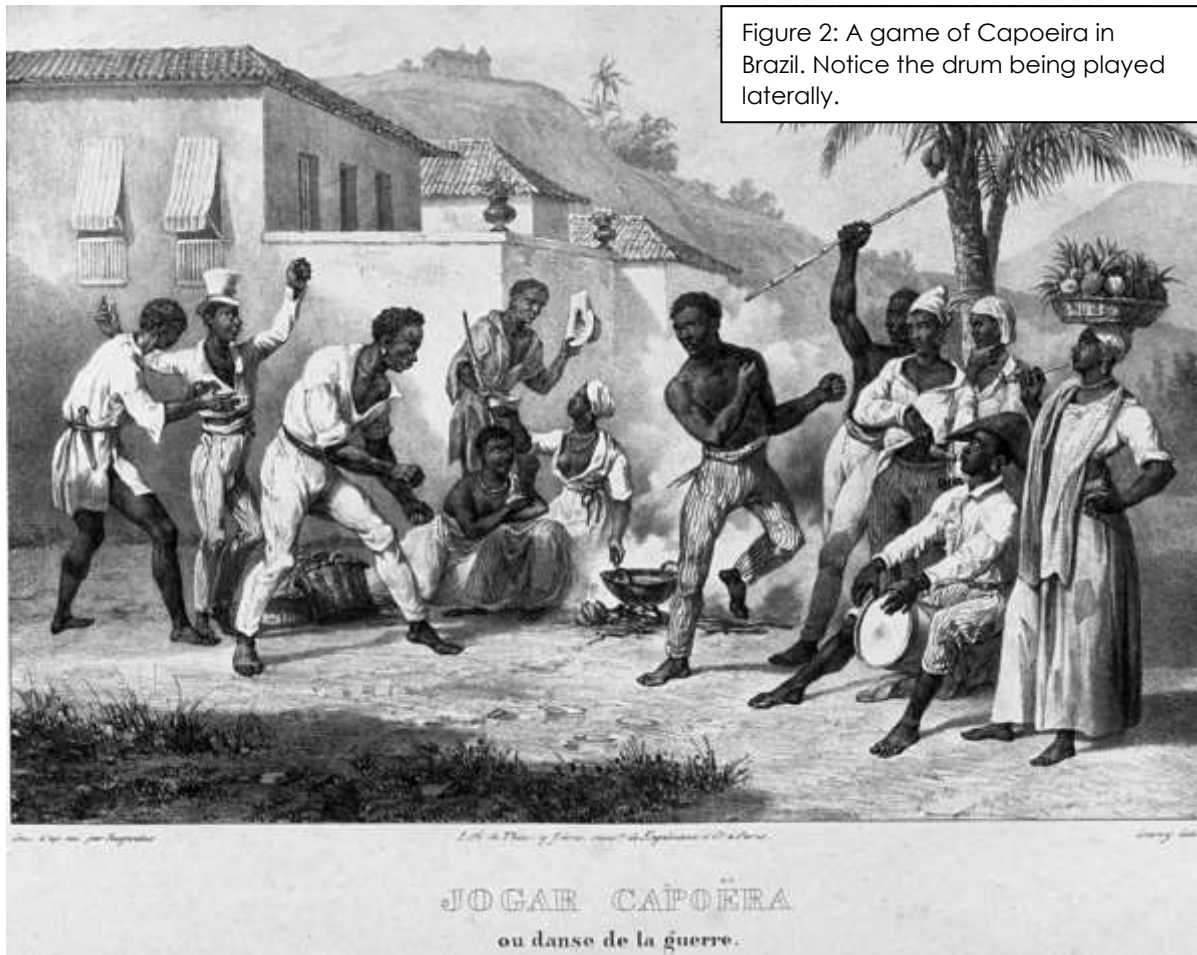


Figure 2: A game of Capoeira in Brazil. Notice the drum being played laterally.

### **Kalenda and Resistance**

Knowledge of fighting skills and strategies would have been of paramount value to any enslaved individual in the Americas. As well as being used to defend honour and to distinguish oneself in the ritualised combat of the bamboulas, Kalenda and other martial arts were of practical value to those seeking to maintain their freedom through marronage or armed struggle against their oppressors. The value of martial arts as tools of resistance is most simply evidenced by looking at prohibitions relating to their practice in colonial slave codes. The 1688 Barbados Slave code entitled 'An Act for the Governing of Negroes', replaced an earlier code from 1661, which was the

<sup>24</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 61-62.



first of its kind in the British Americas and was used as a template for the control of enslaved Africans in other slave societies including Jamaica and Carolina.<sup>25</sup> The beginning of its second paragraph refers to the use of sticks and is worth quoting at length:

'And for that as it is absolutely necessary for the safety of this place, that all due care be taken to restrain the wanderings and meetings of negroes and other slaves at all times, more especially on Saturday nights, Sundays and other holy-days, and their using and carrying of clubs, wooden swords, or other mischievous or dangerous weapons, or using or keeping of drums, horns or other loud instruments...'.<sup>26</sup>

This section of the code clearly indicates the connection in the minds of colonisers between the gathering of slaves on their days off, their possession and use of fighting sticks on such occasions and the playing of music. All three aspects included in this one sentence are present in Butterworths description of Kalenda in Guadeloupe, suggesting that those enslaved in Barbados were also practicing Kalenda. Clearly this was viewed as a threat by authorities. Article fifteen of *the Code Noir*- which governed the treatment and behaviour of enslaved Africans in French colonies- specifically stipulated that 'We forbid slaves from carrying any offensive weapons or large sticks, at the risk of being whipped and having the weapons confiscated.'<sup>27</sup> These 'large sticks' were being used by the enslaved to defend themselves from colonisers, to duel for honour and to practice stick fighting. Several edicts prohibiting their possession had to be circulated in French San Domingue before the revolution, indicating that the practice continued despite its proscription in the Code Noir.<sup>28</sup> These sticks were often ritually impregnated or "mounted" with spirits, to give them specific properties and make them more damaging weapons. They were also crafted using special woods, and once "mounted" were of much value.<sup>29</sup> The punishment of confiscation stipulated in article fifteen, therefore, was a serious one. In Trinidad fighting sticks were also ritually prepared, however, the practice seems to have died out in recent years.<sup>30</sup>

The use of sticks in conflict within plantation society is perhaps best documented by the French clergyman Jean-Baptiste Labat, who was also a

---

<sup>25</sup> Simon Newman, *A New World of Labour: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic*, (Philadelphia, 2013), 192 & 248.

<sup>26</sup> 'An Act for the Governing of Negroes', Barbados 1688, [https://pryan2.kingsfaculty.ca/pryan/assets/File/Barbados%20Slave%20Code%201688%20\(repealed%20the%201661%20code\).pdf](https://pryan2.kingsfaculty.ca/pryan/assets/File/Barbados%20Slave%20Code%201688%20(repealed%20the%201661%20code).pdf)

<sup>27</sup> *The Code Noir, Édít du Roi, Touchant la Police des Isles de l'Amérique Française* (Paris, 1687), 28–58, <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/335/>

<sup>28</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 145.

<sup>29</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 145.

<sup>30</sup> Radhica Sookraj, *Legends of Stickfighting...*, (2020), <https://www.guardian.co.tt/article/legends-of-stickfighting-6.2.1046285.87214b8b45>

slaveowner on the island of Martinique. In his memoirs, he described a running conflict between the owners of two plantations and the enslaved living on each estate. In one instance, the overseer of the opposing estate led an attack on some of the enslaved who belonged to Labat's estate leaving them '...badly mauled, as ever since the first fight I would not allow any of them to carry knives or cutlasses.'<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless they defended themselves '...with sticks that they had taken from their aggressors and by throwing stones...' leaving the white overseer and one of his men with '...their heads broken...'.<sup>32</sup> Mastery of stick fighting, therefore, had some practical application outside of the ritualized combat of bamboulas. Furthermore, it was not confined in its utility to one-to-one duels, but had application in larger skirmishes involving more combatants on each side. The mention of 'cutlasses' by Labat is also significant, given that this would have been the weapon of choice for the self defence of those involved in the fracas, had their possession not been prohibited by the priest. The techniques practiced in Kalenda could be easily adapted to the use of a cutlass or machete. This is exactly what happened during the early stages of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), when the enslaved rose up on the northern plain of French Saint Domingue, to claim freedom from their oppressors. Although the enslaved initially had little access to firearms, they were able to exploit the plentifulness of machetes, and the years of practice in stick fighting martial arts. As such, the tool of their oppression- became their sword of liberation.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> John Eaden (trans.), *The Memoirs of P re Labat, 1693-1705*, (London, 1970; acc. Google Books), 68.

<sup>32</sup> Eaden, *The Memoirs*, 68.

<sup>33</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 147.

### Stick-Fighting legacies

Stick fighters would continue to play a prominent role in resistance to colonialism long after slavery. In this final section of the report, I will analyse video footage of different African derived martial arts being practiced in the Caribbean today. The first example is that of Damnyé- this video which captures an exhibition with two fighters of different statures and styles, will give us a great indication of the variety of movements incorporated into this martial art. Most styles of combat focus on either grappling, or striking, but Damnyé like modern mixed martial arts, incorporates both. Immediately recognisable is the music which resonates throughout the contest, giving the whole a festive atmosphere. Drums are accompanied by call and response songs, much like the lavways sung during Kalenda matches in Trinidad which

Figure 3: The posture of these two fighters practicing Capoeira, resembles the moves of Damnyé, indicating their common root Engolo.



will be analysed below. The two fighters enter the ring separately, and begin to move around the space, dancing to the music and at times approaching the drums to interact with the musicians and draw energy.<sup>34</sup> Once both fighters have done so, they begin to undress and ready themselves for the contest, circling each other all the time and moving with the music.<sup>35</sup> Then the two fighters face each other, and gradually begin to move towards one another, taking small steps and feinting in attempts to draw reactions from

<sup>34</sup> Youtube, *A Danmyé Swaré santral Mi Mès Manmay Matinik*, (2015), 1:50-2:50  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fes0pmCKeJ8>

<sup>35</sup> *A Danmyé Swaré*, 3:00.

one another. The feints most used by these two combatants are bigger or smaller motions with their arms, imitating the hand strikes which are part of Danmyé likely borrowed from the slap-boxing aspect of Kandeka.<sup>36</sup> These are used partially to gauge how their opponent will react to a real attack and partially to try and draw such a reaction, which might leave their opponent vulnerable to counterattack.

The action begins when one drummer changes to a high pitched, urgent, syncopated rhythm which rings above the other music. Taking his lead from the drums, the smaller fighter launches a well-timed spinning back kick towards his opponents head, which is countered by an even better-timed spinning back kick by the bigger man to the attackers body, momentarily disrupting his balance.<sup>37</sup> Both kicks bear much resemblance to the techniques used in the Angolan martial art Engolo. After resetting and working their way back towards each other, the bigger fighter closes the distance to his opponent, a change which is reflected again in the pattern of the drums. Lower pitch notes are played closer and closer together until they melt into a drum roll as he grabs hold of his smaller opponent for a grappling exchange.<sup>38</sup> The grappling techniques displayed are not of central African origin, but are likely the inheritance of West African peoples amongst whom wrestling was universal.<sup>39</sup> In this small clip, therefore, we have seen the influence of three separate martial arts in practice. Although both the slap-boxing borrowed from Kandeka, and the spinning attacks of Engolo originated amongst the Kunene and neighbouring peoples, the two sets of techniques were not traditionally used in conjunction. The addition of wrestling brings another dimension to Damnyé altogether, from a different region of Africa, indicating clearly that the martial art practiced in Martinique today is of African origin but has been creolised through the interaction of different cultural traditions. A similar interaction must have created the various styles of stick fighting we see in the Caribbean today- the variety of forms which are practiced in different parts of the Americas, are evidence of this creolisation with different cultural inputs, in different social and geographical contexts, creating different styles.

---

<sup>36</sup> A *Danmyé Swaré*, 5:55-6:00.

<sup>37</sup> A *Danmyé Swaré*, 6:04-6:13.

<sup>38</sup> A *Danmyé Swaré*, 6:26-6:56.

<sup>39</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 62-63.

The first which I will mention is Trinidadian Kalenda, which now forms an important part of that island's carnival celebrations. The influence of Central African culture is clear; however, this martial art has also been infused with the stick fighting of the indentured Asians who were brought to Trinidad following emancipation.<sup>40</sup> It is also sometimes called “bois” a French word meaning wood which is the name for the fighting sticks themselves- the stick fighters are called “boisman”. Like Damnyé the whole bout is fought to the rhythms of the drum, and “Chantuelles” lead the call and response songs.<sup>41</sup> As such the music is an integral part of the tradition, just like in Danmyé and Brazilian Capoeira. Trinidadian Kalenda takes place inside a ring constructed for the purpose called a “Gayelle”.<sup>42</sup> In this video, the larger fighter in white is the man to beat, and as such, carries himself with a swagger reminiscent of Butterwells 18<sup>th</sup> century description of Kalenda in Guadeloupe. Both him and his opponent who is dressed in red step in time with the drum beat, facing each other in anticipation of their clash.<sup>43</sup> Once the fighter in white is ready, he approaches his opponent cautiously and begins to pressure him, edging



Figure 4: The fighter in yellow holding a defensive posture- the same as that used two hundred years earlier in Brunias' painting (Fig 1).

<sup>40</sup> Their stick fighting tradition is referred to in Trinidad as “Gatka”, Tishanna Williams, *BOIS!: Reviving Trinidad's Stickfighting Traditions*, (2013)

<https://www.largeup.com/2013/09/12/bois-restoring-trinidads-stickfighting-legacy/>

<sup>41</sup> J.D Elder, Color, Music, and Conflict: A Study of Aggression in Trinidad with Reference to the Role of Traditional Music, *Ethnomusicology*, 8, (1964), 130.

<sup>42</sup> Debra Greaves, *Bois for you!*, (2019), <https://newsday.co.tt/2019/04/09/bois-for-you/>

<sup>43</sup> Youtube, *Trinidad TT Stick fight 2018 (Moruga)*, 0:36 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMMiUAjhse8>

forward. Both fighters hold their stick at each end, in the defensive posture depicted in Brunias' painting, which originates in the practice of Kandeka in Central Africa and provides spiritual as well as physical defence. The fighter in red, uses this posture to block the first attack, which comes with such force that it breaks his stick in two.<sup>44</sup> Satisfied with the exchange, the bigger fighter dances off, taking his time before looking to engage once more. In the interim, the smaller man in red, is approached by a spectator, likely a friend or relative, who seems to try and persuade him to step aside- he quickly dismisses him.<sup>45</sup> This is reminiscent of the fighter in Brunias' painting, being held by two friends, perhaps for the same purpose. After another exchange of blows, which the fighter in white gets the better of, he returns to the drums to soak up the rhythms whilst another challenger dances into the ring to replace the man in red.<sup>46</sup> The skills displayed in this video, came to the aid of those resisting colonialism during the attempted suppression of carnival festivities by the "authorities" in the early 1880's- known as the Canboulay Riots.<sup>47</sup> Stick fighters were able to use their skills to confront colonial police, demonstrating the practical value of this martial art for resistance long after abolition.

---

<sup>44</sup> *Trinidad TT Stick fight*, 0:47.

<sup>45</sup> *Trinidad TT Stick fight*, 1:30.

<sup>46</sup> *Trinidad TT Stick fight*, 3:15.

<sup>47</sup> Shannon Dudley, *Creativity and Control in Trinidad Carnival Competitions*, *The World of Music*, 45, (2003), 16.

Figure 5: "Papa Machete"-Professor Alfred Avril. Notice the wooden training machetes, perhaps related to Biafran 'abariba'.



The use of stick fighting techniques in Haiti and the revolutionary history of the country, have produced a particularly practical martial art known as tiré machete, which means pulling machetes. This style was no doubt influenced by Kalenda, however, unlike in Trinidad where the practice remains sporting, in Haiti the focus is really self-defence. Once a practitioner has reached the necessary level of skill, even friendly sparring matches can be fought with sharp machetes. As such, the art has developed in an opposite direction to Trinidadian Kalenda. Instead of short exchanges with powerful attacks, tiré machete features longer exchanges using subtlety and technique in attempts to penetrate the opponents defences. The two-handed defensive posture - fundamental to Kalenda- does not feature in tiré machete, owing to danger of holding the top end of a sharp blade.

The free arm is invariably tucked across the chest or behind the back- to avoid unnecessary loss of finger tips. Given that the blades are sharp, only minimal force is required to draw blood, and causing serious injury is more about misdirection than power. This is all reflected in the video I have chosen to analyse, a friendly sparring between two masters.<sup>48</sup> The clip is short and therefore worth watching in its entirety- as such I will simply make a few general comments. As with the other martial arts, feints play a big part in this exchange. Vladimir, the fighter in jeans, repeatedly stamps his lead foot to

---

<sup>48</sup> Youtube, Roland & Vladimir training with blades ~ Haitian Machete Fencing (Summer 2021), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY1QtmqjK\\_8&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY1QtmqjK_8&t=2s)

imitate the beginning of an attack. As mentioned earlier, both combatants also look away from each other during breaks in the action, feigning disinterest in the hope of surprising their opponent. This tactic as mentioned earlier has been attributed by Obi to Central African culture.<sup>49</sup> Finally, unlike Kalenda in Trinidad which is fought in public for honour and bragging rights, the practice of tiré machete is a private and sometimes secretive affair. The art is closely guarded by practitioners, and passed on generation by generation from father to son.<sup>50</sup> The skill of these men is not evident in big flamboyant moves, or forceful swings of their blades, but in their ability to spar for three minutes with sharp weapons without opening any wounds.

The final Caribbean martial art I will discuss, is practiced on the island of Barbados and is perhaps the least well known and well nourished. It is called “stick science” or “stick licking” and has been described by practitioners as a dying art, although there is now a movement on the island to preserve it and pass the techniques on to the next generation.<sup>51</sup> The similarities between this martial art and the others discussed are clear, and reinforce the view that Kalenda was also practiced in Barbados.<sup>52</sup> The art of stick licking is more fluid and less explosive than Trinidadian bois, but uses more force than Haitian tire machete. Like Kalenda, practitioners sometimes let their free hand drift from their body, which with a sharp weapon would be unwise. They utilize the two-handed defence which is a mainstay of Kalenda, but generally rely on one handed blocks allowing more fluidity. One technique which seems to be unique to Barbadian Sticklicking is the use of thrusting techniques as seen in this contest.<sup>53</sup> These could have originated in English cudgels or indeed fencing. The exchanges in this clip are longer and less aggressive than in Kalenda, owing partly to the fact that it is merely a sparring match, but also the style of the art. The music and crowd are noticeably absent. Its usefulness in resistance to colonialism is perhaps best exemplified through the story of Hubert Nathaniel Cricthlow, father of trade unionism in the West Indies. Born in Barbados, he moved to Guyana at a young age where he took up work as a stevedore. At the age of only 21, he played a leading role in the civil disturbances and clashes with colonial police which would eventually lead to the creation of the British Caribbeans first trade union called the *British*

---

<sup>49</sup> Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 137.

<sup>50</sup> Rolands father was the legendary Machete man Professor Alfred Avril. A chance meeting led to the instruction of two non-Haitian students and the subsequent publicization of their craft. <https://www.haitianfencing.org/>

<sup>51</sup> Elombe Elton Deighton Mottley, *Cover Down Yuh Bucket: The Story of Sticklicking in Barbados*, (Kingston, 2003), iv.

<sup>52</sup> Youtube, *Wielding The Stick - The Fight*, (2018)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ek6hXa9nMb8>

<sup>53</sup> *Wielding The Stick*, 0:51.



*Guyana Labour Union* in 1917.<sup>54</sup> His success in this endeavour, has been partially credited to his skills as a stick fighter, which allowed him to protect himself and others against the truncheons of colonial police.<sup>55</sup> As recently as the twentieth century, stick fighting martial arts have played a role in resistance, and enabled headstrong afro descended Caribbeans, to defend their honour and their rights.

## **Conclusion**

Kalenda, then, is an African tradition which took root in various parts of the Caribbean, and germinated in each locale to create separate but related martial arts. Its origins are equally diverse, although it owes much of its ritual context to Central African culture. In that region, stick fighting was intimately connected to the pastoral lifestyle of the Kunene and neighbouring peoples. Their mastery of sticks from a young age, to control their cattle, settle disputes, for recreation and self-defence, proved to be a valuable tradition worth maintaining and recreating across the Atlantic. There it was cross pollinated with stick fighting traditions from across Africa, and was practiced in a similar context and for similar reasons. Its usefulness in aiding acts of resistance, has been exemplified by the enactment of regulations by colonial authorities against its use. It also came to the aid of Haitian Revolutionaries, particularly in the early stages of their uprising when it was adapted for the use of sharp blades. Similarly, after the abolition of slavery, the descendants of the enslaved have drawn upon their stick fighting culture to aid them in clashes with colonial police.

To conclude, this report and the accompanying report on Obeah analysed two African derived cultural traditions, their transportation to the Americas, and their use in resistance to colonialism. When comparing these two, different aspects of Afro-Caribbean culture, there are clear similarities. For pre-colonial Africans, spirituality was an inherent part of conflict. This has been seen in the crafting of spiritual weapons in resistance to enslavement, for example, the use of amulets to confer invulnerability. Similarly, in the practice of martial arts, spiritual armament was used by practitioners to give them an edge against their opponents. These two aspects of African culture therefore, although presented separately, are in fact intimately connected. Both traditions, used music, singing and dance as a ritual context. Seen in this light, the attempts of colonial powers to ban African instruments and gatherings, were a direct attack on the cultural heritage of the enslaved. As such, any continuation of these practices, even if cursory, was a form of

---

<sup>54</sup> Mottley, *Cover Down Yuh Bucket*, 30, & for a history of the Labour Movement in the Caribbean see, Spencer Mawby, *The Limits of Anticolonialism: The British Labour Movement and the End of Empire in Guiana*, *History*, 101, (2016), 87.

<sup>55</sup> Barrington Brathwaite, *THE AGE OF HUBERT CRITCHLOW*, (2022), <https://guyanachronicle.com/2022/05/08/the-age-of-hubert-critchlow/>

cultural resistance against attempts to eliminate the African traditions of the enslaved. Therefore, continuation of these practices is the best way to pay respect to the struggles of enslaved Africans to maintain their identity against the encroachment of a hostile European culture.

### Video Clips:

- ❖ A Danmyé Swaré santral Mi Mès Manmay Matinik, (2015), 1:50-2:50  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fes0pmCKeJ8>
- ❖ Trinidad π Stick fight 2018 (Moruga),  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMMiUAjhse8>
- ❖ Roland & Vladimir training with blades ~ Haitian Machete Fencing (Summer 2021),  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY1QtmqjK\\_8&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY1QtmqjK_8&t=2s)
- ❖ Wielding The Stick - The Fight, (2018)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ek6hXa9nMb8>

### List of Figures:

- ❖ Figure 1: "Stick Fighting, Dominica, West Indies, 1779 ", *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*
- ❖ Figure 2: "Capoeira Dance: Brazil 1830s", *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*
- ❖ Figure 3: "Capoeira Schene Brazil 1820-24", *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*
- ❖ Figure 4: Sitckfighting in Trinindad. The fighter in yellow holding a defensive posture- the same as that used two hundred years earlier in Brunias' painting featured in Fig 1.
- ❖ Figure 5: "Papa Machete"-Professor Alfred Avril. Early 2000s.
- ❖ <https://www.largeup.com/2013/09/12/bois-restoring-trinidads-stickfighting-legacy/>
- ❖ <https://www.guardian.co.tt/article/legends-of-stickfighting-6.2.1046285.87214b8b45>

## Bibliography:

### ❖ Primary

- 'An Act for the Governing of Negroes', Barbados 1688, [https://pryan2.kingsfaculty.ca/pryan/assets/File/Barbados%20Slave%20Code%201688%20\(repealed%20the%201661%20code\).pdf](https://pryan2.kingsfaculty.ca/pryan/assets/File/Barbados%20Slave%20Code%201688%20(repealed%20the%201661%20code).pdf)
- Bosman Willem, *A new and accurate description of the coast of Guinea, divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory coasts*, (London, 1907).
- Butterworth William, *Three years adventures of a minor, in England, Africa, the West Indies, South-Carolina and Georgia*, (London, 1831).
- Eaden John (trans.), *The Memoirs of P ere Labat, 1693-1705*, (London, 1970; acc. Google Books).
- Edwards Bryan, *The History Civil and Commercial of the British colonies in the West Indies*, (London, 1801).
- Fulham Palace Papers, XIII, Stanford to Porteus, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1788.
- Long Edward, *The History of Jamaica, or, General survey of the antient and modern state of the island: with reflections on its situation settlements, inhabitants, climate, products, commerce, laws, and government*, (London, 1774).
- Slave Voyages database, accessed November 25, 2022, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#tables>
- Stedman John Gabriel, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, vol.2, (London, 1796).
- The Code Noir, * dit du Roi, Touchant la Police des Isles de l'Am rique Fran aise* (Paris, 1687), 28–58, <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/335/>

### ❖ Secondary

- Brathwaite Barrington, *THE AGE OF HUBERT CRITCHLOW*, (2022), <https://guyanachronicle.com/2022/05/08/the-age-of-hubert-critchlow/>
- Bilby Kenneth, *Trueborn Maroons*, (Gainsville, 2005).
- Brown Vincent, *The Reapers Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*, (Cambridge, 2008).
- Cross J. Brent, What Obeah Does Do: Healing, Harm and the Limits of Religion, *Journal of Africana Religions*, 3, (2015).
- Dudley Shannon, Creativity and Control in Trinidad Carnival Competitions, *The World of Music*, 45, (2003).
- Elder J.D, Color, Music, and Conflict: A Study of Aggression in Trinidad with Reference to the Role of Traditional Music, *Ethnomusicology*, 8, (1964).
- Gaspar David Barry, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master Slave Relations in Antigua*, (Baltimore, 1985).
- Greaves Debra, *Bois for you!*, (2019), <https://newsday.co.tt/2019/04/09/bois-for-you/>
- <https://www.haitianfencing.org/>

- Mawby Spencer, *The Limits of Anticolonialism: The British Labour Movement and the End of Empire in Guiana*, *History*, 101, (2016).
- Mottley Elombe Elton Deighton, *Cover Down Yuh Bucket: The Story of Sticklicking in Barbados*, (Kingston, 2003).
- Newman Simon, *A New World of Labour: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic*, (Philadelphia, 2013).
- Obi T.J Desch, *Fighting for Honor: The History of African Martial Art Traditions in the Atlantic World*, (Columbia, 2008).
- Sookraj Radhica, *Legends of Stickfighting...*, (2020),  
<https://www.guardian.co.tt/article/legends-of-stickfighting-6.2.1046285.87214b8b45>
- Williams Tishanna, *BOIS!: Reviving Trinidad's Stickfighting Traditions*, (2013)  
<https://www.largeup.com/2013/09/12/bois-restoring-trinidads-stickfighting-legacy/>