



Kalinago Traditional Sports/Games

By Cozier Frederick

It has been generally understood that in essence a sport is an athletic activity requiring skill or physical prowess, and can often be of a competitive nature. Using this definition, it can be appreciated that the material condition of the Kalinago as a nomadic people in the first instances of their civilization of the islands, and defenders of their lands against the onslaught of colonialism, created conditions limiting the progressive development of Kalinago sports or a sporting culture. Although archaeological evidence have suggested the development of ball games evident in excavated court sites in the greater islands of the Kalinago Island Civilization, these were absent from the smaller lands like Wai'tukubuli.

Although sports like swimming, archery, varying martial arts and a number of cross fitness activities like rock climbing and rowing have earned their spotlight in the international sporting arena, these sports were clearly undertaken by the Kalinago. It can therefore be posited that at varying points of their existence the Kalinago did not relate to these as competitive endeavours, but rather as activities necessary for their basic survival in an increasingly hostile environment. A healthy mind and a sound body must have been the mantra emanating from each Kalinago *warrior* to the next generation, both of which have transcended to our present era.

What our present generation has come to appreciate as

traditional sports have been those adopted throughout the colonial era. And so for instance, the Kalinago are known for first their prowess at cricket, rounders and their involvement in seasonal ring games and the rapidly disappearing top games.

A cricketing culture is evident in the small open field and backyard pitches, and road and sidewalk turfs in the Kalinago Territory, where men and women of all ages craft their skills. In most instances the basic equipment was hand-crafted wickets and coconut bats, and plastic balls. This activity are at varying levels the standard game during school recess times and afternoon *schools out* period, and could also be seen on Saturdays and Sundays in hamlet and team friendlies known as *dasheen matches* where factory manufactured equipment was utilized. The basic construct of these matches have been inculcated into a competitive league structure over time and produced players who have gained national acclaim. This pastime has remained as the premier communal weekend activity and is cemented into the sporting tradition of the Kalinago community.

Likened to cricket, *rounders* is a national bat-and-ball game played between two teams of men and women that have been found to have captivated the hearts of the Kalinago. In its basic form, rounders is a striking and fielding team

game that involves hitting a small rubber or tennis ball with a rounded end wooden bat. The players score by running around the four bases with poles as markers on the field. Simple versions in and around the home involve the bare hand and a soft paper ball. The game has been found to be popular among Irish and British and is therefore part and parcel of the colonial influence. Players from the Kalinago community have also gained national recognition for their achievements in national leagues.

Another series of these adopted sports are the ring games enjoyed by all ages especially during social gatherings and festive seasons. These were generally seen at recreation times being done by both boys and girls and appear to have clear foundations in some African and European heritage with some Kalinago adaptations. They have appeared to have gained prominence as mainly female oriented acts at socializing events rather than competitive endeavours and were accompanied with English and creole songs and chants like *La Lune Hoite*.

The Kalinago was continuously immersed into the arts and crafts over long time spans and they produced tops which were designed as a toy intended to be spun rapidly on the ground. Respected to have existed since antiquity, traditionally these toys were constructed of wood, most times with an iron tip, and would be set in motion by aid of a string or rope coiled around its axis which, when pulled swiftly, caused a rapid unwinding that would set the top in motion. These were utilized in feverish battles by adults who used them to strike

a short twig over a pre assigned finish line in either direction across a field, and even at times hamlet borders. Known as *sann bwa difé*, this activity was done particularly during the Christmas season.

What is truly important and worthy of praise within our present era is the ability of the Kalinago to hold on to precepts held by the ancestors and treasured by our indigenous brothers and sisters worldwide. We should all:

- Honour the person who gave the most challenge
- Respect the rules of the competition,
- Respect the competitors,
- Honour the wager made before the event,
- Have courage, intuition, or skill,
- Be humble even when winning.

In forwarding as a resilient people the Kalinago must eventually come to terms with the reality that the ancestors must be honoured through an active participation in their daily activities.. In this light we must therefore seek to immerse ourselves into competitive sports like swimming, archery, varying martial arts, rock climbing and rowing which have earned their spotlight in the international sporting arena. There are numerous occasions when mastering these acts have become second nature to many Kalinago youth and considered a normal part of their physical development.

"Winners don't wait for chances, they take them."

