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SLAVERY, RELIGION, AND ABOLITION IN SURINAME

"Om werk van jullie te hebben": Plantageleven in Suriname, 1730-1750. RUDI OTTO BEELDSNIJDER. Utrecht: Vakgroep Culturele Antropologie – Bronnen voor de Studie van Afro-Surinaamse Samenlevingen, 1994. xii + 351 pp. (Paper NLG 35.00)

Surinaams contrast: Roofbouw en overleven in een Caraïbische plantagekolonie 1750-1863. ALEX VAN STIPRIAAN. Leiden: KITLV Press, 1995. xiii + 494 pp. (Paper NLG 60.00)

Strijders voor het Lam: Leven en werk van Herrnhutter broeders en -zusters in Suriname, 1735-1900. MARIA LENDERS. Leiden: KITLV Press, 1996. xii + 451 pp. (Paper NLG 65.00)

Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit. GERT OOSTINDIE (ed.). Leiden: KITLV Press, 1995; Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996. viii + 272 pp. (Paper NLG 45.00, US\$ 22.50, Cloth US\$ 45.00)

The publication of the books under review is evidence of a growing scholarly interest in the history of Dutch activities in the Atlantic. Three of them are doctoral dissertations on Suriname history; the fourth contains the published proceedings of a conference held in 1993 that focused on the abolition of slavery in the Dutch colonies. Three were published by the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology (KITLV), which exhibits an increasing interest in publishing scholarly books about Dutch overseas history.

Neither the country of Suriname nor its history are well known outside the Dutch-speaking world. Named after a river that flows into the Atlantic from northern South America, the Suriname plantation colony was started by the British during the mid-seventeenth century. It was captured by the Dutch in 1667, and soon it became the largest Dutch slave plantation colony. While Suriname has often been cited as an example of extremely harsh slave exploitation, a thorough scholarly examination of this claim through historic documents had not previously been undertaken. This is particularly true for the eighteenth century, and the books under review make a giant leap toward filling that void.

Because the slaves were the "linchpin" of the Suriname plantation society, Beeldsnijder places them at the center of his study. Three-fourths of the book is devoted to the slaves, including their Atlantic crossing, African origins, work on the plantations, labor supervision, food and housing, family relations, illness and mortality, resistance to oppression, and treatment by the legal system.

Recognizing that the slaves operated within the bounds and under the control of the plantocracy, Beeldsnijder devotes his first three chapters to the world of the planters, looking at how the plantations were operated and what crops they produced, as well as analyzing the supervisory structure that governed the Suriname plantation society. It was difficult to attract Dutch settlers to tropical Suriname. By 1700 there were barely a thousand Europeans, including several Jewish and foreign colonists and military personnel. The white population doubled during the century, but in the meantime the slave population tripled from 17,000 to about 50,000. Sugar was initially the main crop produced for export to Europe, but by the middle of the century the export of coffee beans surpassed that of sugar. Beeldsnijder also provides a valuable description of the revenues exacted from Suriname's inhabitants.

With his focus on the slaves, Beeldsnijder devotes considerable attention to their African origins, their forced migration from Africa, and the high mortality among the newcomers in comparison to Creoles. He also stresses the significance of African cultural survivals among the slaves in Suriname. Relying heavily on numerous plantation inventories, he makes an assessment of the work that slaves were forced to perform. He concludes that 64 percent of the slave force could be classified as unskilled, 21 percent were not capable of work, and nearly 15 percent were skilled or in supervisory positions. The various skilled and unskilled tasks of the slaves are carefully defined and evaluated. Women had comparatively fewer opportunities than men for supervisory or skilled positions on the plantations. Due to the relatively small European population in Suriname, slaves

were provided with an unusually high number of leadership positions, albeit always under white supervision.

The planters were aware that slaves had to be fed well if they were to work effectively. Slaves were fed better in Suriname than in most Caribbean plantation societies, according to Beeldsnijder. Fertile soils and the absence of hurricanes may have favored Suriname in this respect. Food rations were regularly issued to the slaves, and slaves were often allowed to have their own private gardens. Specialized produce plantations were established from which planters could purchase food that they did not raise themselves.

Death rates were extremely high among Suriname slaves, despite the fact that most plantations had rudimentary hospital facilities. Yet infant mortality rates were nearly as high in Europe at that time, according to Beeldsnijder, and death rates among slaves elsewhere in the Caribbean were similar to the Suriname figures. Male slaves outnumbered female slaves by about 25 percent during the 1730-50 period. Due to high death rates and low birth rates, the slave population had to be sustained by constantly importing slaves from Africa, which kept a gender imbalance of 4-3 intact during the first half of the eighteenth century.

Slaves tried in many ways to defend themselves against exploitation and to resist their masters. Some sabotaged crops, ran away, or committed suicide. Very rarely did they organize a concerted revolt in Suriname. The unsuccessful 1750 revolt at Bethlehem plantation is the only one documented for the 1730-50 period. Slaves must have recognized the futility of such endeavors, and the Suriname system of justice was more concerned with their punishment than with their protection. Eighteenth-century justice was severe everywhere but unlike white convicts, slaves in Suriname never received clemency, Beeldsnijder claims.

The fact that Beeldsnijder limited his analysis to two decades allowed him to provide more detailed analysis, but it restricted his ability to show patterns of change. The wealth of new information about the lives of the slaves, their identities, and their achievements makes this book a valuable contribution to the study of Suriname history. It is well researched and documented and has an English summary.

While Alex van Stipriaan's *Surinaams contrast* follows Beeldsnijder's work chronologically, it covers a much longer period of time (1750-1863) and has a broader focus that encompasses the whole range of the plantation system of Suriname. After discussing the slave plantation literature and outlining the problem, van Stipriaan presents an instructive historical overview and analysis of the colony's political-economic structure. He rejects the widely accepted interpretations of a static society in constant

decline and portrays instead a more dynamic, constantly changing world in which the tendencies toward exploitation and survival were constantly at odds with each other. Plantations were often expanding, shifting from one territory to another, or being abandoned. Van Stipriaan discusses the soil and climate and provides a detailed description of how plantations were developed in Suriname, with special emphasis on the use of water and hydraulic technology in the coastal regions, where plantations were increasingly located. He gives a careful analysis of capital investments such as slaves, buildings, and machinery, and then discusses the production process of coffee, sugar, and cotton, the most important tropical products from Suriname's plantations. While Suriname started with sugar as its chief crop, coffee and cotton were added during the eighteenth century, and each production sector experienced its own cycle of change. Van Stipriaan argues that in each of these sectors, innovation and modernization were essential to survival, and that in this respect Suriname was much like other Caribbean plantation societies. Unfortunately, he does not include cacao production in his analysis.

In the second part of the book, van Stipriaan explains how the Suriname plantation system was financed, giving special attention to Dutch financing schemes (*negotiatiefondsen*) during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, and later also financing with British and local Suriname capital. He makes a convincing case for downplaying the impact of the 1772-73 Amsterdam stock market crash on Suriname's economy. In his analysis of profits from the Suriname plantation economy, he sees losses as well as profits, with the latter increasingly consumed by the plantation owners' conspicuous consumption.

In examining the management of plantations, van Stipriaan focuses on the roles of black overseers (*bastiaans*), white officers, plantation directors, and administrators. Black overseers played a particularly crucial role as middlemen between the slaves and managers of the plantations. Where the merchant-bankers in Holland had been able to exploit Suriname through their financing schemes, the administrators were able to benefit handsomely from the system of absenteeism during the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth.

The demography of Suriname prior to slave emancipation has never been satisfactorily analyzed, but van Stipriaan provides one of the best studies to date on this complex subject. Slave imports, population growth, mortality, natality, and fertility are all carefully examined chronologically and compared by different production sectors. Despite the fact that slave mortality always exceeded births, he concludes that Suriname's harsh slave system was comparable to that of other Caribbean slave plantation

societies. Epidemics, particularly during the 1820s and 1840s, were devastating for the slave population, but after the mid-nineteenth century there appears to have been an amelioration in the survival rates of the slaves. The latter may have been the result of improved labor and living conditions. Gradually, van Stipriaan claims, the “iron fist” of the owners and managers came to be outfitted with a “glove” as a result of government regulations, improvements in working conditions and medical treatment, private garden plots, and slave resistance.

Van Stipriaan's book represents an ambitious undertaking that will undoubtedly become a classic in Suriname historiography. It merits an English translation.

The Moravians (Herrnhutters) or Evangelical Brothers, a pietistic German religious denomination, played an important role in christianizing Suriname slaves and their descendants. In *Strijders voor het Lam*, Maria Lenders narrates and clarifies the activities of the missionaries from a feminist and gender-oriented perspective. Starting with an introductory chapter on the foundation and ideology of the Moravians, she describes and analyzes their activities in Suriname in three chronological phases, 1735-1825 (including neighboring Berbice), 1825-63, and 1863-1900. Although the Moravian missionaries were few in number and their activities were limited to Paramaribo and missions among the free Maroon and indigenous Indian communities, they were initially resented by the white ruling class of Suriname. After 1825, the missionaries gained the support of the governmental authorities and were allowed to proselytize among the slaves on several plantations. This brought both an increase in missionaries from Germany and a tremendous increase in converts. The abolition of slavery in 1863 started a new phase in Suriname history, including religious history. Building on their prior activities, the Moravians continued in their role as ministers, teachers, and health care providers. Gradually, they began to experience serious competition from Catholic missionaries, because Moravians insisted on a stricter moral code of behavior in marital and sexual relations among their converts.

In theory, the Moravian missionaries were quite egalitarian in racial matters, but they were nevertheless infected with cultural value biases that made them view non-European Surinamers as inferior, although they did so with pity and valued them as human beings. The attitudes of most other European whites in Suriname could clearly be categorized as racist. Since the Moravian missionaries were German and rarely mastered the Dutch language, they conducted their proselytizing activities primarily in Creole (*Neger-Engelsch*). This became a detriment to their activities toward the

end of the nineteenth century when the authorities demanded that Dutch be used in all educational institutions receiving government subsidies.

Lenders convincingly documents a shift in attitude and practice among the Moravian missionaries between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries arguing that they evolved from a communal to a more individualistic outlook (substituting nuclear family meals for communal meals), and from lay leadership to a more professional and specialized leadership. Women had played a prominent and decisive role during the early years and in times of crisis, but over time their work became increasingly limited to ministry among women. Nineteenth-century Moravian male missionaries increasingly relegated their wives to household and child rearing activities, a familiar trend in Western societies. Women retained a few professional posts, such as in teaching and health care, but always under male supervision.

According to Lenders, gender, race, and social class were all determining factors in assigning value and position in society, and this was increasingly the case in Moravian circles as well. Black women ended up at the bottom of the scale, viewed as untrustworthy and as sexual temptresses. Black women were prone to keep their traditional pagan beliefs and reject formal marriage ties. Yet many more women than men joined the Evangelical brotherhood, an apparent conflict that is not addressed by Lenders.

While the Moravians tended to be critical of slavery, they did not advocate its abolition. Their concern was mainly with the life of the "spirit" and salvation of the "soul." Although they encouraged masters to treat their slaves humanely, they also advised the slaves to be obedient to their masters. Because they themselves became slave owners, Moravians held back in advocating the abolition of the slave system.

Lenders has written an interesting and readable book. She has managed to bring out the human dimension of the individual Moravian missionaries, the tragedies that befell many of them, and their hard work and dedication to their ideals and beliefs. Her extensive use of correspondence and autobiographical accounts sheds light on various aspects of Suriname history that are often lacking in the official documents surviving from those years, and allows her to illuminate, not only the missionaries, but also various elements of Suriname society and history.

Fifty Years Later is a compilation of essays that grew out of a 1993 conference on the belated Dutch abolition of slavery in 1863. Touching on all regions of the Dutch maritime empire as well as the global phenomenon of abolition, this book has a much broader scope than those reviewed above. Still, Suriname constitutes one of the largest entries in its index. Seymour Drescher, a prominent scholar on the subject of abolition

history, provides the lead article, "The Long Goodbye," to which nine other scholars presented their responses. The key issue of the conference and the published essays was why the Netherlands was so much later than Great Britain in ending slavery in its overseas possession. As Drescher writes, "The Dutch case presents us with the following relevant conundrum: a society identified as a pioneer of modern capitalism from the early seventeenth century, one unencumbered by serfdom for centuries more before that, yet one that failed to generate a major antislavery movement by the standards of the age" (p. 51).

Drescher's articulate presentation had few detractors among the nine commentators, responding from their own areas of expertise. The economic motive in Dutch emancipation resurfaces repeatedly in the ensuing discussion. Maarten Kuitenbrouwer argues that nineteenth-century Dutch politics was dominated by elitist politicians, who retarded the process of emancipation. Angelie Sens stresses that a "decline-ridden" mentality in the Netherlands pushed antislavery concerns into the background. Edwin Horlings posits an economic explanation of the belated emancipation in Suriname. Alex van Stipriaan claims that emancipation might have been postponed further, had it not been for slave pressure and rebelliousness. Gert Oostindie compares slavery in Suriname with that in Curaçao, and points to an evolutionary development toward a "civilizing and patronizing practice" (p. 169), gradually preparing an acceptance of abolition.

The next three essays add to the comparative approach of the abolition issue by introducing the eastern regions of the Dutch colonial empire. Robert Ross takes readers to Dutch South Africa, discussing trends and ideas regarding slavery and emancipation and the role of Christian missionaries in that region. Gerrit Knaap addresses Indonesia, the former Dutch East Indies, introducing the Dutch system of forced labor under the so-called "cultivation system." In an intriguing essay, Pieter Emmer compares trends and ideas about free and coerced systems of labor in the West Indies and the East Indies (India and Indonesia), including both British and Dutch practices, during the nineteenth century. Stanley Engerman concludes the collection of essays with a world-wide comparison of slave emancipation over many centuries of history.

By taking a close look at the Dutch experience, this study broadens our view from the traditional British/French emphasis in antislavery history. One of the decisive conclusions that can be drawn from this publication is that the British were pioneers in the abolition of slavery, and that the Dutch were in line with other continental European and American countries rather than latecomers.

One of the drawbacks of published conference papers is repetition, and this book is no exception. On the positive side are the extensive and up-to-date bibliographies appended to each essay.

All of these publications make valuable contributions to various categories of the human experience. But in particular, they illuminate the history of European expansion by giving Dutch colonial history a fitting place. Above all, these publications make a tremendous contribution to the historiography of Suriname. Since three of the books are in Dutch, the remaining task is to make these scholarly works available to a wider audience.

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