Een zwarte vrijstaat in Suriname: De Okaanse samenleving in de achttiende eeuw. H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen & Wim Hoogbergen. Leiden, the Netherlands: KITLV Press, 2011. xxiii + 360 pp. (Paper €24.90)

An exceptional synergy emerges when anthropologist H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen and historian Wim Hoogbergen join forces to investigate the early history of a Maroon society in Suriname. In most countries where Maroons existed at some point in time, these peoples and their distinct cultures gradually assimilated into mainstream society. In Suriname, Maroon societies have survived as identifiable ethnic groups with ancient cultural traditions. Their vibrant presence provides a unique opportunity to combine archival study of their early years with oral history research. “A black republic in Suriname: Okan society in the eighteenth century” is the engaging outcome of such an endeavor.

The book is based on written and oral histories gathered during fifty years of research on the Okanisi (also referred to as Aukaners or Ndyuka). The rich narratives told by Okanisi historians are at once an account of the past and an aid to understanding the present. The naming of rivers and creeks, relations with the Aluku Maroons, tensions between different clans, and rules of conduct such as menstrual taboos all find their origin in this eighteenth-century history. It is not surprising, as the authors note, that there are many different versions of what happened and who played important roles during specific events. Their goal is not to find “absolute truth,” to provide exact dating of events, or to eliminate all gaps and uncertainties. Rather, the book’s major contribution is that it records ancient personal memories of a poorly known part of the history of the Americas.

Oral traditions form the foundation of the sociocultural fabric of Suriname’s Maroon societies, maintaining shared history and explaining historical and contemporary events. In addition, Maroon children learn the customary rules and moral codes in order to live well with other members of the community and the spiritual world. Collecting oral histories in any culture is challenging. Recording oral histories in a culture with a deep, historically rooted distrust toward outsiders required years of work, gaining trust, and patience—both by the outside researchers and the Maroon historians.

Thoden van Velzen narrates his 1970 visit to a *kabiten* (village headman) whom he asked to recount the earliest history of his people in Suriname:

He [the *kabiten*] ran frantically back and forth, emphasizing that my ancestors had forcefully taken his *gaansama* [ancestors] from Africa, not for normal work, but to dig in the mud of the coastal plains with the purpose of establishing plantations... [he cried out] “and now you want me to tell you, child of the suppressors, a story?” (pp. 272-273)

Only after a half-century of repetitive stays with the Okanisi could he record the detailed stories presented in this book. What emerges is the portrait of several generations of courageous men and women who fled slavery, created a new life in the rainforest, and used both violence and diplomacy in relations with other Maroon groups and the colonial rulers. Supernatural forces shaped the development of Okanisis’ society, from the time of their ancestors in Africa, to the period when they lived as small groups of runaway in the forest, to their establishment as organized societies. Gods, mythical animals, witchcraft, and *obia* dictated when people ran away, where they went, what they encountered, and how they dealt with it. Appeasing spiritual forces required obedience of certain rules. Violating the rules of gods and other spiritual creatures was punished with illness, death, or other misfortune, as a member of the Pataa clan explained:

One day some members from the Pina clan got into an argument with *gaanta* (ancestor) Kofi Abuta of the Pataa clan. It was about a piece of meat. Tata Ogii [God] had prohibited fighting during the time of fleeing in the forest. To punish such disobedience, Tata Ogii made *gaanta* Kofi Abuta choke on a bone. (pp. 81-82)

The accounts of different families and clans are filled with such examples.

Een zwarte vrijstaat in Suriname presents stories about a part of Suriname history that every Suriname high school student—and many more people—should learn about. However, even for a reader familiar with Okanisi culture, the density of facts occasionally makes it difficult to keep track of the main story lines. The detail in recording place, person, family, and (sub)clan names is often overwhelming. It would therefore be useful if some of the main “canons” (as the authors call them) could be reworked into a booklet for a wider audience.

Nevertheless, the book is an invaluable asset for the Okanisi Maroons, whose oral traditions are rapidly eroding under the influences of mass media, modern means of communication, and new ways of learning. Furthermore, this admirable work sheds light on an unwritten and little documented part of African Diaspora history as experienced by the people who lived it.

Marieke Heemskerk
Independent researcher
Paramaribo, Suriname
mheemskerk@yahoo.com