Wilhelmina van Wetering & H. U. E. Thoden van Velzen

_Een zwarte vrijstaat in Suriname: De Okaanse samenleving in de 19e en 20e eeuw._

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This book, which describes the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of the Okanisi Maroons of Suriname, follows upon an earlier book that dealt with the same society in the eighteenth century (Thoden van Velzen & Hoogbergen 2011). From the day that African slaves set foot in the Americas up to the abolition of slavery, runaway slaves formed independent societies. Our knowledge about the early years of these communities has until recent decades been largely derived from colonial records, colored by prejudice, ignorance, and misinterpretation.

Suriname's Maroons societies embody a rich oral tradition through which historical knowledge is passed on from generation to generation, offering a unique opportunity to learn about Maroon history. The late Wilhelmina van Wetering and H. U. E. Thoden van Velzen made it their life work to record the oral histories, particularly the religious histories, of the Okanisi (also known as Aukaners or Ndyuka). The book under review is characterized by a stronger focus on religious cults than its 2011 predecessor, reflecting the authors' long-term interests. In fact, it is based on a translation of ethnographic material that Van Wetering and Thoden van Velzen presented earlier in _The Great Father and the Danger_ (1988). It recounts Okanisi history after 1800, when the war between the Okanisi and the Boni (or Aluku) Maroons had just been concluded. Because the period that follows has received little coverage in colonial records and is “largely shrouded in mystery” (p. 64), the main sources are Okanisi “history narrators.” Van Wetering and Thoden van Velzen prefer not to use the term “historians,” because it “suggests that critical research of the oral traditions is of more importance than it is in reality. Hence it is possible that different versions of important historical events continue to co-exist, without efforts to determine which tradition is the correct one” (p. 17). Because this sequel to the 2011 book partly covers relatively recent history, not only professional history narrators but also other Okanisi share their perspectives, based on personal experiences or stories from their grandparents and great grandparents. The authors embraced the tremendous challenge to tell a more or less chronological history based on undated fragments and events, featuring many persons who are known by different names.

From these narratives emerges a magical world of witches and wizards, avenging spirits, angry ancestors, and prophets, priests and mediums who deliver messages from the gods and other elements of the spiritual world. It also is a story of fear, both fear of witches and fear of being the target of witchcraft.
accusations. Indeed, people who are unmasked through divine intervention as “witches” or bakuubasi (“masters of the demon”) are burned alive, tortured, beaten (sometimes to death) and repudiated, and their possessions destroyed. In the case of posthumous witchcraft accusations, the body is left unburied with its possessions in the forest. In their narrations of sometimes grueling events, the authors do not judge or justify behavior but rather discuss the events from an Okanisi perspective.

The book provides an intriguing glimpse into historic developments in the expressions and roles of traditional religion in Okanisi society. In taking this focus, however, it leaves out other important events that have shaped Okanisi history in the period under investigation, including religious events. There is no mention, for example, of the arrival of the Roman Catholic and Protestant missions, which facilitated access to formal education and health care, or of the evangelical churches with their growing numbers of Okanisi followers. Also little attention is paid to the impact of small-scale gold mining, which has become the motor behind the Okanisi economy in the interior, and to the living conditions of the growing community of Okanisi in Paramaribo.

Today’s Okanisi society is rapidly becoming part of a global world. This trend is accelerated by the emergence of a class of nouveaux riches, who have gained respect and power based on their wealth (largely from gold mining) at the cost of traditional Okanisi authorities. It is not without reason that the authors conclude by wondering whether Okanisi civilization will continue to exist as a distinct society. The rapidly waning interest in ancient traditions among Okanisi youth stresses the urgency of this book. Hopefully its narratives will inspire students at Suriname’s national university, among whom a growing number of Okanisi, to learn about their history.

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References
