

REVIEW ESSAY

The Okanisi: A Surinamese Maroon Community, c.1712–2010*

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THODEN VAN VELZEN, H.U.E. [en] WIM HOOGBERGEN. Een zwarte vrijstaat in Suriname. De Okaanse samenleving in de achttiende eeuw. [Caribbean Series, vol. 29.] KITLV Uitgeverij, Leiden [etc.] 2011. xxiv, 360 pp. Ill. € 27.56; \$35.00. [A]¹

WETERING, WILHELMINA VAN [en] H.U.E. THODEN VAN VELZEN. Een zwarte vrijstaat in Suriname (deel 2). De Okaanse samenleving in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw. [Caribbean Series, vol. 32.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2013. xiii, 364 pp. Ill. € 91.00; \$115.00. [B]²

“*Joe sabi vo ron: joe moe sabi vo kibri.*” [If you know how to run away,
you should know where to hide as well.]
Surinamese proverb³

As long as slavery has existed, slaves have tried to run away, when they are no longer willing or able to tolerate their living conditions. One widely renowned example is the brutally repressed Spartacus Uprising of 73–71 BCE, where the

* Translated from Dutch by Lee Mitzman.

1. All references in the text to H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen and Wim Hoogbergen, *Een zwarte vrijstaat in Suriname. De Okaanse samenleving in de achttiende eeuw* (Leiden [etc.], 2011) are designated A with the appropriate page numbers.

2. All references in the text to Wilhelmina van Wetering and H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen, *Een zwarte vrijstaat in Suriname (deel 2). De Okaanse samenleving in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Leiden [etc.], 2013) are designated B with the appropriate page numbers.

3. H.R. Wullschlägel, *Deutsch-Negerenglisches Wörterbuch. Nebst einem Anhang, Neger-englische Sprichwörter enthaltend* (Löbau, 1856), p. 330 (proverb 534).

escape of a few dozen gladiators culminated in the exodus of about 70,000 slaves. A less well-known but equally impressive case concerns the revolt in 869 of the *Zanj*, the East African slaves forced to work in the salt marshes in southern Iraq. Just south of Basra, they founded a new, expansive city called al-Mokhtára (“the elect city”), with elaborate defence works and home to a population of 50,000 or more. Only after 14 years were these rebels defeated.

In the New World numerous slaves escaped almost immediately after they were brought there from Africa. In 1503, only eleven years after the discovery of the Americas, Nicolas de Obando, governor of Hispaniola (later shared by two colonial powers, Spain [Santo Domingo] and France [Saint Domingue]) implored the Spanish Court to stop sending him slaves “because they run away and join the Indians, teaching them bad habits, and they are impossible to recapture”.⁴ The best-known case from the modern age is probably the “Negro Republic” of Palmares (Brazil, 1605–1694), where between 10,000 and 20,000 runaway slaves (also known as Maroons) lived.⁵

The historiography of the Maroons seems to have started in the late eighteenth century, possibly influenced by the abolitionist movements, which were emerging around that time, especially in Britain. In 1803, for example, Robert C. Dallas’s *History of the Maroons* appeared. In 1844 Louis Timagène Houat from La Réunion published *Les Marrons*, which may be the first novel on the subject.⁶ On the eve of and during the American Civil War, several works documenting the fates of runaway slaves were published in the North.⁷

In the twentieth century the number of books and articles about runaway slaves soared, including pioneering works by authors such as Herbert Aptheker, Yvan Debbasch, and Gabriel Debien.⁸ Since the 1970s the number of studies about runaway slaves in the Americas has continued

4. Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, *Historia general de los hechos de los castellanos en las islas, y Tierra Firme del mar Oceano que llaman Indias Occidentales*, 4 vols (1601–1615), I (Madrid, 1601), p. 142.

5. On the etymology, see Jean-Pierre Tardieu, “Cimarrôn-Maroon-Marron. Note épistémologique”, *Outre-mers*, 350–351 (2006), pp. 237–247.

6. Robert C. Dallas, *The History of the Maroons, from Their Origin to the Establishment of Their Chief Tribe at Sierra Leone [...]* (London, 1803); Louis Timagène Houat, *Les Marrons* (Paris, 1844).

7. For example, Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (New York, 1850), pp. 46–174; Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada, & England* (London, 1855; repr. New York 1968); Benjamin Drew (ed.), *The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston, MA, 1856); J.W. Loguen, *The Rev. J.W. Loguen, as a Slave and as Freeman: A Narrative of Real Life* (Syracuse, NY, 1859).

8. Herbert Aptheker, “Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States”, *Journal of Negro History*, 24 (1939), pp. 167–184; Yvan Debbasch, “Le Marronage. Essai sur la désertion de l’esclave antillais”, Part I, *L’Année Sociologique*, Third Series, (1961), pp. 3–112, and Part II, *L’Année Sociologique*, Third Series, (1962), pp. 117–191; Gabriel Debien, “Le marronage aux Antilles françaises au XVIIIe siècle”, *Caribbean Studies*, 6:3 (1966), pp. 3–44.

to increase.⁹ The focus was obviously on regions where Maroon societies were relatively important (Brazil, Jamaica, and Suriname). Gradually, runaways in Africa received greater coverage, for example the slaves who had participated in the Banamba exodus of 1905–1908 in the Niger Valley.¹⁰

On the Surinamese Maroons (formerly known as “Bush Negroes”), several small studies were published early on, mainly by missionaries, colonial officials, and scientific explorers.¹¹ Larger works appeared in the 1920s. One pioneer was the bacteriologist Morton Kahn, who in the course of his research on tropical diseases in Dutch Guiana (Suriname) had encountered Maroons and subsequently wrote a study that to this day remains immensely readable about the history and culture of a group he called the Djuka (the Saramaka). Kahn also accompanied the anthropologists Melville and Frances Herskovits on their first stay with the Maroons in Suriname. Based on this visit and a second one in 1929, they authored two books: *Rebel Destiny* and *Surinam Folk-lore*.¹²

After World War II, scholars began to research the Surinamese Maroons more intensively. The anthropologist André Köbben was pivotal in this process.¹³ He conducted field research and supervised some dissertations on the topic. His Ph.D. candidates included the main author of the books discussed here: H.U.E. (Bonno) Thoden van Velzen, with his wife Wilhelmina (Ineke) van Wetering, and the historian Silvia W. de Groot. They all studied the Okanisi Maroons in south-east Suriname, also known as Djuka or Ndyuka.¹⁴ Wim Hoogbergen, who co-authored the first book reviewed here, in turn studied under Thoden van Velzen and took his Ph.D. under his

9. A useful survey of the current state of knowledge appears in Monolo Florentino and Márcia Amantino, “Runaways and *Quilombolas* in the Americas”, in David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (eds), *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, III: AD 1420–AD 1804 (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 708–740.

10. Richard Roberts and Martin A. Klein. “The Banamba Slave Exodus of 1905 and the Decline of Slavery in the Western Sudan”, *Journal of African History*, 21 (1980), pp. 375–394.

11. A complete bibliography of these earlier studies appears in Richard Price, *The Guiana Maroons: A Historical and Bibliographical Introduction* (Baltimore, MD [etc.], 1976).

12. Morton C. Kahn, *Djuka: The Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (New York, 1931); Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (New York, 1934); *idem*, *Suriname Folk-lore, With transcriptions of Suriname songs and Musicological Analysis by Dr M. Kolinski* (New York, 1936).

13. A.J.F. Köbben, “Unity and Disunity. Cottica Society as a Kinship System”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 123 (1967), pp. 10–52; *idem*, “Continuity in Change: Cottica Djuka Society as a Changing System”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 124 (1968), pp. 56–90; *idem*, “Classificatory Kinship and Classificatory Status: The Cottica Djuka of Surinam”, *Man*, New Series, 4 (1969), pp. 236–249.

14. H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen, *Politieke beheersing in de Djuka maatschappij. Een studie van een onvolledig machtoverwicht* (Amsterdam, 1966); Wilhelmina van Wetering, *Hekserij bij de Djuka. Een sociologische benadering* (Amsterdam, 1968); Silvia W. de Groot, *Djuka Society and Social Change: History of an Attempt to Develop a Bush Negro Community in Surinam 1917–1926* (Assen, 1969).

supervision in 1985 about a different group of Surinamese Maroons, the Boni.¹⁵ In this context, historical studies soon followed. One important work was the dissertation by Frank Dragtenstein about Marronage from the start of the Dutch domination until the late eighteenth century.¹⁶

Thoden van Velzen (b. 1933) and Van Wetering (1934–2011) began their anthropological field research in May 1961. For the rest of their lives, they continued studying the Surinamese Maroons. Their somewhat younger colleague Hoogbergen (b. 1944) remains fascinated by them as well. The two books to be discussed here are the outcome of this lifelong study by the three authors; Van Wetering did not live to see their publication. The two books are based on a combination of anthropological field research, archival research conducted mainly in Paramaribo and The Hague, and countless conversations with local history narrators. These narrators are indispensable sources of information for this type of project, in which written sources on the earlier period are scarce; of course the information needs to be examined very carefully. Willem van Lier, one of the first discerning observers of Surinamese Maroon culture, wrote:

I mention history narrators for lack of historiographers; as with other peoples, who do not know how to read or write, Bush Negroes are trained from early childhood to have a sharp memory. History is passed from one generation to the next that way, and certain elders among them may be consulted about all historical details, as we would a history book. Young adults with a natural propensity are trained by these elders as historical experts.¹⁷

To my knowledge, there has never been such a vast study about the history of a single Maroon society over the course of three centuries. Below I will start with a brief general overview of the history of the Surinamese Maroons. I will then summarize the highlights from the two books, quoting fairly extensively, because the books are in Dutch and therefore inaccessible to an international readership. I will conclude with some critical reflections.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Settlers began to arrive in the region of today's three Guianas (Suriname, Guyana, and French Guiana) in the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁸ The

15. Wim Hoogbergen, *De Boni-oorlogen, 1757–1860: Marronage en guerilla in Oost-Suriname* (Utrecht, 1985). Published in English as *The Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname* (Leiden, 1990).

16. Frank Dragtenstein, "*De ondraaglijke stoutheid der wegloopers*": *Marronage en koloniaal beleid in Suriname, 1667–1768* (Utrecht, 2002).

17. Willem F. van Lier, *Iets over de Boschnegers in Boven-Marowijne* (Paramaribo, 1919), p. 40, note. See also the methodological reflections in Hoogbergen, *De Boni-oorlogen*, pp. 430–439. All translations are mine.

18. British Guiana was founded in 1831 as a result of the merging of three older colonies: Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo.

Table 1. *Population and plantations in Surinam, 1684–1863.*

Year	Slaves	Whites	Manumitted slaves	Maroons	Amerindians	Plantations
1684	3,332	652				
1730	18,190	1,085				
1735	22,196	1,266				400
1754	33,423	1,441				
1762		2,390	330			
1786	50,000	3,350		7,000	1–2,000	500
1830	53,000	8,500			1–2,000	451
1863	33,600	16,500	5,607	8,000	1–2,000	162

Sources: 1684, 1730, 1734, 1752: Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600–1815* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 185; 1762: Jean Jacques Vrij, “Jan Elias en het ‘politiek systeem’”, *OSO: Tijdschrift voor Surinaamse taalkunde, letterkunde en geschiedenis*, 17 (1998), pp. 130–147, 133; 1786, 1830 and 1863: De Groot, *Djuka Society and Social Change*, pp. 4, 6.

region was one of dense jungles and few inhabitants, perhaps 30,000 Amerindians, consisting mainly of two peoples: the Arowaks and the Caribs. Particularly in what is now known as Suriname, the English and Dutch increasingly set up plantations. Slaves imported from Africa worked these plantations, rapidly growing in number.¹⁹ Until 1667, this colony was officially British; it was then taken over by the Dutch. From the late 1670s, the ongoing expansion of the plantation economy led to attacks by the original inhabitants.²⁰ The battle that ensued is also known as the War of Indians (1668–1685). After the war the plantations no longer expanded along the Suriname River, as they had been doing, but were extended eastward, toward the Commewijne, Cottica, and Perica rivers (B: p. 54). As a consequence of the thriving plantation economy, the slave population initially grew in leaps and bounds but growth then slowed. I offer some numerical summaries (in part estimates) in Table 1.

Among the over 250,000 Africans brought to Suriname between 1651 and 1800, by far the largest share came from four areas: the Windward Coast, the Gold Coast, the Slave Coast, and Loango. Because of the different influences, pidgin contact languages came about, such as Sranantongo and Okatongo (the language of the Okanisi).²¹

Almost from the beginning slaves ran away. They started to do so in more substantial numbers during the War of Indians. “At first they [the Indians]

19. According to the data in the database, www.slavevoyages.org, the numbers of slaves imported in the Dutch Guianas (including Essequibo) were as follows: 1651–75: 11,594; 1676–1700: 27,155; 1701–1725: 26,496.

20. Dragtenstein, “*De ondraaglijke stoutheid*”, pp. 22–23.

21. Jan Voorhoeve and Ursy M. Lichtveld (eds), *Creole Drum: An Anthology of Creole Literature in Surinam* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 1975), Appendix 1, pp. 273–284.

murdered the Negro slaves as well, but soon changed their policy and began persuading them to desert, a manoeuvre which became increasingly successful"; "many Negro slaves either fled into the bush or threw in their lot with the rebels".²² By the end of 1679, 700 to 800 slaves were believed to have fled the plantations.²³

From the early eighteenth century several Maroon communities gradually consolidated. The first large community of runaways was formed in 1712. The French corsair Jacques Cassard had attacked the thriving colony. The planters, hoping to protect their precious labour from being stolen, had sent their slaves temporarily into the woods.²⁴ Over 700 slaves then opted to remain free, rather than to return to the plantations, and were the core of what later became the Saramaka community. In 1749 they numbered about 1,600.²⁵ At around the same time, along the Maroni River, the Okanisi community was formed. This somewhat smaller group expanded, after a few hundred insurgents from the Tempati area joined them in 1757, thereby reducing the numerical gap between Okanisi and Saramaka. Later on, smaller communities formed, such as the Kwinti, the Matawai, and the Boni or Aluku.²⁶

The main communities (i.e. the Saramaka and the Okanisi) were divided according to clans (*lo*), comprising members of various matrilineal families, the *bere* or *bee* (belly). The political leader of a *lo* was a chief or captain (*kabiten* or *kapten*). The head of the entire tribe was the *granman* or *gaanman* (big man). One very revealing practice of the Maroons in Suriname was that after they had deserted, they identified themselves by their plantation of origin. Slaves who had fled the plantation run by the widow of Johan (Dyan) Bosseliers called themselves *Misidyman*. Slaves who had escaped from the L'Espinasse family were called *Pinasi-lo*, and the *Dikan* came from the Nessenkamp plantation of the De Camp family.²⁷ When clans took in new runaways (*Lowéman*), they preferred slaves from

22. Raymond Th. Buve, "Governor Johannes Heinsius: The Role of Van Aerssen's Predecessor in the Surinam Indian War, 1678–1680", in Peter Kloos and Henri J.M. Claessen (eds), *Current Anthropology in the Netherlands* (Rotterdam, 1975), pp. 39–48, 41.

23. Sandew Hira, *Van Priary tot en met De Kom. De geschiedenis van het verzet in Suriname, 1630–1940* (Rotterdam, 1982), p. 41.

24. Philippe Hrodej, *Jacques Cassard: armateur et corsaire du Roi-Soleil* (Rennes, 2002), p. 176.

25. For a history of the Saramaka, see Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore, MD [etc.], 1983).

26. On the Matawai, see Chris de Beet and Miriam Sterman, *People in Between: The Matawai-Maroons of Suriname* (Meppel, 1980); on the Kwinti, see Wim Hoogbergen, "Origins of the Suriname Kwinti Maroons", *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 66 (1992), pp. 27–59; on the Aluku or Boni, see Hoogbergen, *Boni Maroon Wars*.

27. E. Wong, "Hoofdenverkiezing, stamverdeeling en stamverspreiding der boschnegers van Suriname in de 18e en 19e eeuw", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 97 (1938), pp. 295–362, 311–314.

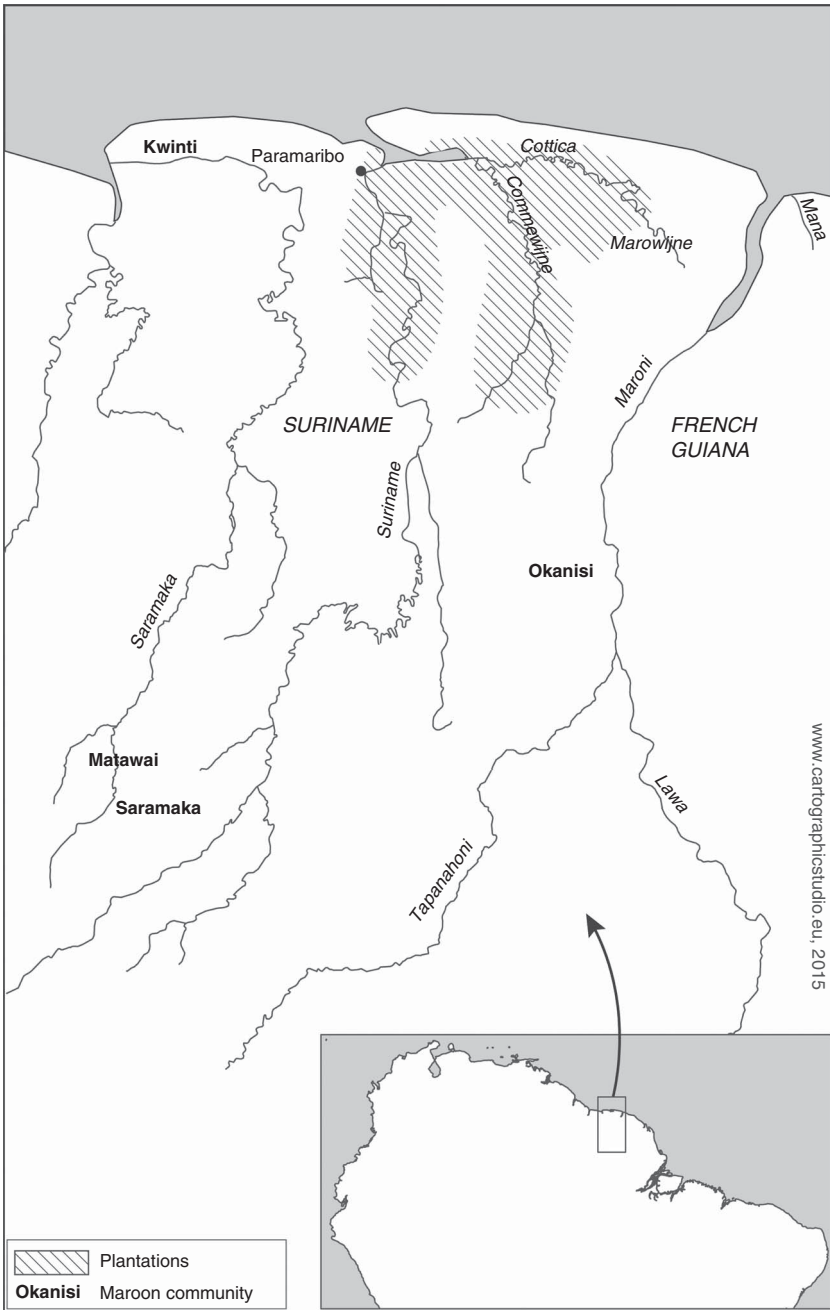


Figure 1. Suriname, c.1765.

“their own plantation”. Maroons from different plantations might become very suspicious of one another, sometimes resulting in armed conflicts. Mass desertions were thus based on local or ethnic homogeneity.²⁸

Each *lo* built its own village or villages and comprised a few dozen to a few hundred dwellings. Sometimes palisades and watchtowers were constructed as well. The farming system derived from the Amerindians and involved shifting cultivation.

Men would clear a section of woods, to which they would set fire at the end of the great drought season (November). A few days after the fire, the women could already plant these provision grounds. When the soil was depleted after a few years, they would leave those grounds to plant others. After a decade or so, they would return to this secondary jungle (*karwee*) to clear away the shrubs starting to grow there. This system has the advantage that the grounds require relatively little maintenance. Of course, this system works only in fairly sparsely populated areas. (A: p. 3)

In addition to the basic staple crops (rice and cassava), yams, maize, bananas, and sugar cane were cultivated. The provision grounds were never near the villages but always some distance away, in some cases a few hours on foot. They were well camouflaged.

It is told that this practice of isolating the provision ground was a heritage of the days when the ancestors were escaping from slavery, for then the whites were at war with them, and villages had often to be deserted. But to desert a village was one thing. [...] Men did not, after all, derive their food supply from a village. It was the provision ground upon which life depended. The provision ground had at all cost to be saved. Access to it was, therefore, made difficult. Trails were never clearly marked, and were often marked to mislead the invading enemy. The river bank was allowed to give no hint of shielding, behind the thicket, a clearing where crops grew to feed the warriors and their families. When a village was destroyed by the enemy, the Bush Negroes fell back on their fields and maintained life. To this day [the 1930s], it is said, this practice holds, for though hostilities ended more than a hundred years ago, the planting grounds are rarely found close to a village.²⁹

Communication between villages and on the rivers was possible in three ways. In every village there lived a few skilled drummers who transmitted

28. The Maroons appear to have adopted European stereotypes as well: in 1759, in the course of peace negotiations to end the regular cycles of attacks and retaliations between the Maroons and the Dutch, a member of the Dutch delegation complained “that from early morning until late at night, a group of twenty Maroons hung about in his house. They ate everything in sight and stole his goods. Labi Dikan and Basiton [the spokespersons for the Okanisi] apologized and said they had no control over the Maroons. They were ‘canaille Smauze’ (Jewish trash, Lowéman [run-aways] of Ashkenazi [?] Jewish masters)” (A: p. 191).

29. Herskovits and Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny*, p. 93. According to Müller, it was of such vital importance to the Maroons “that their *kostgronden* [provision grounds] should not be destroyed if they were attacked by whites, [that] they often reclaimed more fields in reserve”; M. Müller, “Ten Years of Guerilla-Warfare and Slave Rebellions in Surinam, 1750–1759”, *Acta Historiae Neerlandica*, 8 (1975), pp. 85–102, 94.



Figure 2. Maroon village by the Cottica river near Moengo.

Photograph: C.R. Singh. From: J.L. Volders, *Bouwkunst in Suriname (Hilversum, 1966)*.

messages (usually in the dead of night). If a mountain or hill separated two villages, a detour was taken via villages between the two. This enabled complicated messages to be transmitted across long distances relatively quickly. Sometimes communication proceeded via dugout canoes: messengers would transmit messages orally, sometimes in a relay service. Finally, probably only later on, horns (*toetoe*) made from tin were used, so that boats were able to remain in contact across great distances.³⁰ Maroon villages were relatively easy to relocate: “They could hunt and fish everywhere, provision grounds are quickly replanted. They are therefore mobile, and living along or nearby large rivers enhances this mobility.”³¹

Because the runaways were predominantly men, the villages had a severe shortage of women. Metal implements (pots and kettles, axes, etc.) and salt were also in great demand. The Maroons therefore regularly attacked plantations and took from them women and implements. The colonial authorities retaliated repeatedly by launching crackdowns, killing Maroons, and setting their villages and provision grounds ablaze. They did not, however, manage to stop the raids. Nor had this been successful in other plantation colonies. In Jamaica settlers had therefore signed a peace treaty with Maroons in 1739. This measure inspired peace treaties in Suriname as

30. Van Lier, *Iets over de Boschnegers*, pp. 86–88; L. Junker, “Een staat in den staat”, *West-Indische Gids*, 14 (1933), pp. 267–280, 321–336, 335.

31. Silvia W. de Groot, “Migratiebewegingen der Djoeka’s in Suriname van 1845 tot 1863”, *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 44 (1965), pp. 133–151, 137.

well, first with the Okanisi (1760) living along the Maroni River, and somewhat later with the Saramaka (1762) living along the Suriname River, and the Matawai (1767) along the Saramaka River. These three groups were called the “pacified Bush Negroes”.³² Maroons not covered by these treaties were known as the “non-pacified Bush Negroes”.

One important part of these accords was that the pacified agreed to help trace the non-pacified. Some runaways were indeed returned by the pacified Maroons. In the words of a contemporary observer, however, non-pacified “nests” persisted,³³ among them the Paramaka and the Kwinti. The fiercest hotbeds of resistance were the Aluku or Boni; in the 1770s and 1780s the colonial troops waged an extended war against them, described at length by the mercenary Stedman and examined in depth by historians later.³⁴ After their leaders Boni and Codjo Coromanti were killed in 1791, the remaining Aluku headed south and later to French Guiana.

Following the peace treaties of the 1760s, new runaways faced difficult choices: they could try to join the pacified Maroons but risk being handed back to their owners, or they could try to join the non-pacified Maroons. One difficulty was that these Maroons carefully concealed the location of their villages and provision grounds. Also, there was the risk of being killed by the non-pacified Maroons for fear of betrayal, which was not unusual when newcomers arrived. A third option was either to retreat to the immediate surroundings or to move a bit further away from the plantations: “Whenever groups formed that set up camps and provision grounds at a few hours distance from the plantation, they remained in contact with the plantations and regularly stole food and goods from them.”³⁵ Finally, a fourth opportunity arose, when slavery was abolished in the neighbouring countries (in British Guiana in 1833 and in French Guiana in 1848), and these became possible places of refuge.

Maroons who – as the settlers put it – were “pacified” could be integrated gradually in the colonial economy as well. The first signs to this effect became visible around 1800, when they – as we shall see – became involved in logging and the timber trade. The official abolition of slavery in 1863 was also conducive to integration, as a labour shortage became imminent; past experience in British and French colonies had revealed, after all, that former slaves preferred

32. How the peace treaties came about has been analysed at length in Dragtenstein, “*De ondraaglijke stoutheid*”, pp. 112–234.

33. Jan Jacob Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana, of de Wilde Kust, in Zuid-America* (Amsterdam, 1770), p. 813.

34. See the critical edition: John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative, of a Five-Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript. Edited by Richard Price and Sally Price (Baltimore, MD [etc.], 1988). The authoritative reference work is Hoogbergen, *Boni Maroon Wars*. On French Guiana, see Jean Hurault, *Les noirs réfugiés Boni de la Guyane française* (Dakar, 1961), a study covering the 1950s.

35. Wim Hoogbergen, *De Surinaamse “weglopers” van de 19e eeuw*, Bronnen voor de Studie van Bosneger Samenlevingen, I (Utrecht, n.d. [1978]), pp. 20–21.

not to continue working on the old plantations. The authorities therefore tried to resolve the anticipated labour shortage by increasingly recruiting Bush Negroes. Later influences that boosted economic integration and acculturation included the “development” of the interior, the impact of tourism, and education.³⁶ With the book of Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering this history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has now been reconstructed for the first time in detail for the second-largest Maroon group, the Okanisi.

THE EARLY DECADES (c.1712–1760)

In eighteenth-century Suriname, the boundaries of nearly all plantations opened on to the jungle:

Slaves had reasonable freedom of movement. Every plantation had tracts of land that were not used to cultivate market crops; slaves could plant their own small fields, provision grounds (*goon*) to raise edible crops. Some of these provision grounds were even in the “forest” behind the plantations. Slaves would hunt in these jungles, and they caught fish in the swamps. The slaves also had small dugout canoes, in which they paddled through creeks and swamps. The Bakaa, their white masters, owners, and foremen never went along on these journeys, so that the slaves knew considerably more than their masters about the geographic state of this terrain. Slaves usually had little difficulty slipping away from the plantation unnoticed. (A: p. 1)

In the eighteenth century about 250 slaves ran away annually. About 90 per cent consisted of men. Many returned to their masters after a while, but about 100 slaves remained in the woods every year. The different groups of Maroons soon formed the aforementioned larger communities. Already by 1740 the Okanisi had found a sanctuary near the creeks (which they called Mama Ndyuka) at the foot of the Bakaa Lely mountains (A: p. 95). Three main groups or federations probably already existed by then: the Ndyuka, the Lukubun, and the Miáfiya. During a sort of founding meeting “many years before 1760 [the year of the peace treaty with the Dutch]” (A: p. 97) the banks and islands of the Tapanahoni River were divided among the three Okanese main groups. The Ndyuka were the most influential. The chiefs of the Lukubun and Miáfiya had dwellings in the Ndyuka area and stayed there regularly. Mutual ties were strengthened by marriages. This basic structure persisted until well into the twentieth century.

The lives of the Okanisi were permeated by a constantly changing religion, in which many gods and spirits figured. First came “the lower gods, who are able to get into people but are merely entrusted with specific missions”. Then there were three intermediate gods who handled daily operations. Finally, there was the supreme being (*Nana*) who intervened

36. For an informative list of influences that have promoted “acculturation” by Maroons in the twentieth century, see Alan B. Anderson, “Recent Acculturation of Bush Negroes in Surinam and French Guiana”, *Anthropologica*, 22 (1980), pp. 61–84.

only in crises and announced his missions via a special envoy (*yeye*). Each of the three federations took responsibility for serving one of the “intermediate” or “mediator gods”. The Ndyuka had Agedeonsu, the Lukubun had Sweli Gadu, and the Miáfiya had Tati Ogii (A: pp. 20, 133, 141–162; quotation on p. 133). Agedeonsu seems to have evolved into the most important mediator god over time: “With crop failures, extended droughts, or when hunting and fishing seem to yield little anymore, the priests of Agedeonsu appeal to the people to pray *en masse*.” Following food sacrifices a pilgrimage was organized to the historic sites, such as the place where the Okanisi first reached the Tapanahoni (A: p. 143).

While the gods represented positive forces, female and male witches embodied evil. If somebody was exposed as a witch, the consequences were often deadly. He or she was sometimes tortured and frequently burned alive. Based on their own observations, Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering report:

Witchcraft (*wisi*) may aptly be described as the obsession of the Okanisi. This religion revolves around the idea that mankind is constantly subject to the temptations of Evil, especially to the desire to target those within one’s own group. Jealousy is seen as the main driver for people to act against the interests of others, infect them with disease, or kill them. Whoever succumbs to such temptation, whether they be men or women, shall be called a witch (*wisiman*). (B: p. 9)

They estimate that in the nineteenth century about two dozen suspects were burned at the stake (B: p. 77).³⁷

Because most Maroons were men, gender ratios long remained distorted within the runaway communities. This was in part why women were relatively powerful and gave rise to a matrilineal kinship structure. Children were named after their mother, and especially during the early years, women were pivotal (A: p. 7).

The matriline is an important corporative group: members share land rights; a prayer stake with a sacrifice site (*bee yookafaaka* or *bee faakatiki*) for the ancestors of the line, while they manage a mortuary (*kee-osu*), together with the other matriline in the village. Owning a prayer stake and a mortuary entitles an Okanese settlement to call itself a village (*kondee*). (A: pp. 9–10)³⁸

Still, the men were ordinarily the “formal” leaders. The community as a whole was headed by the *granman*, who since the eighteenth century was

37. More extensively on this subject, see H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen and Wilhelmina van Wetering, *The Great Father and the Danger: Religious Cults, Material Forces, and Collective Fantasies in the World of the Surinamese Maroons* (Dordrecht, 1988). On p. 408 (n. 15), the authors list fifteen witches by name.

38. The matrilineal structure in fact reflects some influence from classificatory relations, leading a series of relations to be captured in a very limited number of terms. In some cases, for example, a husband or uncle may be called a “brother”. More extensively on this subject, see Köbben, “Classificatory Kinship”.



Figure 3. Okanisi preparing cassave, c.1885.

Photograph: Julius Eduard Muller. Courtesy of Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.nr. TM-60012335.

always elected from among the Otoo-clan which enjoyed more authority than others (A: p. 15). Leaders subsidiary to the *granman* were the village authorities: the village chief (*kabiten*) and one or more assistants (*basiya*). The power of the leaders was always restricted.

The village, or rather a group of nearby villages, are a type of republic, a micro polis, in which all somewhat older men gather daily to discuss pending matters. During this *kuutu* compromise is often reached only after hours of talks, and only after influential older women have been consulted as well. (A: pp. 16–17)

Over time, however, these relatively egalitarian relations in the tiny village republics were seriously disrupted by prophets who “invoking a divine wrath, exercise their authoritarian powers” (A: p. 17).

Like other groups of Maroons, the Okanisi waged a constant war against the planters. The colonial authorities regularly dispatched military patrols into the jungle to capture or kill Maroons and to destroy their villages and provision grounds. In turn, Maroons raided the plantations to steal hardware, gunpowder, or rifles, and to kidnap women. These constant bloody conflicts and the memory of the atrocities of slavery permeated the culture of the Okanisi and

instilled in them a fundamental and persistent mistrust of white people.³⁹ Until well into the twentieth century, the sentry would greet those coming to visit the village with: “*Wadaa!*” (from *Werda?*: Who’s there?) to which the guest was expected to reply: “*Fiiman*” (a free man) (B: p. 23).⁴⁰

“PACIFICATION” AND THE CONSEQUENCES (1760–1863)

On 22 February 1757 a slave revolt broke out in the Tempati region. The impetus was the plan of Jean Martin, owner of the La Paix timber plantation, to relocate the slaves to his sugar plantation along the Upper Commewijne. His slaves would have none of this. Work on timber plantations was less strenuous than on sugar plantations. The slaves were also attached to the land where they lived. Moreover, supervision was minimal for those working in the woods. This situation was a far cry from the work regime on the sugar plantations. Not only did the cane cutters work very hard, but they were also under constant supervision. If the planter carried out his intention, the circumstances of the slaves would deteriorate considerably. (A: p. 163)

The governor in Paramaribo sent troops to suppress the uprising, culminating in bloody armed conflicts.

The insurgents then retreated into the woods. Six months later, they turned out to have joined the Okanisi (A: p. 166).⁴¹ In 1759 the insurgents from the Tempati and the Okanisi jointly raided some plantations. Because Basiton, the leader of the Tempati rebels and sometimes known as Boston, was literate, the Court of Police in Paramaribo sent two slaves, Coffy and Charlestown, to the Okanisi with a letter, escorted by a patrol of twenty-three carriers and twenty-two servicemen (A: p. 170).

Basiton read the letter very attentively. He then told Labi Dikan [head of the Dikan-clan] that the Bakaa [whites] meant well. They wanted peace, and this

39. After the peace of 1760, Lieutenant C.E. Vieira reported that the homes of the Okanisi each had a front and a back door (characteristic of those who feel persecuted) (A: p. 207); and Junker observed: “The thought of a war still to come with the white people lives on [...]. This makes it extremely difficult for a white person to gain the trust of the Bush Negroes. From early childhood, they are taught to regard white people as liars and perpetrators of violence”; L. Junker, “Eenige mededeelingen over de Saramaccaner-boschneegers”, *West-Indische Gids*, 4 (1923), pp. 449–480, 458.

40. Cf. the observations of Melville and Frances Herskovits about the Saramaka: “Today when a Bush Negro drinks with a white man his toast is ‘Free!’” (*Rebel Destiny*, p. vii); and: “one of the three worst crimes among the Bush Negroes – one that ranks with incest and murder – is informing on a Negro to a white man” (*Rebel Destiny*, p. xi). Van Lier noted: “[N]o Bush Negro, from whatever tribe, may ever surrender a fellow tribe member to the court of the White People”; Willem F. van Lier, “Bij de Aucaners (II)”, *West-Indische Gids*, 4 (1923), pp. 205–230, 223.

41. For more detailed information about the Tempati uprising, see Harry van den Bouwhuijsen, Ron de Bruin, and Georg Horeweg, *Opstand in Tempati, 1757–1760* (Utrecht, 1988).

opportunity to make peace should not be missed. Basiton turned out to be one of the strongest advocates of making peace. *He mentioned the peace that had been reached (in 1739) in Jamaica between the English and the Maroons*, “which the Negroes had accepted”. The Bakaa had compensated for the raids on the plantations by presenting gifts. Surely, a similar arrangement would be possible in Suriname. If the planters would send goods to the Maroons at set intervals, they were willing to make peace. (A: p. 171, my italics)

This was the start of several rounds of negotiations that fairly soon culminated in an agreement between Abercrombie, the chief negotiator on behalf of the slave owners, and Basiton. “It was agreed that peace would be reached in a year. Abercrombie gave Basiton two chords with thirteen knots. The first knot represented 13 October 1759, the day of the conversation. Every other knot represented an additional month. The peace would be reached at the thirteenth knot” (A: p. 178) when the news of the upcoming peace spread throughout the colony, many slaves saw this as cause to run away as quickly as possible and join the Okanisi (A: p. 185). In 1760, the peace agreement became official between both parties and was affirmed with a blood oath (*diingi sweli* or *dringi sweri*).

Both parties took a solemn oath that they would observe the agreements reached, after which they licked their fingers, which they had dipped in a liquid mixed with drops of blood from their fellow oath takers. This blood oath is pivotal in Okanese culture. Efforts to escape the plantation regime were consistently preceded by swearing a blood oath, reciting the hallowed formula: “May the gods be witness to my solemn promise that I will escape on the agreed day. Where you die, I will die as well. If I do not keep this promise, may the gods kill me.” (B: p. 57)⁴²

The text of the treaty was based on the one that the British had reached with the Leeward Maroons in Jamaica in June 1739 (A: p. 192; text pp. 192–193). The treaty was known not only to the settlers but also to Basiton, as mentioned above – one of many indications that important information circulated among slaves in the Caribbean. The treaty in fact formalized an exchange: the government would provide the Okanisi with regular supplies, if they stopped raiding the plantations. In return, the Okanisi promised not to accept new Maroons into their community and to surrender any runaways. A so-called “postholder” would settle in the area of the Okanisi to act as liaison.⁴³ The duty to surrender new Maroons continued to bother the Okanisi. In 1761 they explained that they would surrender only slaves who had done wrong: murderers, *wisiman*, and the like. They might also agree to surrender slaves who were too lazy to work.

42. Such blood oaths were common among Caribbean Maroons; “blood” prevailed over “paper”. See Kenneth Bilby, “Swearing by the Past, Swearing to the Future: Sacred Oaths, Alliances, and Treaties among the Guianese and Jamaican Maroons”, *Ethnohistory*, 44 (1997), pp. 655–689.

43. The institution of the postholder at the Tapanahoni was suspended in 1830 but was reintroduced again in 1919.

But runaways who “were the victims of cruel masters and had been chased into the woods through ‘torture’ were a different matter. They would not be surrendering them” (A: p. 209).

In 1762, when the Okanisi surrendered four slaves who had recently escaped and who were executed after returning to Paramaribo (“beaten to death, then decapitated, with their heads placed on a stake”), the Okanisi became irate:

That was not the agreement. They refused to surrender any more Lowéman [runaways] in the future, if they were to be executed in Paramaribo. The next Lowéman they surrendered was not executed but was “allowed” to return to his master. Nor were the Lowéman the Okanisi surrendered afterwards executed. Their master got them back (obviously in return for payment of all costs [to the authorities]), or the Court sold them “outside the country”. (A: p. 210)

During the decades following the peace, the Okanisi regularly surrendered runaways but appear to have done so increasingly reluctantly and only after vehement urgings from the postholder. Women were hardly ever returned (A: p. 211).

After they had convened an initial constituent meeting well before 1760, as explained above, the Okanisi organized a second large gathering attended by all Okanisi chiefs on 12 September 1763. On this occasion the exact hierarchy was established for the new era of unendangered freedom. It was agreed who would be the *granman*, who would be the clan chiefs, etc. (A: p. 217).

Peace with the settlers, however, did not put a stop to all collective violence. Over three decades after the pacification, a war broke out with the Boni (1792–1793). For most of the eighteenth century, the Okanisi had been on good terms with the neighbouring Maroon community of the Bonis or Aluku, who lived first in Suriname and then also in French Guiana across the river along the border. There were even official friendship ties and marriage relations (A: p. 235). Unlike the Okanisi, however, the Bonis had not made peace with the settlers and continued to raid plantations. In April 1790 colonial troops occupied the Boni villages. The Boni responded by settling 40 kilometres further south and building new villages. In August 1791 the Dutch resumed the war, and the Boni advanced deeper into the jungle. The Okanisi stayed out of these conflicts, thereby making enemies of the Boni.⁴⁴ “In August 1792 a few Aluku, led by Boni’s son Agosu, attacked the [Okanese] village Animbaw, exuberantly dancing on the grave

44. De Groot has suggested a possible explanation for this reluctance. The Okanisi had controlled the Maroni river, but when the Boni settled along the Maroni from 1776, because they had been driven from the coastal area, tensions arose: “Relations between these two groups progressively deteriorated: the Djukas [Okanisi] had their free passage along the river to the coast blocked; the Boni feared the threat of the Djuka from the rear and that of the white troops on the other side”; Silvia W. de Groot, “Conflictsituaties. De Marrons in Suriname (sedert de 18e eeuw). Overeenkomsten en verschillen met andere Caraïbische gebieden”, in *idem*, *Suriname*.

of the recently deceased gaanman Pamu. The Okanisi then abandoned their neutrality and turned on their allies” (A: p. 236). They destroyed at least eleven Boni villages, killed the leader of the Boni, shot at least twenty Bonis dead, and took still more hostages there.

In 1805 a new clan joined the Okanisi, consisting of black rebel soldiers, known as the Black Rangers, who lived along the Upper Commewijne. The Black Rangers were a few hundred slaves that the colonial government had purchased since the 1770s to assist the regular troops on occasion, especially in the struggle against Maroons. They had their own provision grounds and were paid only when they were dispatched on missions. In 1799 some of the Rangers rebelled, because new measures of the Governor General were expected to cause their prestige and living conditions to deteriorate. After they had pillaged several plantations and killed a few whites, they fled further inland.⁴⁵

In 1809 the Okanisi and the government signed a new peace treaty, in which the Okanisi promised that they would control the Boni and the Black Rangers (B: p. 69). The Black Rangers were given a place to settle on a site near the confluence of Tapanahoni and Lawa. The pact was sealed with the traditional blood oath (B: p. 70). “Long after their rebellion”, the descendants of the Black Rangers “had little prestige within Okanese society”, and “were summoned for all kinds of services by the clans who settled at the nether reaches of the Tapanahoni. If they did not agree immediately to render these lord services, their orchards might be chopped down and their provision grounds destroyed” (B: p. 131). A disproportionately large share of the men from this group was accused of witchcraft (*wisi*) and burned at the stake in the nineteenth century (A: p. 5).⁴⁶

Following the peace treaty of 1760 – which was revised and confirmed in 1809 and 1837 – what we might describe as the reintegration of the former slaves in the commodified economy got under way. Gradually, the Okanisi learned to use colonial consumer goods (*bakra sani*), which increasingly became indispensable to them: soap, rum, beer, clothes, rifles, and ammunition. To purchase these commodities, they needed to earn money. From around 1800, Okanese labour migrants therefore moved in fairly massive numbers to the city of Paramaribo and the plantations.⁴⁷ The postholder

Van slavernij naar onafhankelijkheid. De Geschiedenis van Suriname 1674–1974 (Amsterdam, 1975), pp. 27–36, 31.

45. *Idem*, “Rebellie der Zwarte Jagers”, *De Gids*, 133:9 (1970), pp. 291–304; *idem*, “Het Korps Zwarte Jagers in Suriname. Collaboratie en opstand”, *Oso: Tijdschrift voor Surinaamse taalkunde, letterkunde en geschiedenis*, 7 (1988), pp. 147–160, and 8 (1989), pp. 6–20.

46. In his work *Boni Maroon Wars*, p. 186, Hoogbergen quotes a French official who, invoking a Dutch officer, stated in 1821 that “the Boni and the ‘rebels of 1805’ were bullied by the Ndjuka [Okanisi]. The Ndjuka prevented any and all contact between the ‘rebels’ and the Boni.”

47. Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering argued previously in their book *The Great Father*, p. 13, that “the first clear indication of Ndjuka [Okanisi] eagerness to participate in the colonial economy dates from 1802. Ndjukas then requested the authorities in Paramaribo that they be

Kelderman, who in 1806 and 1807 negotiated about surrendering runaways in the village of Mainsi, observed that virtually all the men had left; he therefore conducted these negotiations with Ma Akuba, the oldest woman in the village (B: p. 71). "Some Maroons moved to the coastal plain to grow food to sell at the market in the city, but the majority of the Okanese migrants became loggers. The trees they cut down were tied together to form rafts to be sawed on the plantations or in Paramaribo" (B: p. 71).

The authors estimate that in the mid-nineteenth century over half of all Okanese men were active in the colonial economy (B: p. 72). The women stayed behind in the villages.

In the communities of the Okanese loggers, the spirit of solidarity was clear. This derived in significant measure from the production processes that this economic activity entailed. The loggers, who worked on the Surinamese coastal plain throughout most of the nineteenth century, were largely dependent on one another. This manifested especially when tree trunks needed to be rolled to creeks or rivers. On those days the entire community turned up to drag the tree trunks to the creeks or rivers by pushing and pulling and by using wooden rollers. Given these working arrangements, the earnings understandably had to be divided among the community of loggers and their relatives. This communal economic system was at the same time the breeding ground of hatred and envy toward successful entrepreneurs, who depended far less on the labour of their relatives and therefore obviously did not take for granted that they would have to share all their possessions with others. (B: pp. 81, 89)

One such successful entrepreneur of Okanese heritage was Atokwa, who grew food crops for the market in Paramaribo. "He was denounced as a witch, placed in shackles, and taken to the Tapanahoni, where he was subjected to the poison oracle in Puket. The Sweli priests found him guilty." He was executed. "He was later found to be innocent. His spirit became a vengeful spirit or fury (*kunu*) [...]. To this day, this kunu is feared" (B: pp. 83, 83–86).

Another ongoing problem after 1800 was the relationship between Okanisi and runaways (*Lowéman*). Sometimes the Okanisi brought runaways back to the settlers, but now they did so mainly for financial compensation. In August 1834, for example, forty-six Okanisi led by chiefs Bosu and Dyaki raided a camp, where they found seven *Lowéman*. "Five were shot dead, and two were taken prisoner" (B: p. 73). Still, the authors find all kinds of signs that the Okanisi and the new Maroons often acted together: "In 1848 the postholder Dhondt complained that the Cottica-Okanisi and the 'Un-pacified' *Lowéman* were often in cahoots with each other. They gathered timber from the woods together, which the Okanisi sold in Paramaribo. The Okanisi would use these earnings to

given permission to settle in the region where the insurgent Aluku used to live. This was in the lower Marowijne at the site of the first rapids (Armina)." Moving would make it easier for them to maintain economic ties with the coastal region.

purchase goods, which they passed on to the Lowéman” (B: p.74). But the information includes contradictions. Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering also write: “After 1800 Lowéman were called *bakabuisamo* (literally: people from the back bush), trash that lived in the outback and was unreliable. In the 1960s we still recorded such opinions” (B: p. 103).

AFTER THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY (1863–2010)

Following the example of Britain (1833) and France (1848), the Netherlands abolished slavery in 1863. As a result, tensions between the different Maroon groups (pacified and not yet pacified) diminished, and relations between the Maroons and the colonial authorities normalized as well (B: p. 79). The improved political stability soon brought about vibrant economic dynamics. In 1880 Governor C.A. van Sypesteyn wrote to the Minister of Colonies:

I am delighted to inform you that the Bush Negroes are becoming increasingly inclined, especially over the past three years, to interact with the more civilized share of the population. Not only has the amount of timber they supply on request or sell on the market grown considerably, but they also hire themselves out for gold extraction, especially along the Maroni, and work as guides and carriers; they are particularly willing to provide the gold seekers engaged in prospecting with the assistance they require. (B: p. 76)

Around 1880 in French Guiana, at the upper reaches of the Mana River, vast gold fields were discovered. Gold seekers arrived from all over the world; they soon numbered in the thousands. The *placers* (places where gold was extracted) were spread throughout a large part of the hinterlands of Suriname and French Guiana.

Specifically in the hinterlands, however, the gold diggers encountered obstacles along their path. The area is almost entirely covered by dense, virtually impenetrable South American rain forests. The gold diggers therefore had to be transported by river. River transport, however, was by no means simple. Forty to seventy kilometres from the ocean, rocks, rapids, and waterfalls begin. About every five to ten kilometres upstream, these obstacles recur. At some points the rapids transformed the course the boat had to follow into a labyrinth. Huge differences in water levels between the seasons required constant changes in the route navigated. Under these conditions, only the Maroons – and indigenous peoples, but their low numbers in those days render them negligible – were able to bring the thousands of gold diggers with their tools and supplies to the remote placers in the hinterlands. (B: pp. 87–88)

The Maroon cargo transporters along the waterways, known as *bagasimen*, soon acquired a monopoly position in both French Guiana and Suriname; they therefore managed to claim high wages and high cargo fees (B: p. 88), earning an excellent income in this way for about thirty years.

While relatively well-paid black workers in Paramaribo were paid 2 guilders a day, Okanisi cargo transporters rarely made less than 2,500 guilders a year in the period 1890–1915 and in several years earned significantly over 3,000 guilders (B: p. 89).⁴⁸ This eroded the fairly egalitarian nature of Okanese society.

On cargo boats, the entire family did not need to be mobilized, as had been the case with logging. The owner of the boat would take on board two or three sons or sister's sons, and he had a full crew. As a result, communities lost their significance; only a few family members were needed to make a lot of money transporting cargo along the waterways. These new labour relations meant that those staying behind in the villages hardly benefited from the new affluence. The Okanese cargo boat operators usually worked in the catchment area of Lawa and Inini, allowing them to return to their villages regularly, after being away for perhaps a few months. Upon their return, one may assume they found family members hoping for a share of the new material prosperity. (B: p. 91)

The authors regard this confrontation as the deeper cause of the severe religious tensions that appeared in the Okanese community around 1900. They describe at great length how the envy among the poor family members of the “nouveaux riches” coincided with a sharp revival of belief in witches (B: pp. 137–200). The events around the death of sa Koba (1889 or 1890) are very indicative. After her death, when her spirit was routinely questioned by the priests, she revealed (speaking through the bearers of the bier she was lying on) that she had been involved in witchcraft. Having become the victim of the malignancy of other witches she now wanted to take revenge, reporting that the others were still at large (B: p. 140). This instigated widespread witch tests: everybody had to crawl under the bier of sa Koba, which rested on the shoulders of two pall bearers.

Whoever was innocent could easily do so, but tribe members who had practised witchcraft or intended to do so were blocked by fierce swaying of this bier. The same held true for persons who were considered to be criminals by their fellow villagers or were viewed as miscreants or perhaps as people trying to evade village rituals. [...] Regardless of how repulsive it was, the “witchcraft survey among the population” was highly effective in many respects. People from all the villages in this river area flocked to Puketi to be screened. (B: p. 142)

This mass test, however, was not the only sign of new religious fervor. All kinds of cult objects were burned, and lower “mediums” eliminated, a new oracle emerged, and a kind of reform movement got under way, the Gaan Gadu movement, which propagated forms of worship which were different from the traditional practices.

48. A reasoned estimate appears in Chris de Beet and H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen, “Bush Negro Prophetic Movements: Religions of Despair?”, *Bijdragen tot de Land-, Taal- en Volkenkunde*, 133 (1977), pp. 100–135, 119–128.

From around 1920, however, prosperity gradually declined.⁴⁹ In 1921, when the boom had started to give the first signs of exhaustion, the cargo carriers of the Okanisi and Aluku organized a large and widely supported strike, demanding higher wages and lower prices in the shops. They did not have a strike fund. Still, they planned their struggle carefully. Expanding their provision grounds enabled them to prepare for a conflict lasting three to four months (B: p. 208). The struggle lasted over three months, making it the longest strike in Surinamese history; it ended in defeat. Postholder Willem van Lier figured prominently in undermining the strike successfully playing the Okanese leaders, *granman* Amakiti and his favourite, the high priest Kanape, against one another (B: pp. 201–215).⁵⁰

In the 1920s the gold rush ended, and the high income of the Okanese men along with it. They resumed their former activities, such as supplying timber.⁵¹ Demand for timber increased in these years, in part because a bauxite mine opened in the town of Moengo in 1920 (B: p. 272).⁵² Better opportunities for making money arose again in the 1950s, with the start of the “development” of the Surinamese hinterlands. Maroons were recruited as unskilled labour, for example to build airstrips in the hinterlands. They also settled in Paramaribo more often, first as individual men, but from the 1970s increasingly together with their entire families (B: p. 272).⁵³ Generally, therefore, the twentieth century began with great affluence, subsequently declining and then reviving, but remaining at a lower level than around 1900.

Towards the end of 1975 Suriname became independent. In the years preceding the independence, tens of thousands of inhabitants from Paramaribo and its surroundings moved to the Netherlands, often for the superior social security system. Land and housing prices declined in the

49. The historian Serge Mam-Lam-Fouck describes the period 1880–1916 as the *belle époque* of the French-Guyanese economy. See his *Histoire de la société guyanaise. Les années cruciales: 1848–1946* (Paris, 1987), pp. 85–124.

50. Thoden van Velzen previously devoted an excellent separate monograph to this labour conflict: H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen, *Een koloniaal drama. De grote staking van de Marron vrachtwaaarders, 1921* (Utrecht, 2003).

51. Around 1930, Junker observed in “Een staat in den staat”, p. 326: “The Bush Negroes living along the rivers in the middle section of Suriname, numbering 10 to 12,000, are mainly loggers.”

52. Fred Oudschans Dentz, “De bauxietnijverheid en de stichting van een nieuwe stad in Suriname”, *West-Indische Gids*, 2 (1921), pp. 481–508; Anouk de Koning, “‘Shadows of the Plantation?’ A Social History of Suriname’s Bauxite Town Moengo”, *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 85 (2011), pp. 215–246. Anouk de Koning also described the first major strike that the Moengo bauxite workers staged in 1941–1942 in “Moengo on Strike: The Politics of Labour in Suriname’s Bauxite Industry”, *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 91 (2011), pp. 31–47.

53. In the 1960s migrant labour was mainly seasonal. Most involved hauling, “either to load and unload trucks or to carry timber for the sawmills”; Humphrey E. Lamur, “De levensomstandigheden van de in Paramaribo werkende Aukaner arbeiders”, *De Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 44 (1965), pp. 119–132, 123 and 129 (quotation).



Figure 4. Maroons haul their large dugout canoes through the falls.

Photograph: Conrad Friederich Albert Bruijning. From: C.F.A. Bruijning, Suriname: geboorte van een nieuw volk (Amsterdam, 1957).

capital, and hundreds of Maroons were now able to purchase real estate. Social inequality deepened within the Maroon communities. As in the years 1885–1920, “centrifugal forces” emerged in society, which the Okanisi expressed, inter alia, through anti-witchcraft movements:

The success of the migrants [to the cities] was encouraged but at the same time gave rise to suspicion and envy. They were suspected of achieving their social advancement by making a pact with the demons. Okanese small entrepreneurs, such as shopkeepers and transport van operators were suspected of hiring demons to eliminate their competitors. These people came to be known as “Masters of the Demon” (Bakuubasi). (B: p. 316)

Women took centre stage in “demonizing” entrepreneurs; most had stayed behind in the home villages. Their formerly crucial contribution to the social economy – working the provision grounds – had lost much of its significance. As a consequence, men were nearly always held to be chiefly responsible for problems; in their pursuit of economic success, they were believed to have resorted to using the services of demons (B: p. 320). The rise and decline of the

revolutionary prophet Akalali Wootu, who, starting in 1972 until his retreat in 1979, lashed out against the self-enriching priests, is indicative of this turmoil (B: pp. 253–270).

Although some Maroons became more affluent, they hardly ever acceded to the middle and higher echelons of the public sector that was so important in Suriname. They were blocked by “class interests, family relations, ethnic prejudices, and educational requirements” (B: p. 273). In 1980 a group of non-commissioned officers led by Sergeant Desi Bouterse staged a coup. The new junta consolidated its power by murdering a group of fifteen leading intellectuals in December 1982. The new regime seemed receptive to admitting more Maroons in the public sector:

After all, dictatorial regimes not only promote social mobility for those who have become embedded in the nucleus of power but can also benefit groups assigned to the periphery of the old society before that time. Such marginal figures attribute their position to the new potentates and are thus heavily dependent on them. Some examples: Bouterse recruited his bodyguard from among the Maroons; many Maroons found jobs with the military police, the intelligence services, and people’s mobilization committees. In addition, a few hundred Maroons were inducted in the National Army. (B: pp. 273–274)

These Maroons, however, soon grew dissatisfied: they aspired to more, and they wanted a larger slice of the pie. The authors see this as the main reason for the rise of the Okanese guerrilla movement, which emerged in 1986 under the aegis of Ronnie Brunswijk, a bodyguard of Bouterse who received a dishonourable discharge. This so-called Jungle Commando soon had the “tacit support” of the local population, because the National Army, in the hunt for Brunswijk and his cohorts, terrorized Maroon villages (B: p. 279). When mutual acts of violence increased, the Bouterse regime launched a hate campaign against the Okanisi and other Maroons. Soon every Maroon in east Suriname was treated as suspect.

Persons suspected of being Maroons were removed from busses or cars by soldiers based on physical and cultural traits and forced to undress. The servicemen would search for the metal bands (*buui*) that some *obiyaman* manufactured and regarded as a source of strength [...]. Even in Paramaribo, raids were carried out and Maroon men arrested. [...] We are aware of a few cases of men who fled Paramaribo and managed to cross the lines to reach the outposts of the Jungle Commando. The Maroons joining the insurgents in many cases did so only because they feared being arrested as suspect elements based exclusively on ethnic traits. (B: p. 283)

As a result, the Jungle Commando expanded rapidly. In late 1986 it reached its maximum size of over 1,000 fighters. The extremely violent repression by the National Army, in which entire villages were destroyed, with infants and pregnant women being slaughtered as well in at least one case, led the Maroons to flee en masse. About 9,000 Okanisi sought refuge in French Guiana, while thousands of others fled to Paramaribo. Overall, in

the words of the authors, there was an “ethnic purge of East Suriname” (B: p. 288). During the conflict Maroons who had embraced Christianity began to revert to their old religious roots. “In early 1987 the leadership of the Jungle Commando formed a special division that was responsible for contacts with the centres for medical-religious assistance, the oracles of the Mediator gods (Sweli Gadu, Tata Ogi, and Agedeonsu) and with independently operating *obiya*man” (B: p. 308).⁵⁴ But the gods did not help. By 1988–1989 only a few dozen fighters remained; in 1992 the conflict ceased.

While secularization has advanced in urban settings, the influence of the gods and spirits continues to thrive in part of the Surinamese hinterlands.

Around 2000, when resistance to the Brazilian gold seekers grew, this movement was controlled by the priests of Agedeonsu. All those who were not Okanisi were chased from the Selakiiki. This creek is the centre of artisanal gold extraction in the catchment area of the Tapanahoni, a few hours upstream from Godoolo. The rafts used to examine the bed of the Tapanahoni for gold remnants were removed at the orders of Agedeonsu as well. This injunction affected not only Brazilians but also the Okanisi themselves. The god seeks not only to reserve the catchment area of the Tapanahoni for the Okanisi. He also condemns erosion of the natural surroundings. As we would say nowadays, this is a “green god”. The Okanese gold seekers were thus forbidden to ride around with their quads, because this was clearly tearing open the top layer. Agedeonsu stated on various occasions that his sphere of involvement was limited to the catchment area of the Tapanahoni. The Lawa and the Maroni were already beyond any hope of rescue, according to this god. (A: pp. 145–146)

The flight of several thousands of Okanisi during what was known as the Domestic War of 1986–1992 brought a “definitive end to the traditional Okanese culture and society. Afterwards, one could say, things went steadily downhill” (B: p. 323).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Thoden van Velzen, Hoogbergen, and Van Wetering have written two impressive books about the Okanisi. However, these works offer neither a true synthesis nor a comprehensive history of this society. The focus is heavily placed on religious aspects. The second book is even explicitly “dedicated largely to worship of the mediator gods” (B: p. 36).⁵⁵ I do not mean to suggest

54. This subject matter is addressed in somewhat greater depth in H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen, “De rol van de goden bij de Binnenlandse Oorlog”, *OSO. Tijdschrift voor Surinamistiek*, 25 (2006), pp. 114–130. *Obiya* is the term used to denote all forces in the world that make life possible, as well as all means for gaining control of those forces (B: p. 338).

55. This work overlaps in part with two previous publications: Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering, *Great Father*, and *idem*, *In the Shadow of the Oracle: Religion as Politics in a Suriname Maroon Society* (Long Grove, IL, 2004).

that the authors are culturalists. Thoden van Velzen and Van Wetering write that in the course of their research, they became convinced “that major spiritual transitions were often associated with changes in production relations in the Guyanese coastal area” (B: p. 13). And they also note:

Their representations of Evil (witches, evil spirits, demons) offer good insight into the nature of the tensions existing below the surface. These notions together form a “language of emotional life”, disclosing the contours of the social tensions. [...] The tensions arise from political and economic processes originating from broader, often global “world systems”. Although these processes have a “modern” façade, the emotional vernacular is often written in archaic terms. (B: p. 312)⁵⁶

The authors, however, are interested primarily in the world of the gods, spirits, and rituals and consider the material world from that perspective. They do not actually step “outside” religion to situate it in society as a whole; they consider the context only insofar as directly relevant to understanding religion. Perhaps that is also why several important aspects receive insufficient consideration.

The first question we might ask is why was (and, to some extent, why is) religion so important to the Okanisi – as well as to the other Maroon communities in Suriname? Why is the fear of evil spirits and witches so omnipresent? A plausible explanation was provided nearly a century ago by the colonial official L. Junker:

Understanding this anxiety requires considering the history of suffering of the Bush Negroes or of negroes in general. Hunted and captured like wild animals in their country of origin, placed in shackles on their journey to the coast and later on the slave ships, subjected to the most bestial abuse, and finally pulled apart from each other in their imposed homeland, seeing the holiest bonds broken by cruel masters and at the mercy of basest passions for black flesh of the owners, the memories of their previous lives were not quickly erased. Only after the runaway slaves enjoyed relative tranquillity in the jungles of Suriname could ideas about religion come to fruition. The constant experience of evil left its mark on the emerging observations deriving from a defence against evil that was arising and continues to surface everywhere.⁵⁷

56. Conscious attempts at materialist historiography can be found in Wilhelmina van Wetering and H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen, “Affluence, Deprivation and the Flowering of Bush Negro Religious Movements”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 139 (1983), pp. 99–139, and in Thoden van Velzen’s essay “The Gaan Tata Movement. A Materialist Explanation”, in Richard P. Werbner (ed.), *Regional Cults* (London, 1977), pp. 93–118.

57. Junker, “Eenige mededeelingen”, pp. 454–455. Another question is, of course, why, despite this common background of the Surinamese Maroons, significant differences nonetheless arose between individual communities, for example the Okanisi, Matawai, and Saramaka. As Castoriadis has rightly noted: “At a distance of only a few kilometres, in the same jungle, with the same weapons and instruments, two primitive tribes develop social structures and cultures as dissimilar as possible. Is it God who wanted it thus, is it the singular ‘soul’ of the tribe that is behind this? Not at all. A study of the *total history* of each one, of its relations with the others, etc.

Second, several more structural elements of Okanese society receive insufficient consideration. Material culture, for example, is hardly addressed,⁵⁸ and the gendered socialization of children is a similar omission,⁵⁹ as is the gendered division of labour, which others argue was exceptionally rigid. Lou Lichtveld, for example, a prominent Surinamese intellectual, has written:

[...] no man would ever consider working the land, after he has made it ready for planting. The division of labour is rigidly enforced. Planting, weeding, and harvesting the provision grounds, which are often a long way from the villages, is women's work, as is cooking or keeping the village clean. Hunting, fishing, making boats, woodcarvings, and chopping trees for poles and planks or to clear land to build on it, [and] building the hut, is men's work.⁶⁰

Social differences *within* individual villages and clans are mentioned but not actually analysed. Thoden van Velzen and Hoogbergen, for example, note “a deplorable inequality within the Maroon communities; while many Lowéman remained single throughout their lives, the leaders often had multiple wives” (A: p. 241). We read nothing about the tensions that this must have caused; nor do we find any mention of the indignation at the end of the twentieth century regarding the “prevailing gerontocracy” (B: p. 329).

Progressive integration in the commodified economy figures as a source of social-religious tensions, but their deeper impact is not addressed. Neumann has noted that money became immensely more important to the Maroons, especially after cargo transport gained importance. He quotes a missionary from the Moravian Church, who wrote in 1894:

Sadly, money and making money dominates all their senses and thoughts, making it difficult to interest them in other things. This becomes perfectly clear, when one remains in their company for an extended period, for example in a boat on a journey. The topic they invoke to entertain each other is ordinarily money, and they tell each other what they have purchased with their earnings, and how much

would permit an understanding of how the various evolutions took place (although it would not enable us to understand ‘everything’, and even less to isolate a ‘cause’ of this evolution); Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, 1987), p. 23.

58. The thorough examination of the literature by Peter Neumann in *Wirtschaft und materielle Kultur der Buschneger Surinames. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung afroamerikanischer Probleme* (Berlin, 1967), who considers this extensively, does not appear in the bibliography of either of the books. However, in earlier publications Thoden van Velzen mentioned this work.

59. On this subject, however, see Van Lier, *Iets over de Boschnegers*, pp. 85–102, who writes about the skills that youths need to learn: building houses, making dugout canoes, wrestling, poling boats, trees, and dancing. Girls do not figure in his account.

60. Lou Lichtveld, “Van bosnegers en indianen”, in J. van de Walle and H. de Wit (eds), *Suriname in stroomlijnen* (Amsterdam [etc.], 1958), pp. 59–75, 65. Melville and Frances Herskovits in *Rebel Destiny*, pp. 207–227, have seriously examined the activities of women.

the different items cost in Albina, in Saint Laurent, and in Paramaribo. All Djukas [Okanisi] staying in Albina are therefore inherently materialistic. They do not do anything for nothing.⁶¹

How did this focus on money affect everyday culture? That remains unclear.

Another aspect the authors overlook is that over time social stratification appears to have formed within Okanese society. The postholder Willem van Lier – who was the most knowledgeable about the Okanisi in his day – believed immediately after World War I that a contrast existed between “patrician” and “plebian” *lo*. The “patrician” *lo* (such as the Otoo and the Misidyan) lived at the nether reaches (*bi**lo*) of the Tapanahoni, the “plebian” *lo* (who included the Black Rangers, also known as Company Negroes) lived upstream (*opo*).⁶² This is probably an exaggeration, but the existence of different statuses is implicitly confirmed by the observation of Thoden van Velzen and Hoogbergen that, certainly after 1761, the *granman* always descended from the Otoo-*lo*, with the Misidyan’s support (A: p. 43).

Unchallenged as well is the fact that the Black Rangers until far into the twentieth century were looked down on by other *lo*; they had to take care not to put on airs, as the members of the “higher” *lo* would reproach them

[...] that when their *granmama ben kon soekoe kibripe* [when their ancestors were looking for a place to hide in the jungle], they were seen as slaves by the Aucaners [Okanisi]. Legend has it that the Company Negroes were allowed to join the Aucaners on the condition that they perform slave labour. They obtained their freedom in exchange for paying the *granman* [...] several iron pots and pans and tools, which they had brought with them, when they escaped. To hurt a Company Negro deeply, one would tell him: *no wan iesrie potoe joe pai foe finde fri* [you have paid an iron pot to become a free man].⁶³

Third, relations with other Maroon communities and with the plantation slaves and, later on, with the free blacks in Paramaribo are hardly discussed. We know that Okanisi and Saramaka were not always on good terms. A century ago the Saramaka regarded the Okanisi as haughty, while the Okanisi found the Saramaka to be thieving sloths and womanizers.⁶⁴ In the 1960s those who lived in cities told many jokes about the stupidity of the Okanisi and found their traditional dress similarly repulsive: “[T]hey are all but naked.”⁶⁵ Conversely, the Bush Negroes decried the city negroes as *bakraningré*, white negroes.⁶⁶ In some cases the colonial authorities

61. Neumann, *Wirtschaft und materielle Kultur der Buschneger*, pp. 106–107.

62. Van Lier, *Iets over de Boschnegers*, p. 88.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Junker, “Eenige mededeelingen”, p. 450.

65. Lamur, “De levensomstandigheden”, p. 127.

66. Van Lier, *Iets over de Boschnegers*, p. 30, note.

deliberately encouraged such stereotypes. Even in 1835, an official instruction was to “use all means to perpetuate distinctions between them [the Maroons] without making it appear that the Government has any interest in this”.⁶⁷ An analysis of these interrelations might be conducive to understanding broader developments in Surinamese society. And perhaps such an analysis might help explain why in Suriname, both under slavery and afterwards, social resistance was consistently fragmented.⁶⁸

Notwithstanding these remarks, Thoden van Velzen, Hoogbergen, and Van Wetering have written two works of great scholarly and political merit. Precisely because their project is so ambitious and comprehensive, it raises many new questions.

67. De Groot, “Conflictsituaties”, pp. 32–33.

68. *Idem*, *Djuka Society and Social Change*, p. 5: “The slaves of Surinam never united to carry out a large-scale rising, as happened elsewhere in the Caribbean (Berbice, Haiti, etc.).” See also Müller, “Ten Years of Guerilla-Warfare”, p. 90: “Nearly all the rebellions took place in one plantation at a time. The slaves of six timber-plantations revolted simultaneously only in Tempatie. A general, co-ordinated rebellion never took place.”