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Aviva Ben-Ur, *Jewish Autonomy in a Slave Society: Suriname in the Atlantic World, 1651-1825*. The Early Modern Americas (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), ISBN 9780812252118; 358 pp., £45.00 (hardcover).

When a gifted and learned scholar like Aviva Ben-Ur (author of, e.g., *Remnant Stones: The Jewish Cemeteries and Synagogues of Suriname: Essays & Epitaphs*, 2009-2012) writes a volume on the political and social history of the Jews of Suriname, one is wise to pay heed. And I must admit, Ben-Ur does not disappoint. While the history of the Jews of Suriname is one that has attracted the attention of many professional and amateur historians before (e.g., Jonathan Schorsch, Wieke Vink, Ben Ipenburg), Ben-Ur succeeds in “debunking” some of the persistent myths about the Surinamese Jews.

In each of the seven chapters another of these myths is put under scrutiny. In the first chapter — on Jodensavanne, the Jewish settlement in the inlands of Suriname — she shows that views of Jodensavanne as New Jerusalem or proto-Zionist community are of a later, 19th century, date and cannot be traced to the original founders of the village. In her second chapter Ben-Ur focuses on the myth that the Jews in Suriname could dwell on exceptional liberties. Although this is true in a way, Ben-Ur admits, an emphasis on these liberties ignores the fact that these liberties were contested almost constantly. In the next chapter, Ben-Ur shows how Suriname’s Jews were the true settlers of Suriname: while white Christians returned to their fatherlands after making or losing their fortune, the Jewish (Portuguese) community was proud of its rootedness and longevity. In chapters four and five Ben-Ur attacks scholarship that downplays the number and impact of Eurafrican Jews. In what I deem the most interesting part of her book, she proves how many Eurafrican Jews lived in Suriname (“the majority of [Jewish, MS] community members by the early 1800s,” 163) and how they were treated with respect by the “white” Jews. This might be one of the instances in which the Jewish communities truly upheld other values and customs than the other white colonists, and I assume Ben-Ur’s position will surely give lead to scholarly debate. Chapter six, then, is devoted to the Jewish feast of Purim, that evolved into a creolized “carnaval” accessible for everyone in Suriname (an “ecumenical festivity,” 217). While most scholars, according to Ben-Ur, paint the Jewish encounter with

both Christian and African religions through a cultural-resistance paradigm, the case of Purim shows the truth of a “cultures in contact” approach in which “every participant seemed to be an invited guest” (220). Finally, in her seventh chapter, Ben-Ur discusses the abolition of autonomy of the Jewish community. She argues that, while the heads of the Jewish communities lamented the loss of privileges, for the laypersons few things changed.

Taken together, the chapters picture a remarkable Jewish community—a community that was small and always contested, but at the same time one that managed to leave such a great imprint on the country (and its mixed population) that it became deeply connected with it. With her great linguistic skills and the comparisons Ben-Ur is able to make with other colonial societies, she sets the bar high for future scholarship.

There is only one critical remark I would like to make, and that is that she sometimes exaggerates the vitality of the myths she tries to disprove. To give one example: that Jodensavanne is seen in secondary literature as a proto-Zionist settlement, might be true for some of the older literature, but has been disproven convincingly for some time, also by earlier publications of Ben-Ur herself. Moreover, in modern literature I have never seen the claim that Jodensavanne would be a “bustling commercial centre” (255), although it had its (symbolic) importance as a religious and legal centre.

Apart from this note, Ben-Ur has written an exemplary study of the Surinamese Jews. For those who are looking for a fresh and broad account of the history of the Jewish community of Suriname, I surely commend this well-written work.

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