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Alan Fredric Benjamin. *Jews of the Dutch Caribbean: Exploring Ethnic Identity on CuraÖÂ§ao.* London and New York: Routledge, 2002. xii + 200 pp. $75.96 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-27439-5.

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Fieldwork's Prickly Paths

Jews in the Dutch Caribbean is a welcome study, particularly given scholarly neglect of the Dutch Caribbean, whose territories are among the smallest geographically, while also the most ethnically diverse and complex in the region. The subtitle, *Exploring Ethnic Identity on CuraÃ§ao*, more accurately conveys the book's ethnographic focus on the island's contemporary Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities. CuraÃ§ao's Jewish community was established in the 1650s by Sephardim (the Hebrew-derived term for Jews of Portuguese and Spanish origin), peaked at just over one thousand members in the eighteenth century, and comprised one-third of the white population. The island's Jewish community, diversified in the 1930s by the first significant influx of Ashkenazi immigrants from Europe, shares the distinction, along with Suriname, as the longest-lived and historically largest Jewish community in the Caribbean. Sephardim once dominated as merchants and shipping magnates and left a formative linguistic imprint on the local creole, Papiamentu.[1] The contemporary Jewish community, drastically reduced to some two hundred individuals, through emigration, is deeply cognizant of the prominent role of its forebears in the island's economic and social life.

Alan Fredric Benjamin, informed by an appreciation of ethnicity as "fluid and context-dependent rather than fixed," describes religious and secular ritual practices, while considering the place of Jews in island society. The book's value lies partly in rendering contemporary CuraÃ§aoan society accessible to an Anglophone audience whose knowledge of the Dutch Caribbean is limited by linguistic barriers. Moreover, Benjamin's training as an anthropologist yields fresh data on a community whose main attraction for Jewish Studies scholars has been historical, a trend inaugurated by Isaac Samuel Emmanuel with the publication in 1957 of his *Precious Stones of the Jews of CuraÃ§ao.*[2] In applying methodologies from the social sciences, Benjamin has created a discipline-specific marker for future researchers of the island's contemporary Jews.

Much of this book is a reworking of secondary sources, useful only to readers with little prior knowledge, and this reviewer wishes the author had not waited until chapter 6 to fully introduce his original findings. His main argument, that ethnic identities "do not depend

on genetic inheritance, and do not remain the same for every individual in every context or throughout a lifetime" (p. 153), is a bit axiomatic and was demonstrated by U.S. sociologists decades ago.

The book is remarkable for what it does not explore at length, most notably the question of race (as opposed to ethnicity), particularly in light of Benjamin's promise to contribute to the "who is a Jew" question. Indeed, race is never defined anywhere, though the author employs the word several times in passing. Another surprising (and related) omission is an extensive consideration of African-Jewish relations, particularly given the elite status of whites, the island's majority African-descendant population, and the large number of Afro-CuraÃ§aoans bearing Jewish surnames and/or cognizant of their Jewish ancestry. The introduction (chapter 1), an overview drawing on anthropological and sociological literature, might have been more relevant had it more extensively explored Caribbean ethnicities.

But the book's broader significance lies elsewhere. The process of Benjamin's research is what is fascinating and highly relevant to both social science and historiography. The ethical and practical conundrums with which the author grapples not only raise critical questions for future projects, but also cast new light on the challenges CuraÃ§ao's historians faced in the past. The highlight of the book is chapter 2, a sensational contribution where Benjamin describes the communal censorship that stymied his fieldwork and publications during the last decade of the twentieth century. Here we see not only the practical frustrations, but also the personal toll of venturing out on difficult investigative terrain. Benjamin recounts sleepless nights, bitter conflicts, months lost in contract negotiations (the Sephardi congregation required him to sign a legal document that nearly resulted in refusal to publish his findings), writing hampered by censorship and self-censorship, delayed publication, and perhaps (as Benjamin speculates) difficulty in obtaining an academic position, all the result of the community's resistance to his research. Benjamin places his own experience in historical context, alluding to the obstacles with which Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne Amzalak Emmanuel contended nearly half a century before him. As a result, the publication of their co-authored book was delayed by over a decade. Benjamin also places in historical context the Sephardi congregation's defensive guard over its archives. The motivation for this extreme protectiveness, which Benjamin insightfully links back to the seventeenth century, remains public reputation. The contract he was obligated to sign with the congregation, with its expressed concern that the island's Jews "are especially vulnerable to public opinion," is eerily reminiscent of a seventeenth-century communal ordinance fretting that the "improper conduct" of one member may cause the entire congregation to "suffer prejudice" (pp. 28, 169).[3]

Thus, what Benjamin attempted to discover and did not find, as well as what he discovered but could not publish, is as interesting as what explicitly appears in the book. Benjamin found both his white Sephardi and Afro-CuraÃ§aoan informants genealogically aware of their mingled ancestry, but often reluctant to identify specific individuals produced in these largely extra-legal relationships (p.115). This is highly significant because most information on intimate African-Jewish relations in the Caribbean is not recorded, but lies embedded in oral traditions and family trees. This is particularly true of CuraÃ§ao, where a dearth of evidence suggests that blacks and Eurafricans were seldom converted to Judaism. Yet, the Sephardic surnames of many Afro-CuraÃ§aoans belie the portrayal, by historians such as Isaac S. Emmanuel, of the Sephardi community as "racially" endogamous. As such, Benjamin's testimony offers a tentative roadmap to future researchers hoping to delve into this critical issue via oral history.

Another point Benjamin alludes to only in passing is the daunting research barriers, particularly linguistic. The author, who does not read Dutch (as attested by his bibliography), enrolled in Papiamentu classes and refers to himself as a student of Papiamentu as a second language (p. 83). Most of Benjamin's informants spoke English, and his linguistic handicaps did not seem to interfere with his informants' candidness (he describes his interactions as "more genuine than polite," p. 31). Still, Benjamin's research raises important questions about the use of language in ethnographic research. What, specifically, might be lost to an ethnographer not conversant in the island's creole, in which Jews have communicated since at least the eighteenth century?

As a North American Jew, Benjamin was both an insider and an outsider (like the Emmanuels, Thessaloniki Sephardim, before him). Writers positioned partly or wholly outside the Sephardic community have apparently enjoyed a greater degree of scholarly freedom. Among these is CuraÃ§aoan-born Frances Karner, daughter of a Sephardic mother and non-Jewish Dutch father (p. 101). As a student of anthropology at Columbia University, Karner was apparently not constrained by the island's Sephardic censorship. She affirms in her

1969 study that in her interviews she was "able to speak freely" and "obtained a wealth of interesting and frank replies."[4] Her status as a protÃ©gÃ© of Harry Hoetink probably facilitated her work. The late Hoetink, a Dutch-born professor of Ethnic Relations in Afro-America at the University of Utrecht, served on the island for seven years as a high school teacher, of history and geography, and was revered by members of CuraÃ§ao's Sephardic community.[5] In spite of the wealth of candid responses, Karner records almost nothing about concubinage, either because this question did not interest her or, more likely, because her interviewees were not forthcoming.[6]

The misleading main title of Benjamin's book (which masks its narrow geographical focus on CuraÃ§ao, clarified in the subtitle) in some ways mirrors the content, for Benjamin's promised scope is restricted by current realities that have hindered meaningful research. But what many readers have missed or are apt to disregard is the book's acute relevance to both social scientists and historians. Chapter 2, devoted to research ethics, is interesting to both sociologists and anthropologists, and also relevant to historians whose access to archives is still impeded by a minefield of communal suspicion.[7] Most of all, *Jews in the Dutch Caribbean* represents a type of anthropological research that few are brave enough to undertake. Benjamin's study demonstrates the limits of research possibilities in an environment where free investigation is stymied, or even vitiated.

Notes

[1]. Linda Marguerite Rupert, *Roots of Our Future: A Commercial History of CuraÃ§ao* (CuraÃ§ao, Netherlands Antilles: CuraÃ§ao Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1999); and "Trading Globally, Speaking Locally," *Jewish Culture and History* 7, no. 1/2 (2004): pp. 109-122.

[2]. Isaac S. Emmanuel, *Precious Stones of the Jews of CuraÃ§ao* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1957); and Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, *A History of the Jews in the Netherlands Antilles*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1970).

[3]. For the contract from the seventeenth century see Emmanuel and Emmanuel, *Jews in the Netherlands Antilles*, vol. 2, pp. 544-545.

[4]. Frances Karner, *The Sephardics of CuraÃ§ao: A Study of Socio-Cultural Patterns in Flux* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1969), p. 1.

[5]. Hoetink wrote the foreword to her book. On Hoetink see Ellen Klinkers and Wim Klooster, "Interview with Harmannus Hoetink," *Itinerario* 19, no. 1 (1995): pp. 10-17. Members of CuraÃ§ao's Sephardim spoke of their reverence in informal conversations during my visit there in May 2004.

[6]. Karner's sample questionnaire did not include references to illegitimate children and her references to Afro-Jewish sexual relations are limited to a single page where she relies on an often highly speculative study by her mentor Hoetink. One scholar who does attempt to investigate this matter historically is Eva Abraham-Van der Mark. She was able to elicit candid responses from both European-origin Jews and Afro-CuraÃ§aoans about extra-marital relations between the groups. For Karner's work see Karner, *The Sephardics of CuraÃ§ao*, pp. 24, 78-81. On Hoetink and Abraham-Van der Mark see Harry Hoetink, *Het Patroon van de Oude CuraÃ§aose Samenleving: Een Sociologische Studie* (Aruba, Netherlands Antilles: D. J. de Wit, 1958), p. 120; and Eva Abraham-Van der Mark, "Marriage and Concubinage among the Sephardic Merchant Elite of CuraÃ§ao," in *Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective*, ed. Janet Henshall Momsen (London: James Currey, 1993), pp. 38-49.

[7]. See also Alan F. Benjamin, "Contract and Covenant in Curacao: Reciprocal Relationships in Scholarly Research," in *Beyond Regulations: Ethics in Human Subjects Research*, ed. Nancy M. P. King, Gail E. Henderson, and Jane Stein (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 49-66.