



# CREOLE JEWS

Negotiating Community  
in Colonial Suriname

Wieke Vink



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# CREOLE JEWS

## Negotiating Community in Colonial Suriname

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Gemeenschapsvorming in koloniaal Suriname

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*TO DANIEL AND MANU*



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## LIST OF FOREIGN TERMINOLOGY

Abelim	mourners
Adjunctos	council of Jewish regents and ex-regents
Akoma	West-African heart symbol that symbolized patience and tolerance
Ascaba	soul-prayer
Askamoth	community regulations
Bet Din	religious court
Beth Haim	Jewish communal cemetery
Chupa	Jewish wedding
Congreganten	members of the Surinamese-Jewish community with limited rights
Finta	community taxes
Gabay	treasurer and member of the Mahamad
Goi	abusive for a non-Jewish person, often used for Christians
Halakha	orthodox Jewish law
Hazan	cantor. In Suriname, with no rabbi present, the Hazan often functioned as the religious leader of the community
Hebra Gesed	burial society
Herem	excommunication
Junta	current and old regents (also Adjunctos)
Mahamad	Jewish church and community council, also referred to as regents
Mikwa	ritual bath
Minhag	local religious traditions
Minjan	a quorum of ten adult men, required to perform certain rituals during a synagogue service, like unfolding the Torah scrolls.
Mohel	person who performs ritual circumcision
Kashrut	food laws
Levaja	funeral procession
Parnasim	synagogue board of three men, often used as a synonym for Mahamad
Sankofa	West African heart shaped symbol that symbolizes the importance of learning from the past,
Sedaka	poor-relieve system
Sjamas	sexton
Tahara	ritual cleansing of a deceased person prior to its burial
Tachrichim	white burial shrouds
Yachidim	full members of the Surinamese-Jewish community
Yeshiva	educational institution for the study of Jewish texts (primarily Talmud)





## INTRODUCTION: JEWISHNESS, CREOLIZATION AND THE COLONIAL DOMAIN

### 1 MEMORIES OF BYGONE DAYS

I was born in 1936. My mother came from an orthodox family; she was Portuguese. As a little boy, her father still lived at Jodensavanne.<sup>1</sup> He visited the city [Paramaribo] only during the [Jewish] holidays. At home, we lived quite kosher and made our own salted beef. My brothers had to attend the synagogue services during Sabbath. My mother was very strict about this. And when there was no *minjan*<sup>2</sup>, poor Jews were paid for their presence.

In the synagogue, we had to wear a felt hat. I hated it. Not so much in the synagogue, where everybody wore a hat, but on the street. We looked like a troupe of Amish! When I walked behind my mother, I always secretly tried to take off my hat. But my mother; that woman had eyes in the back of her head. 'Put on your hat', she said without even looking backwards.

...

<sup>1</sup> Jodensavanne is the old and deserted Portuguese-Jewish plantation settlement in the interior of Suriname. It was the centre of the Portuguese-Jewish community until the late eighteenth century, after which it deteriorated. Throughout the nineteenth century, only a few impoverished families remained in Jodensavanne.

<sup>2</sup> *Minjan*: a quorum of ten adult men, required to perform certain rituals during a synagogue service, like unfolding the Torah scrolls.

That hat is perhaps the worst memory of my youth [laughing]. We wore felt hats and dresses with long sleeves, and stockings.

This was in the 1960s. In those years, there was still a vibrant community. On the day before the Day of Atonement,<sup>3</sup> we sat in the synagogue at four o'clock in the morning. It was so beautiful, all dark outside, with the candles burning. You could smell the scent of the morning, especially when it was raining. Then you really felt: I am a Jew. [...]

We had a foster sister and brother in our house. The foster sister was Lutheran; the foster brother was with the EBG.<sup>4</sup> But they knew the *Hagadah*<sup>5</sup> front to back. We wished them a Happy Christmas, but what they enjoyed was an orthodox Jewish upbringing. [...] There was also Zionism. As a child, I found that very threatening. I was afraid that as Zionists we would have to leave Suriname. I did not want to go to Israel; I wanted to stay in Suriname.

Then people started to move away. Younger people left for Holland for their education, for a job and a future. Older people moved away to earn their pension, to collect their AOW<sup>6</sup> as we said. In 1970, I left Suriname. In Holland, the Jewish feeling disappeared. I had married a non-Jewish man. The orthodox community in Holland did not accept him; they did not welcome him. I never really felt at home in Holland. Especially Christmas time was an annual disaster. Everybody asked, 'Why don't you have a tree?' Oh, it is very cosy indeed, a candlestick in the windowsill, but I do not want it. Christmas in Suriname is much more pleasant. Here in Suriname I do not have to justify myself. In Holland, I did not feel accepted. People kept asking 'why don't you go back?' That hurts.

When I returned to Suriname, the Jewish feeling returned. It is also the nostalgia. Musing on the ancestors, who once sat on those same wooden benches in that beautiful synagogue. Daydreaming where grandpa may have sat, being part of that rich and beautiful history. Especially the Heerenstraat<sup>7</sup> is full of memories of youth and bygone days. [...]

I feel Surinamese. I am Surinamese. It was my schoolteacher, uncle Wim, who awakened this feeling. That man sowed a seed in my heart. During

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<sup>3</sup> Yom Kippur, one of the main Jewish holidays.

<sup>4</sup> EBG, *Evangelische Broeder Gemeente*, also referred to as the Moravian Brethren or Herrnhutters.

<sup>5</sup> This is the book used at the Jewish Passover Seder meal to recount the story of the first Passover and the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt in the time of Moses.

<sup>6</sup> AOW, *Algemene Ouderdoms Wet*, Dutch state pension.

<sup>7</sup> The Heerenstraat was one of the old colonial streets of Paramaribo where the Portuguese synagogue was located and many Jews lived.

school hours, we, the whole class, had to march through the street and around the block. And we yelled: 'We want self-government. We want self-government.' I am a Surinamese and a Jew. I don't want to be a Jew in Jerusalem. I want to be a Jew in Suriname.

At home, I try to have a kosher household. Well, we do not eat meat with butter. That much of Judaism I want to hold on to: watching my food. So we buy *Halal* meat<sup>8</sup>. I make it kosher by soaking it in salted water. It is difficult, to live kosher in Suriname. [...]

Today the community is small and pitiful. But it is still alive. During the holidays, when everybody is incited to attend, about 40 people visit the synagogue. The total membership is 150. When I came back to Suriname, I was shocked. The community had become liberal. Men and women were all sitting together. You have to accept it. You cannot come from outside, and then want to change everything. If you want to be orthodox, you should go to Israel. [...] Let us hope that also in the future there will be persons who will put some effort in preserving the community; to cherish the memory of the community. I like to cherish that hope. There is no choice. The circumstances determine the possibilities, what may be or not. [silence] I sometimes feel like impoverished nobility. The only thing that remains is my coat of arms.<sup>9</sup>

The memories of this elderly woman describe a feeling of loss that is shared by many older Surinamese Jews. The Jewish community she remembers from her childhood, although small at the time, no longer exists. The Old Portuguese synagogue in the Heerenstraat that anchors her memories of youth to a tangible legacy, symbolizes a vanishing community. Deprived of the religious role it once had, the synagogue now accommodates an internet café and a computer store, while its inventory has been transported to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Most visitors who check their e-mail or chat with their friends on one of the computers will not be aware of the historical narrative embodied by this building.

Besides a notion of loss and bygone days, the memories of this woman also form a personal account of a localized sense of Jewishness. 'Feeling Jewish' is connected with the local Surinamese environment: the memories of synagogue visits with their strict dress code during her childhood, the hint of colonial nostalgia, the scent of a tropical early morning rain, and perhaps even the impossibility of living an orthodox-Jewish life in a place where buying *Halal* meat has become the practical standard of a kosher Jewish household.

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<sup>8</sup> Meat slaughtered according to Islamic dietary laws.

<sup>9</sup> Interview recorded in Paramaribo, 19-6-2006.

The reminiscences of this Surinamese Jewish woman reflect the life cycle of the Surinamese-Jewish community, which, after 350 years, seems to be on the verge of ending.<sup>10</sup> Jews had settled in Suriname since the mid seventeenth century onwards as part of a colonial undertaking. They were among the first settlers in the colony, and have been – together with the Afro-Surinamese population – the most constant factor in the multi-ethnic society of Suriname ever since. The history of a Jewish community in Suriname is a history of a community of colonizers and colonial migrants that became increasingly interwoven with the local environment of Suriname over the course of history. The changing circumstances in Suriname (demographics, economics, social, political and cultural) demanded continuous adjustment to new circumstances. The Jews were an intrinsic factor in the creation of this environment rather than a passive, reactive one that only responded to the changing world outside.

Social and cultural interaction between Surinamese Jews and other groups in Suriname took place from the very beginning. Jewish children grew up with slave children and the *Anansitori*<sup>11</sup> of their black *Nenes* (nannies), and illegitimate children of Jewish males and Afro-Surinamese women were given Jewish names and Jewish upbringings. In Suriname several diasporas have come together, resulting in complex cultural encounters.<sup>12</sup> This aspect of Surinamese history offers the possibility of analyzing processes of creolization against the background of diaspora identifications.

In the Jewish cemeteries of Paramaribo one can find the silent testimonies of this social and cultural interaction: traditional Jewish tombstones – some sculpted in Hebrew, others richly adorned with Jewish symbolism – alternate with creole grave markers. The heritage of Jewish settlement in Suriname remains visible in various other ways as well. Family names that once indicated Jewish origins are now considered ‘typically’ Afro-Surinamese family names, many streets have been named after prominent Jews or carry names that remind us of the many Jewish settlers that

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<sup>10</sup> Today, the Jewish community has about 150 members. The fading interest in religious activities, the migration of many Surinamese Jews to Holland, the United States and Israel in the 1950s, and the growing number of mixed marriages with Hindus and Christians, all have resulted in the disappearance of the Surinamese Jews as a separate, identifiable group in Suriname. To join forces, and in an attempt to preserve the Surinamese-Jewish community, the High German and Portuguese congregations have merged into the Israelite Congregation of Suriname (ISG, Israelitische Gemeente Suriname). In 2004, the ISG turned Liberal and gave up its Orthodox signature after nearly a century of recurring discussion. Despite these initiatives to breathe new life into the Surinamese-Jewish community, only a few believe a sustained existence of this community is viable.

<sup>11</sup> *Anansitori* is Sranan for spider story (*anansi* ‘spider’; *tori* ‘story’). *Anansitori* originated in the oral tradition of the enslaved Africans, and can be found in other slave-societies as well. The spider Anansi derives its name from the West African son god Ananse who took the shape of a spider. During the era of slavery, Anansi came to personify an imagined resistance against the condition of slavery. Anansi was the sly and trickster spider who outwitted the dominant figures that crossed its path. See, Van Kempen 2003:146-151.

<sup>12</sup> Such as the Indian (Hindustani), Chinese, Javanese and Libanese diaspora. For this study, the interaction between the Jewish and African diaspora is of primary importance.

used to live there in the past (such as Jodenbreestraat), some Saramaccan-Maroon clan names refer to the Jewish owners of the plantations from which their ancestors escaped more than three centuries before; there are creole dishes that bear the stamp of Jewish dietary laws, and, of course, the old settlement of Jodensavanne with its burial grounds and ruined synagogue, and the synagogues in the Keizerstraat and the Heerenstraat.

Many analyses of Caribbean societies emphasize the confrontation between African and European cultures. Few scholars would deny the heterogeneity and diversity of the African cultures that assembled in the Caribbean. Far less attention has been given, though, to the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of the European migrants. Such a view of the colonial encounter in the Caribbean might overlook the process by which European communities were forced together into a common cause in the New World.<sup>13</sup> The history of the Surinamese Jews adds extra depth to the analyses of socio-cultural interaction and cultural change in Caribbean societies and the complex social fabric that characterizes these societies.

With its multiple contradictions and ambiguous positions, the Surinamese Jews offer a good vantage point from which the complexity of white colonial communities can be studied. The Surinamese-Jewish narrative is a rich historical account that is much more complex and diverse than the well-known stories of Jodensavanne and the Portuguese-Jewish sugar plantations. It is a story about rich Jewish sugar planters, excluded from white colonial social life, and poor Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe who were disdained by the Portuguese-Jewish elite. It is also a story of coloured Jews and their ambiguous position within the Jewish community. Their history includes many of the complexities and ambiguities of Suriname's colonial society. The history of the Surinamese Jews does not only involve conflict, struggle and exclusion, but also cultural adaptation, inclusion and cultural production.

This study stems from a fascination with the way people adapt to new and changing circumstances, especially in a context of conquest, unsettledness and hostility, inherent to any colonial society. 'No group, no matter how well equipped or how free to choose, can transfer its way of life and the accompanying beliefs and values intact from one locale to another'.<sup>14</sup> These lines, written by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price as an introductory note to their classic essay on African-American culture, form the point of departure of this study. What were the consequences of colonial settlement for identifying practices among the Jews who had forged a Jewish community in Suriname since the mid seventeenth century? How did these Jewish migrants, with their diverging social and cultural backgrounds, become Surinamese Jews, what conditions framed this process, and what options were available to them given the Surinamese context? With these questions in mind, this study is essentially

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<sup>13</sup> Snyder 2000:12.

<sup>14</sup> Mintz and Price 1992:1.

an exploration of the arenas of colonial interplay and the many ways in which a colonial domain<sup>15</sup> affected identification processes in European migrant communities. The central questions that have guided me throughout this study focus on the processes of changing Surinamese-Jewish identifications: what were the critical events and dominant processes of change that directed the localization of the Jewish community in Suriname? And what conclusions can be drawn, on the basis of the Surinamese-Jewish case, about the interplay between colonialism, creolization and the dynamics of diaspora?<sup>16</sup>

## 2 IN SEARCH OF A PERSPECTIVE: CONNECTING JUDAISM, CREOLIZATION AND COLONIALISM

Jewishness and the problem of identity

In this study, the story of the Surinamese Jews is reconstructed through the accounts of men and women that contested dominant notions of Surinamese Jewishness, and created new notions. Even though 'identity' is still an immensely popular and infrequently criticized concept in the public debate, it has become an increasingly contested one in academic circles. It has become commonly accepted among researchers in cultural studies and the social sciences that identities are by no means fixed, given or self-evident, but forever changing and always in process.<sup>17</sup> Frederic Cooper and Rogers Brubaker have made a strong argument against the use of 'identity' as an analytical concept in such non-essentialist and volatile applications. They argue that the prevailing constructivist stance on identity has left us without the analytical tools to examine the essentialist claims of identity politics.<sup>18</sup> The notions of Surinamese Jewishness that are described and analysed in this study include both volatile expressions of belonging and hard claims of identity. In the words of Cooper and Brubaker: 'Setting out to write about identifications as they emerge, crystallize, and fade away in particular social and political circumstances may well inspire a rather

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<sup>15</sup> With 'colonial domain' I do not only refer to the local environment of colonial Suriname, its population, factions and local colonial authorities, but also to the relation with the Dutch colonial state and her representatives, and the colonial power structures that defined this relationship.

<sup>16</sup> Note that I will use the term creolization as a context-specific process of localization in Suriname.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Brah 1996a, Butler 1993, Donald and Rattansi 1992, Rutherford 1990, Hall 1992, Hall 1996, and Hall 1997

<sup>18</sup> Cooper and Brubaker 2005:59-60.

different history than setting out to write of an identity, which links past, present and future in a single word'.<sup>19</sup>

In this study, the concept of identity only refers to 'hard' claims of identity: the many stories of forced inclusion in both the Portuguese and High German Jewish community during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the repressive control that Jewish community leaders had of Jewish community boundaries.<sup>20</sup> This sort of identity claims left little space for negotiation, and was often supported by colonial legislation. Such identity politics generally involved practices of forced inclusion, while exclusionary practices tended to be much more ambiguous and circumstantial.

In this ongoing construction of Surinamese Jewishness, the role of the Surinamese-Jewish community leaders is considered at length, as their position is often ambiguous. On the one hand, these community leaders often acted as the guardians of 'old' identifications and the executioners of 'hard' identity politics, while at other times they were the instigators of changing collective identifications. Although community leaders often presented their identity claims as self-evident and non-negotiable, they did not remain uncontested by individual community members. On repeated occasions, inclusion by force by Jewish community leaders contrasted with the way these community leaders perceived themselves, and their place in the colonial society of Suriname. For instance, an articulated self-understanding of prominent Portuguese Jews as a white and colonial elite went hand in hand with aggressive inclusionary politics towards poor and coloured Jews during the late eighteenth century.

A recurring theme in discussions on Jewish identity relates to the meaning of *halakha* and ancestry in defining Jewishness. According to *halakhic* law, there are two ways to become a Jew. The first is to be to a Jewish mother, and the second is a conversion procedure confirmed by an orthodox rabbinic court. Although the relevance of *halakha* for defining Jewishness is questioned by liberal movements within Judaism, in the orthodox-Jewish world, *halakha* is still the common law against which Jewishness is measured. In the Surinamese-Jewish case this matter turned into a complicated issue given that almost every aspect of life in colonial Suriname was

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<sup>19</sup> Cooper and Brubaker 2005:85.

<sup>20</sup> The idea that difference and differentiation lies at the heart of identity has led to a one-sided emphasis on exclusion. For instance, Judith Butler believes that all identities operate through exclusion, through the 'production of an outside'. Avtar Brah reaches a similar conclusion in her influential article *Difference, diversity, differentiation*. See Butler 1993:22, and Brah 1996b. Equally indicative are the different contributions in the edited volumes *Race*, *Culture and Difference* by James Donald and Ali Rattansi (1992), and *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* by Jonathan Rutherford (1990). See also the writings of Stuart Hall on identity, particularly Hall 1992, Hall 1996. Yet, as David T. Goldberg rightfully underlines, power and conflict do not only make part of identity strategies when used as a mechanism of excluding. 'Identity' can also keep people in who don't want to be in, for instance, by insisting on an essential racial character or by requiring racial, ethnic or religious solidarity, or – as in the case of the Surinamese Jews – by resorting to the colonial order of things (Goldberg 1994:12).

structured along racial boundaries. The fact that colour and a slave or freeman status – rather than *halakha* – were the primary boundary-making attributes shows the influence of a colonial, creole environment on Jewish identifications and identity politics in colonial Suriname.

The vocabulary of creole, creolization and localization

The local environment the Surinamese Jews lived in was made up of different cultural traditions, and divided by unequal power relations. Scholars have long tried to establish a theoretical framework that would explain the complex cultural processes by which new societies, such as Suriname, were formed from the sixteenth century onwards. In the 1970s, the concepts of ‘creolization’ and ‘creole societies’ became popular terms for understanding Caribbean societies. These notions were important alternatives to earlier concepts such as ‘acculturation’, and explanatory models such as the plantation-society thesis and the plural-society thesis. Although theories of creolization differ, they share a basic concern with the intersection of two or more previously unrelated cultural groups (or languages) and are built on the idea of cultural change and (some form of) amalgamation, rather than cultural separation.

Early perspectives on creolization, which are often associated with nationalist projects in the Caribbean, have been criticized for their homogenizing and romantic perception of creolization, emphasizing the unifying tendencies of creolization (cultural blending). Later views of creolization drew attention to the conflicts and contradictions that the process of creolization inevitably involves.<sup>21</sup> Such dialectical notions of creolization were picked up by a growing number of scholars engaged in the study of creole societies, several of whom believe the experience of colonialism, slavery and transportation to be at the heart of the concept.<sup>22</sup>

My interpretation of creolization links up with approaches to creolization that perceive it as a process of cultural change resulting from intercultural interaction in a context of colonialism, domination and unequal power relations. In this study creolization refers to a historical process tied to the colonial experiences of slavery, masterhood and coloniality. In the slave societies of the New World, creolization did not manifest itself in one way, but manoeuvred along a continuum of appearances and

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, Drummond 1980, Bolland 1992:64 and Bolland 2005, Chaudenson 2001, the contributions of Stuart Hall and others in Hall 2003b. See also the work of Alex van Stipriaan (especially Van Stipriaan 2000, Van Stipriaan 2002 and Van Stipriaan 2003).

<sup>22</sup> O. Nigel Bolland, for instance, argued that ‘the colonial system of domination and the resistant responses to that domination are two aspects of the same socio-cultural process that creates a society that is creole because it is colonial’ (Bolland 2005:182). Similarly, Stuart Hall claims that ‘creolization *always* entails inequality, hierarchization, issues of domination and sub-alterneity, mastery and servitude, control and resistance. Questions of *power*, as well as issues of entanglement are always at stake’ (Hall 2003a:31).

possible outcomes, ranging from some degree of adaptation to a new environment, and the development of group identifications that fitted this new locality, to full cultural transformation and cultural production.<sup>23</sup>

Different groups did undergo different processes of change, depending on a variety of circumstances, such as numerical dominance or subordination, state upon arrival (destitute or wealthy, scattered or as a rather coherent body), and the place they assumed within the spectrum of colonial rule (master or enslaved). This notion of heterogeneity has generally been used to understand the distinctiveness between creole societies: 'run the combination [of constitutive elements] one way, and – as it were – you get Cuba. Inflect the elements differently and you suddenly see Martinique, Jamaica, Dominica, Grenada.'<sup>24</sup> However, one also needs to account for the multiple processes of creolization that operate simultaneously within societies to understand the historical experience of various groups in Caribbean societies. This understanding of Caribbean creolization includes all the population segments that constituted Caribbean colonial societies (that is, the Amerindian population, Afro-Caribbean groups, white colonial settlers, as well as those known as indentured labourers). As such, it bears resemblance to Edward Kamau Brathwaite's notion of creolization.

Brathwaite, who played an important role in the early development of the concept, argued that creolization is a two-way process of cultural change, based upon the interaction between individuals and their environment.<sup>25</sup> Although Brathwaite pictured Africa as the 'submerged mother of the Creole system', he also acknowledged the importance of so-called 'lateral creolization': 'the leakage between, say, poor whites and coloureds; between Syrians, Chinese and Jews; between these and blacks; between blacks and East Indians and between East Indians and others'.<sup>26</sup> The relevance of Brathwaite's argument for this study lies in his explicit inclusion of the white settler community, and in his interpretation of creolization not only as a cultural, but as a social process of indigenization 'that created, by its very nature, a way of life essentially different from the metropolitan model'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The notion of creolization as a continuum is based on Lee Drummond's influential article, *The Cultural Continuum: A Theory of Intersystems* (1980). Drummond argues that 'cultures are neither structures nor plural amalgams, but a continuum or set of intersystems'. The endless internal variation within a cultural continuum leaves Drummond to argue that there are no cultures, only intersystemically connected and creolizing Culture. (Drummond 1980: 354).

<sup>24</sup> Hall 2003a:34.

<sup>25</sup> Brathwaite 1971:296, 300.

<sup>26</sup> Brathwaite 1974:6, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Brathwaite 1971:101.

Notwithstanding either Brathwaite's explicit reference to Jamaica's white population ('all Jamaican creoles were colonials')<sup>28</sup>, little study has been undertaken so far as to how European settler communities in the Caribbean colonies were affected by colonial environment they lived in. Interpretations of creolization, as used in the Caribbean, have become almost entirely focused on Afro-Caribbean cultures, and ever more exclusive towards other groups that constitute(d) Caribbean societies.<sup>29</sup> In these interpretations creolization is often used synonymously for cultural production, cultural newness and cultural mixing.<sup>30</sup>

The Afro-Caribbean focus of the concept ties in with a tendency to emphasize the differences between European communities and the enslaved Africans, resulting in a more limited interpretation of creolization that focuses on suppression and compulsion as the essential conditions of cultural production. Such conceptualization of creolization has proved to be of good value for analyzing the idiosyncrasies of Afro-Caribbean communities, but leaves white European colonial communities largely misunderstood as it does not explain their experience of becoming creole, of adapting to a colonial environment and developing a creole 'mental envelope' that distinguished them from European metropolitans.<sup>31</sup>

Although many of the colonial experiences of European settlers (Jews and non-Jews alike) stand in stark contrast to the historic experience of the enslaved Africans, there are some important points of similarity between the European communities and Afro-Caribbean communities. The most striking commonality is what Van Lier has referred to as the mental framing of living in a 'frontier society' where the population (of whatever origin) found itself in a 'borderline situation', a context of slavery and colonial conditions 'on the fringes of the world economy' and 'in a country where the settled and cultivated areas lie on the edges of the mighty jungles of its uncultivated interior', a context that created 'a state of mind in both masters and slaves which was

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<sup>28</sup> Brathwaite 1971:101.

<sup>29</sup> Sidney Mintz is one of the advocates of such a narrow understanding of creolization: he confines the meaning of creolization to those processes of cultural production in the Caribbean that took place during the early colonial period. Mintz focuses on the moment of initial cultural encounter and the developments that followed immediately, when 'everyone involved was in what was for all of them a new place.' This position became clear once more during the *International Workshop on Creolization and Globalisation* in Rotterdam (March 2002), where Mintz featured as a keynote speaker. Promising, I think, was Karen Fog Olwig suggestion (in response to Mintz) that being in a new place, as a distinct feature of creolization, obviously includes physical transference, but may also involve a new social or cultural setting. This addition is particularly relevant when studying creolization processes among indigenous groups, who obviously did not share in the experience of migration, but may have felt uprooted in their dramatically changing home-environments nonetheless. See Mintz 1998:119. In contrast to Mintz' narrow understanding of creolization, Ulf Hannerz sees a whole world in creolization (Hannerz 1987).

<sup>30</sup> For instance, Buissaret 2000 and Price 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Bernabe, et al. 1993:75.

ruled by fear.’<sup>32</sup> Stuart Hall has referred to this commonality as a ‘third space’.<sup>33</sup> A space that Hall describes in rather vague terms as a space of ‘unsettledness, of conquest, of forced exile, and of unhomeliness’, but which is very apparent and explicit in the case of the Surinamese Jews. Suriname’s atmosphere of hostility and fear is very tangible in the immanent fear for maroon attacks that was an essential element of daily life in the plantation district until the late eighteenth century. This fear went side by side with a forced intimacy with the slave-population.

The notion that colonial processes like creolization affected both dominant and dominated groups is a synthesis of Memmi’s assertion that the colonizer was as much affected by the colonial condition as the colonized with Eduard Kamau Brathwaite’s early notion of creolization.<sup>34</sup> Although not new, the assumption that both Afro-Caribbean and European communities were affected by the colonial environment in which they found themselves is important nonetheless, as it uncovers the importance of creolization for white European communities that have long been excluded from creolization theory.

The history of the Surinamese Jews can show us the specific manifestations of creolization in a white colonial community, and can attribute to our understanding of the ways in which a colonial domain affected European communities in the Caribbean colonial societies. Analysing creolization from a white colonial point of view, brings along a renewed focus on the indigenizing dimension of creolization. Important are the processes of ‘adjusting’ and ‘localization’; but also miscegenation played a role, or in the words of Robin Cohen, the process by which European settler communities took on some ‘couleur locale’.<sup>35</sup> Recently, Stuart Hall has re-emphasized the importance of indigenization in the process of creolization by stating that: ‘in most of the Caribbean islands, after the first century of conquest, all the social forces, which created plantation societies, came from ‘somewhere else’. They did not ‘originally’ belong. They were ‘conscripted,’ whether they wanted to be or not, to a process of indigenization [...] This aspect is often missing in our accounts of creolization; creolization as the process of ‘indigenization,’ which prevents any of the constitutive elements – either colonizing or colonized – from preserving their purity or authenticity’.<sup>36</sup>

In this study, ‘localization’ will be used to refer to this indigenizing dimension of creolization, as the terminology of indigenization could possibly be misunderstood

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<sup>32</sup> Van Lier 1971:7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Hall 2003a:34.

<sup>34</sup> Compare Brathwaite 1971 and 1974, and Memmi 1990.

<sup>35</sup> Cohen 2007:3.

<sup>36</sup> Hall 2003a:34. See also Mintz 1996:302.

when referring to the localizing process of a migrant community in relation to the indigenous population of Suriname: the Amerindians. Moreover, the process of becoming ‘native’ of the Surinamese-Jewish population is one of the central topics of this study. The random use of indigenization to refer to the process of localization may insinuate an already indigenized condition of the Surinamese Jews, when, in fact, their status in the Surinamese society was still contested and far from self-evident.

This interpretation of creolization with its emphasis on localization, links up with the original usage of the term ‘Creole’. Soon after its introduction, the term ‘Creole’ came to include the native-born Afro-Caribbean population. Black Creoles were thought of as ‘adjusted’, or ‘seasoned’ to the condition of slavery, in contrast to newly arrived African slaves, who were cynically referred to as ‘saltwater slaves’ (in Suriname, *zoutwaternegers*). In present-day Suriname, the term ‘Creole’ has become a synonym for the Afro-Surinamese population. Originally, however, the term ‘Creoles’ referred to white Europeans who were born in the colonies, or had lived there so long that they had acquired certain characteristics that were thought of as ‘native’ by their European counterparts.<sup>37</sup> As such, it also contained a condemnatory charge as it implied that someone had forgotten to be a ‘proper’ Frenchman, Englishman, or in the case of the Surinamese Jew, a ‘good Jew’.<sup>38</sup>

The development of a creole mentality among the Surinamese Jews presupposes – by definition – a process of creolization. After all, a creole mentality does not develop over night: to become creole one needs to creolize in the first place. This localized mental framing distinguished the Surinamese Jews from those Jews living in their metropolitan homeland communities, and is manifested most clearly by the racialized boundaries of both the Portuguese and High German communities during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and by the tangible examples of Jewish creole culture in Suriname. In this study, I will therefore refer to Surinamese Jews as ‘creolized’ or ‘creole’ when Surinamese-Jewish self-understanding was explicitly framed by the specific condition of living in a race-based slave society, or was adjusted to the creolized environment that Suriname became over the course of history.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Within linguistics, the term ‘creole’ is used to refer to a vernacular language, developed in the colonies out of various lexicons, which became the mother-tongue of the majority of the Caribbean population as, for example, Sranan Tongo in Suriname. Later, the term was expanded to include other mixed languages around the world as well. For the development of creole languages in Suriname, see Carlin 2002.

<sup>38</sup> This can be illustrated by the verb ‘to creolize’, which is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘to spend the day in a delectable state of apathy’ (Buisseret 2000:6). Also Hall 2003a:29.

<sup>39</sup> My preference for creolization as a framing concept for understanding certain aspects of Surinamese-Jewish identifications lies precisely in this spatiality that cannot be disconnected from a colonial and New World setting. Alternative concepts used in the field of border-crossings, culture blending and cultural analyses (such as syncretism, acculturation, hybridization or assimilation) are devoid of any  
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Not every transformation seen in the Surinamese-Jewish communities is adequately described as creolization, however. The historic experience of the Surinamese Jews also contains elements that fall outside the scope of creolization. Dissolving community boundaries between Portuguese and High German Jews, for instance, should not be understood as a manifestation of creolization, but cannot be explained outside the constraints and possibilities offered by Suriname's colonial context either. Although processes of Surinamese-Jewish creolization may have ended at some point in history, community boundaries and collective identifications continued to change and to adapt to a transforming environment and new circumstances – both local and global – until this very day.

Creolization and diasporic consciousness

Creolization constituted only one of the formative processes in the making of a Jewish community in Suriname; also the forces of diaspora have been constitutive to Surinamese-Jewish identifications. As noted by Avtar Brah, when used in reference to a collective migratory experience, diaspora often overemphasizes the collective experience of migration and ignores the fact that diasporas are not these massive and homogenous flows of people, but rather an amalgam of distinct and sometimes even disparate experiences of migration, and settlement.<sup>40</sup> In my opinion, the term diaspora derives its prime value as a cultural construct, as complexes of institutional networks, social and economic connections, and discourses of authenticity and shared notions of origin.

In this study, 'diaspora' predominantly refers to the mood or consciousness that moulded and affected identifying practices among the Surinamese Jews, and their relationships with others. Diasporic identifications can express a wide range of different moods at different moments, in different settings and under different circumstances. An important aspect of diaspora is the ambiguity it expresses: the negative feeling and experiences of exclusion, and the positive feeling that can be generated through identification with a historical grounded cultural or political force, such as 'the Jewish people'. In addition, the concept of 'diaspora' is also used to refer to the incorporation of the Surinamese-Jewish communities into a (predominantly) Dutch-Jewish religious framework.<sup>41</sup>

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such geographical articulation.

<sup>40</sup> Brah 1996a:183.

<sup>41</sup> Following James Clifford (1994), I believe that people do not have to be 'in diaspora' for their social relations, self-identification, actions, and ideas to contain diasporic dimensions, such as the feeling of belonging to a worldwide (here: Jewish) community; the existence of institutionalized networks (be it religious or economical) or the feeling of exclusion or alienation in the place of settlement. Also Vertovec 2000:142-3.

The juxtaposition of diasporic Jewish identifications and creolized notions of Surinamese Jewishness raises the question how the concepts of creolization and diaspora interrelate. At first sight, the diaspora may appear to be counterforce of creolization. After all, 'creole', often contains new senses of belonging and new claims of authenticity. The diaspora presumes the opposite: an attachment to a translocal community, and a claim of origin that lies 'somewhere else', and entails more than just a 'phantasmagorical reconstruction'.<sup>42</sup> One only has to consider the many differences (both culturally and phenotypically) between different diaspora communities around the world to endorse that such a diametrical perspective on creolization and diaspora does not fit reality. Clearly, every diaspora is characterized by its own localized heterogeneities. How else could the difference have come into existence between, for instance, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Judaism? That diaspora formation always entails a measure of adjusting or cultural mixing, has already been noted by Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin about fifteen years ago, when they claimed that 'diasporic cultural identity teaches us that cultures are not preserved by being protected from 'mixing' but can probably only continue to exist as a product of such mixing. [...] While this is true of all cultures, diasporic Jewish culture lays it bare because of the impossibility of a natural association between this people and a particular land – thus the impossibility of seeing Jewish culture as a self-enclosed, bounded phenomenon.'<sup>43</sup>

Still, despite the apparent overlap between both concepts, creolization and diaspora also account for different contexts, distinct identifications and conflicting claims of authenticity. One of the basic premises of this study is the tension that existed between participating in a local environment and becoming ever more localized and 'creole'; and a prevailing sense of belonging to a worldwide Jewish community, that is, a notion of diaspora.<sup>44</sup> The field of tension between creolization and diaspora appears from the many conflicts that pertained to the notion of colonial eliteness versus religious-based understandings of Jewishness. This double vision of the Surinamese Jews also manifested itself in the complex relationship between past and present where the historical consciousness that is embodied in colonial nostalgia and creole awareness conflicts with a continued wish to belong to a worldwide (orthodox) Jewish community.

Both the forces of creolization and diaspora directed the development of the Surinamese-Jewish community, not as diametrical forces, but as intrinsic elements of one another. The question remains whether a strong sense of diaspora will impede

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Claude Carpanin Marimoutou in Enwezor 2003:49.

<sup>43</sup> Boyarin and Boyarin 1993:721.

<sup>44</sup> Even though as an analytical concept, 'diaspora' is heading for a similar fate as 'identity' – with diasporas abound, the concept has become a buzz-word and has lost much of its analytical strength – I believe its usage to be justified in a historical analysis of the Surinamese-Jewish community.

processes of creolization: for instance, did the incorporation of the Surinamese-Jewish community into a Dutch religious framework during the nineteenth century have a decisive influence on the direction and form of Surinamese-Jewish creolization? This question makes the circumstances under which a diasporic consciousness or creole mentality among the Surinamese Jews waxed and waned even more relevant, and underlines the need for a long-term historical perspective. In the concluding chapter, I will readdress the complex relationship between localization, creolization and diaspora, and add further insights from this study.

### 3 A COLONIAL JEWISH COMMUNITY

A study of the effects of colonialism on a Jewish community offers possibilities for a critical view of the position of Jewish communities towards others. Many existing studies in the field of Jewish identity, tend to emphasize the ways in which Jews have been excluded, marginalized and oppressed by dominant groups. There is little or no attention for the ways in which Jews – like any community – have excluded and constructed their ‘others’ in the process of creating and maintaining a sense of connectedness. In light of the often ambiguous position colonial Jewish communities held in their home societies, I believe there is ample reason for such critical analyses. It is remarkable to see the amount of literature that appears on Caribbean Jewish communities that solely focus on their congregational history, and portray the communities as isolated from the colonial environment in which they participated.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, the colonial experience of the Surinamese-Jewish communities is still, largely, unknown. Although Jews constituted an important part of Suriname’s population, for more than two and a half centuries only two full-length monographs on Surinamese Jews have been published. Both monographs are set in the eighteenth century and focus primarily on the Portuguese-Jewish community. The first monograph, *Essay Historique sur la colonie de Surinam*, published in 1788 and reprinted in English in 1974. Written by one of the regents of the Portuguese Jewish community (David Cohen Nassy) its central message is the major contribution of the (Portuguese) Jews to the development of the colony of Suriname.<sup>46</sup> Nassy’s *Essay Historique* was to remain the standard work on Surinamese-Jewish history for nearly two centuries, and has strongly influenced today’s Surinamese (Jewish) historical consciousness as such. Nassy’s claims and assumptions have often been accepted as ‘historical facts’ by both professional and amateur historians alike without acknowledging the specific context in which *Essay Historique* was written; a political

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<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, Cohen 2004 and Delevante and Alberga 2006. Gert Oostindie did a similar observation in Oostindie 2007:14-5.

<sup>46</sup> For a contextualization of *Essay Historique*, see also Phaf-Rheinberger 2001, and Cohen 1991:94-124.

statement made by prominent and well read Surinamese Jews, as a response to Christian Wilhelm Dohm's plea for Jewish political emancipation, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (published in Berlin in 1781), and with the intent to underscore the (unappreciated) value of Jewish settlement for the development of Suriname's colonial society.

Less biased, and of a more recent date, is the work of Robert Cohen (†1992). In his most recent work, a social-economical study of the Surinamese-Jewish community, titled *Jews in another environment: Suriname in the second half of the eighteenth century* (1991), Cohen addressed several issues concerning Jewish life in a tropical environment.<sup>47</sup> Recently, Jonathan Schorsch has included the Surinamese Jews in his study *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (2004). Although Suriname's colonial environment is part of both Cohen's and Schorsch analyses', both studies still tend towards a Jewish perspective, rather than a colonial vantage point. Moreover, the explicit focus on the Portuguese Jews and the early colonial era, particularly by Jonathan Schorsch, leaves some important issues underexposed, such as the colonial experience of the High German Jews and the important transitions that took place during the nineteenth century in Suriname.

As for Suriname's white colonial community and the locus of the Surinamese Jews in this community, the notion that sets the Jewish community aside as a separate category in Suriname's so-called plural society – as did, for instance, Van Lier in his standard work on Suriname's history: *Frontier society: a social analysis of the history of Suriname* (1971) – calls for a critical stand.<sup>48</sup> The plural-society thesis emphasizes institutionalized cultural separation along ethnic or racial lines, and was the dominant paradigm for understanding Caribbean plantation societies in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>49</sup> Setting Jews apart, is generally based on their separate juridical status, the so-called 'Jewish privileges', and their spatial segregation in Jodensavanne. Referring to the Jews as a 'pseudo-state'<sup>50</sup> largely follows the rhetoric of Jewish community leaders,

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<sup>47</sup> Many other publications on Jewish presence in Suriname are primarily smaller articles or reviews in newspapers or magazines; often short and dated renditions on the first Jewish migration to Suriname and the settlement in Jodensavanne. Some articles offer more in-dept analyses, however, such as the work of Samuel Oppenheim and Frederick Oudschans Dentz. For instance, Oppenheim's paper *An Early Jewish Colony in Western Guiana, 1658-1666, and its Relation to the Jews in Surinam, Cayenne and Tobago* (1909), covers the early Jewish settlement in Essequibo between 1658-1666 (at that time in Dutch possession) and the displacement of Jews from Pomeroun (Essequibo) to Suriname after the invasion of the English in 1666. Oudschans Dentz published various books and articles on Suriname, some of them relating to the Jewish population. The booklet *Kolonisatie van de Portugeesch Joodsche Natie in Suriname en de geschiedenis van de joden savanne* (1927), offers an inventory of facts and figures of the Portuguese settlement in Suriname and the history of Jodensavanne.

<sup>48</sup> For instance, Van Lier 1971, but also Van der Meiden 1987:14, and Schalkwijk 1994:66-70.

<sup>49</sup> See for instance Smith 1965.

<sup>50</sup> Schalkwijk 1994:66-70.

who referred to themselves as ‘Regents of the Portuguese-Jewish and High German Jewish Nation’ and represented the Surinamese-Jewish communities as enclosed and self-evident entities. Historic reality was more unruly, however, than this image of segregation and self-rule presumes. Moreover, the separate juridical status of the Surinamese Jews lost importance during the nineteenth century because of various edicts and decrees, most importantly the granting of civil rights in 1825. Jodensavanne only represented the mainstay of Surinamese-Jewish community life during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and then only for the Portuguese-Jewish planters community.

During the mid eighteenth to late nineteenth century, Jews made up about half of Suriname’s white population, sharing much of the colonial experience of non-Jewish settlers in Suriname.<sup>51</sup> The interplay between the Surinamese Jews and Suriname’s colonial society brings to mind Ann Laura Stoler’s pioneering work on European colonial communities during the late nineteenth to mid twentieth century in Indonesia. Stoler depicts a differentiated group of Dutch colonial whites that – in short – was preoccupied with demarcating its racialized community boundaries and maintaining its white male prestige.<sup>52</sup> The colonial experience of the Surinamese Jews both resembles and deviates from this model of community making and self-identification. The Surinamese-Jewish (self)identification as colonial whites; the large body of poor Jewish settlers in Suriname; and the presence of a considerable group of mixed Afro-Jewish descent, creates a storyline throughout this book quite similar to Stoler’s arguments. However, Surinamese-Jewish ‘otherness’ and their long history of settlement and localization also sets the Surinamese-Jewish experience apart from Suriname’s European settlers as well. First as Jews, later as ‘locals’ in a colonial environment.

An insightful vantage point for studying this complex position of Jews in Suriname’s colonial society is provided by Albert Memmi’s classic book *The colonizer and the colonized* (1957). While Memmi’s writings have been used to analyse all sorts of oppressive relationships among well or less well-defined colonized peoples, his work has hardly resulted in a rethinking of the position of Jews in the colonized world. This is even more remarkable considering that Memmi’s perspective is that of a colonial Jew. Memmi’s Jews are in constant pain – ‘they live in painful and constant ambiguity’.<sup>53</sup> Although they seek to avoid categorization as a colonized group through identification with the French, they are rejected by the colonizer as belonging to their group. The significance of Memmi’s work lies in questioning the prevailing

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<sup>51</sup> For estimations and numerical data on the size of the Surinamese-Jewish community, and the share of Jews as part of the total (white and non-white) population, see Chapter II.

<sup>52</sup> For instance, Stoler 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Memmi 1990:81.

view of the Jewish experience – not only in a European, but also in a colonial setting – as one of subordination and oppression.<sup>54</sup> Today, in an era of continued violence in Palestine, this image is increasingly problematic; but also in a Surinamese historic context – as in other colonial societies were the Jew assumed the role of colonizer – this image is largely untenable.

Of course, there is a world of difference between the colonial experience of the North African Jews and the Surinamese Jews. While – as locals – the colonial Jewish communities in North Africa were colonized (although they tried to escape their colonized condition by mimicking the colonizer), the Surinamese Jews were part of the colonial enterprise themselves. They came as colonizers and colonists and shared the experience of colonial migration with non-Jewish colonists, both strangers in a hostile environment. The Surinamese Jews would never identify themselves ‘as much with the colonizers as with the colonized’, nor were they ‘undeniable natives’.<sup>55</sup> In the full spectrum of colonial categories and local power relations, their status was, however, ambiguous.

In this study, I will abandon a one-dimensional and static approach of the Surinamese Jews as a colonizers community, in favour of a multi-layered conception of the Surinamese Jews. The first does not do justice to their long history of localization in Suriname. With family histories going back to the early days of establishment, the Surinamese Jews shared their timeline of presence in Suriname with the Afro-Surinamese population. Somewhere along the course of history, though difficult to pinpoint at an exact moment in time, the Surinamese Jews, as a group, became ‘locals’. The status of Surinamese Jews as locals in a colonial environment evidently contrasts with their dominant status as whites in a colour-coded slave society, and is but one of the multiple complexities that characterize the Surinamese-Jewish community. It was especially during the late eighteenth to early twentieth century that this paradoxical position of the Surinamese Jews became manifest.

#### 4 BROWSING THROUGH HISTORY: ON PERIODIZATION AND ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

In this book, I am interested in one, albeit far-reaching, aspect of Surinamese-Jewish history, namely the many questions of belonging that were provoked by their adjustment to a colonial environment, the way this affected their collective

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<sup>54</sup> For instance, when the anthropologist Homi H. Bhabha wrote that: ‘[t]he ‘Jew’ stands for that experience of a lethal modernity, shared by the histories of slavery or colonialism, where the racist desire for supremacy and domination turns the ideas of progress and sovereignty into demonic partners in a *danse macabre*’, the Jewish experience of subordination, is juxtaposed to other ‘grand narratives of torture, ethnic cleansing, and persecution’, see Bhabha 1998:xvi.

<sup>55</sup> Memmi 1990:12.

identifications, and how this fitted into the colonial undertaking. Although this study is primarily thematically demarcated, rather than by a precise period of time, some general time-based demarcations can be made. Broadly speaking, the designation 'colonial Suriname' demarcates this study historically. Here, 'colonial Suriname' refers to the period of foreign (mainly Dutch) rule in Suriname, when Suriname was primarily a plantation economy driven by slave labour or indentured labour, and legitimized by a colour-coded racism that affected all social relationships of every resident in Suriname, slave or free.<sup>56</sup>

The empirical research on which this study is based concentrates on the late eighteenth to early twentieth century. However, earlier and later periods are taken into account when necessary for making an argument, for picking up stories or rounding them up. When studying such a long period it is easy to lapse into a view of history as a continuous and linear process, in which various historical events form a regular pattern. Rather than demonstrating continuity between past and present, I follow Foucault's arguments for a 'genealogical approach'. According to Foucault, history is about multiple beginnings, sudden lurches forwards, pauses and gaps. History, then, is not a comprehensive story, but a multiple number of events that are as often and as much in conflict with another, as they can be held together.<sup>57</sup>

This study draws largely on written material derived from various archives. Far from being intangible, transforming group identifications manifest themselves by events, small and large, in a community's history, that redefine(d) or reconfirm(ed) existing categories and cultural identifications within that community. These critical events (often conflicts pertaining to community boundaries) can be traced and explained. Conflicts do not only indicate a crumbling legitimacy of existing community boundaries, but are as often an immediate cause of redefinition. Although a focus on conflicts and critical events runs the risk of disguising perhaps harmonious practices of everyday life, as well as smouldering long-term developments; conflicts and discordant events are also strong examples of the interaction between collective identifications and adjustments to a new environment and form concrete leads for studying a localizing Surinamese-Jewish community. Adjusting is not a painless process: it is about giving up and taking in; it involves conflicts and generates dilemmas.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, new ideas have to be incorporated in an existing set of ideas in

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<sup>56</sup> Note that throughout this study, I will use the term 'colonial' as both a time marker of the period of official foreign colonial rule, and as a broader designation of certain power relations and forms of inequality characteristic to colonial societies.

<sup>57</sup> Foucault 1984:81.

<sup>58</sup> A parallel can be drawn to the mechanisms of intellectual innovation described by Mark Bevir in *The logic of the history of ideas*. According to Bevir: '[d]ilemmas arise for individuals when they accept as authoritative a new understanding that, merely by virtue of being new, poses a question for their existing (continued)

the wake of ‘critical events’: moments of giving up old ideas as truths, and taking in, or keeping out novelty or new elements of a collective self-understanding. The incorporation and acceptance of these ‘newcomers’ (often in the capacity of an official decree or resolution) are the critical moments of creolizing identifications and bring to light the dynamics and interaction between individual and the collective.<sup>59</sup>

Logical starting points for studying the Surinamese Jews form the Surinamese-Jewish congregational archives. The documents found in this archive provided me with a general understanding of the historical transformation seen in the two communities at large, and with a more detailed knowledge of several conflicts that are discussed in this study. The archive of the Portuguese-Jewish community is housed in the Dutch National Archives (*Nationaal Archief*) in The Hague.<sup>60</sup> Here, I focused on the minute books and correspondence of the *Mahamad* where I expected to find the discordant events I was after. The community regulations and records pertaining to the constitutional positions of Jews in Suriname not only provided me with the required insight into the internal organization of the community, but also allowed for a reconstruction of the many negotiations over its constitutional position in the Surinamese society with the colonial authorities. The minute books and community regulations typically contain the (male) voices of prominent Jews and community leaders, thus give only limited insight into the thoughts and feelings of common Surinamese Jews, women, coloureds or the poor. These actors in the history of Surinamese Jews only appear as the ones that fill in requests for poor relief and plea for the status of their children. However, although barred from exercising power in the community, it were exactly these subordinate groups that took center stage in debates over the demarcation of community boundaries. Through close reading of certain discordant events pertaining to such issues, I have tried to include the voices of less powerful Surinamese Jews in this study as much as possible.

An important problem I encountered when working with the archived material concerns the appalling condition of large parts of its documents. Much of the minutes of the Portuguese congregation between 1836 and 1861, including correspondence between members and community leaders, is heavily damaged by moist, severely decayed, and often no longer readable. Apart from the general condition of the Portuguese-Jewish archive, another practical impediment is the fact that the entire archive after 1864 is mysteriously missing, except for some loose documents. While some community members believe the material is smuggled out of the country, others suspect some locals of hiding the historical material ‘under their beds’. As a

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web of beliefs. Dilemmas explain changes of belief because when people accept something as true, they have to extend their existing beliefs to accommodate the newcomer’ (Bevir 2000:299).

<sup>59</sup> My use of ‘critical events’ is inspired by the work of Veena Das (Das 1996).

<sup>60</sup> By order of the Governor, the Portuguese Jewish archive was handed over to the local colonial authorities in 1861 and transferred to the Dutch National archive in 1916.

consequence, analyses of late-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century developments are largely based on the High German archive (Neve Shalom Archive, NSA).

Fortunately, the High German archive is by and large in a better condition, although some of the books containing the minutes from the late eighteenth century are in rather abominable state as well. At the time of my field research, the archive was privately housed; today the High German archive is housed in the so-called *Mahamad* building, next to the synagogue on the Keizerstraat. The High German records go back to the establishment of a separate High German community in Suriname in 1734 and cover the entire period of settlement. Apart from the historical material, the archive also contains contemporary records of the merged Israelitische Gemeente Suriname. At my time in Suriname in 2003, I worked through much of the Neve Shalom Archives, especially focusing on the recorded minutes, correspondence and community regulations. The High German archive is not inventoried. When referring to records of this archive, I will refer to the boxes where I found the documents at that time.<sup>61</sup>

Apart from the congregational archives, I made use of the colonial archives of Suriname. The material found here ranged from extracts taken from the governor's journals; minutes of the Court of Police (*Hof van Politie*); and correspondence between Surinamese Jews, the community leaders and the governor over internal conflicts, the constitutional position of Jews in Suriname and various other issues. The Archive of the Chief Commission of Israelite Affairs, also kept at National Archives in The Hague, proved to be an unexpected source of information as well as the Samson archive housed by the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana in Amsterdam.

As noted by Patrick Joyce, archives (like the historian) are the sites of public memory.<sup>62</sup> They are a means by which societies organize their past, rather than simple mirrors to the past, producing objective truths. This particularly holds true for colonial archives, which are among the principal sources of this study. Various writers of colonial and postcolonial history have shown that the very existence of colonial archives, as well as the enormous wealth of material that these archives contain, is a direct result of unequal relations of power, notably the regulation of peoples and territories by white colonials.<sup>63</sup> When working with colonial archives one should be aware of the way these archives are structured and the meanings that lay underneath. Ann Laura Stoler argues that archives are not just sites of collected knowledge, guarded treasure that hide the secrets of the colonial state and are waiting to be

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<sup>61</sup> Note that a considerable part of the archive was sent to the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati in 1955 for photostat, where the documents got mixed up. This part of the archive is still left un-inventoried and piled-up in the original post-boxes.

<sup>62</sup> Joyce 2001:367.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Said 1978, Stoler 1995, Young 1990.

explored, but actively produce this knowledge as well by the way information is classed and categorized, by including certain facts that were deemed important and while excluding others. Colonial archives were not constructed randomly, nor should they be read in any such way: '[i]ssues were rendered important by how they were classed and discursively framed.' Content, as well as form and mode of classification of colonial archives are critical features of colonial politics.<sup>64</sup>

As such, the kind of material preserved and the structuring of the colonial archives can be as revealing as the actual content of the documents.<sup>65</sup> Take for example the Old Archives of Suriname, kept at the National Archives in The Hague. Here, Jews appear as a separate category during the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Between 1755 and 1802, correspondence between the Jewish communities (Portuguese and High German) and the governor are filed separately. In Suriname's colonial archives, no documents of any other group in Suriname, whether religiously or ethnically defined, were archived separately in a way comparable to the Jews. The separate entry for Jewish documents coincides with the increase of conflicts between Jews Christian whites during the late eighteenth century, and is illustrative of a period of exclusionary colonial politics vis-à-vis the Jews in Suriname. From the early nineteenth century onwards, the Surinamese Jews disappear as a separate entry from the colonial administration and 'vanish' in the enormous archives of the Ministry of Colonies.

In addition to the traditional documentary sources, I have used various types of biographical material such as official censuses and other population surveys. Although census material should be considered with due reservation, it can provide insight in both processes of self-identification and colonial identity politics (through the categorization and presentation afterwards).<sup>67</sup> The empirical data found in the archives are contrasted with tangible legacies such as images and paintings, sepulchral culture

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<sup>64</sup> Stoler 2002b:98. In a same vein, Nicholas Dirks notes that the (colonial) archive not only contains documents, but is in itself a primary document - 'the instantiation of the state's interest in history' (Dirks 2002:62-3).

<sup>65</sup> Although Surinamese Jews were among the colonizers, they did not form part of the colonial apparatus until the late nineteenth century.

<sup>66</sup> NA, 1.05.10.01: 524-529. These entries in Suriname's Old Archive contain the correspondence between the community leaders and the governor between 1755 and 1802 on a variety of cases. Some of these cases concerned the interest of the Jews as a group, others related to conflicts of community members and the Mahamad in which the governor was consulted for support by either party.

<sup>67</sup> Joan Scott argues that statistical data are often (wrongly) kept outside the analyses of the production of meaning and social reality. According to Scott, statistical data tell an important political story Scott 1988:113 and further. Peter van de Veer makes a similar argument when he refers to the census as a 'number game' that gave meaning and stability to existing categories, and was used by the political elite in defining the boundaries of their community (Van der Veer 1994:126-7). Also compare with Benedict Anderson's remarks on the census and Virginia Dominguez' analysis of the Israeli census (Anderson 1991, Dominguez 1989).

and cemetery space. Several interviews with community members and various synagogue visits helped me understand the importance of historical belonging, and gave me a glimpse of the present-day community. The extensive secondary literature on socio-economic changes in the Caribbean area, colonial divisions of power, and Jewish community life provided me with the necessary framing.

This book does not offer a synthetic overview of the information gathered in the various archives mentioned in the above. Much of the chapters were written in an associative manner, whereby stories and events lead me to uncover more stories and other events. As such, case studies play a central role in this study. Although they can never be more than a partial reflection of the larger identity questions that were at issue in the Surinamese-Jewish community, they make it possible to stay close to the individuals that comprise the ‘empirical data’ of this study.<sup>68</sup> In the words of Philip D. Curtin – who aptly described such an approach as eclectic empiricism – ‘The whole truth is not available to historians in any case, and it is not possible to tell possible partial truths at the same time. It may be that the sum of partial truths, arrived at by asking a variety of different questions about the past, may lead to a better understanding of how human societies change through time.’<sup>69</sup> I hope that the answers I will come up with do justice to the many stories of men and women that make up the history of the Surinamese Jews.

## 5 OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

As group identification is not an isolated affair, I will focus on the relation between Surinamese Jews and their neighbours throughout this book: the world of Surinamese whites, with whom they shared their position of economic leadership but stood apart as well, and the Afro-Surinamese population, with whom they have the longest shared history.<sup>70</sup> Yet, identification is not about ‘others’ alone. The juxtaposition of participating in a local colonial society versus identifying with a broader Jewish community is also essential to processes of creolization and diaspora among the Surinamese Jews and should be taken into account as such. After all, the environment in which the Jews participated (both local and supra local) determined their cultural frame of reference to some or larger extent.

This book is divided in two parts. The first part (Forging a community, Chapter II to IV) is about the making of a Jewish community in Suriname. Based on literature

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<sup>68</sup> Phrasing borrowed from Curtin (Curtin 2000:xi).

<sup>69</sup> Curtin 2000:xi-xii.

<sup>70</sup> The focus in this research is on the interaction with other white segments in Suriname and the Afro-Surinamese population. Other groups in Suriname, most notably the Hindustani population, will only be referred to sporadically. This is primarily a consequence of the timeframe of this research.

study and archival research, it tells the story of a European colonial community that, through the course of history, adjusted to Suriname's changing environment. Attention is paid to the composition of the Surinamese-Jewish community based on an analysis of migration patterns and the social, economic and political engagements of Surinamese Jews. The main objective of this part, therefore, is to provide a bird's-eye view of Surinamese-Jewish history, before delving into a more detailed study and analysis of how group identifications and expressions of commonality transformed over the course of Surinamese-Jewish history.

Chapter II discusses the initial establishment of a Jewish community in Suriname, halfway the seventeenth century; the patterns of Jewish migration and settlement; the heterogeneous origin of the Jews who came to Suriname; and the growth and – ultimately – decline of the Jewish community in Suriname. In addition, I will address the specific places of Surinamese-Jewish settlement in Jodensavanne and Paramaribo. In Chapter III, attention is paid to the main social and economic changes that took place in the Surinamese-Jewish community from the late eighteenth century onwards: changes that not only influenced the economic strength of the Suriname Jews as a group, but also had considerable impact on their social status in the Surinamese society, as well as on Jewish community life. The participation of the Surinamese Jews in colonial elite life is considered, since this provides us with relevant information on the position of the Surinamese Jews within the Surinamese colonial society and its local web of power relations. Chapter IV explores the political configurations and religious structures that set the scope of Surinamese-Jewish community making. It addresses the community structures and internal divisions of power, and discusses the incorporation of the Jews in a Dutch colonial state structure and the reconnection with Dutch Jewry during the nineteenth century.

The second part of this book (Cultivating differences, localizing boundaries) focuses on Surinamese-Jewish questions of belonging in a creolizing colonial community. Suriname's colonial domain, with its many cultural interactions and specific balance of power, constituted the framework of Surinamese-Jewish processes of identification. Surinamese Jews debated not only among themselves, but also with the colonial authorities in both Suriname and the Netherlands on the pillars of a Surinamese-Jewish identity. In this part of the book, several case studies are presented that manifest contestations surrounding the manifold distinctions and boundaries that structured daily Surinamese-Jewish life. Marrying the 'other' is a recurring theme in this part of the book. Although such marriages did occur occasionally, as a rule both High German and Portuguese community strongly opposed these matrimonyes. During the eighteenth century, both communities promulgated decrees that prohibited mixed marriages, on penalty of exclusion from the community as full members (*Yachidim*). These decrees applied to mixed High German Portuguese marriages, as well as to those marrying coloureds. From the mid nineteenth century onwards, attention was directed to mixed Jewish-Christian marriages instead.

Chapter V addresses the ways in which Jews were perceived and categorized by non-Jews. As is argued, different images of the Surinamese Jews prevailed throughout history. These images were particularly contradictory during the nineteenth century, at times even at odds with one another. Chapter VI to VIII focus on the self-understanding of the Surinamese Jews and how this (collective) self-understanding was shaped by their interaction with other segments of the colonial society of Suriname. In Chapter VI, then, some of the critical moments in the process of a Surinamese-Jewish creolization are addressed through a case study of the Jewish cemeteries in Suriname. The nineteenth century did not only witness the rise of a specific form of creole sepulchral art at the Jewish cemeteries, but also some fundamental conflicts related to burial rites, gravestones, and cemetery space which reflect changing notions of Surinamese Jewishness or, at the very least, can be read as a contemporary critique of the dominant conceptions of Surinamese-Jewish identity at that time. Chapter VII discusses the relation between the Portuguese and High German communities. As is argued, cultural differences that originated from the ‘Old World’ were transplanted into the ‘New World’ where their meaning altered. In Suriname, internal differences between the Portuguese and High German communities became centred on the issue of a colonial elite status – and the dilemmas such identifications raised – versus religious defined notions of Jewishness.

In Chapter VIII, I show how the making of Surinamese Jewishness was inextricably bound to Suriname’s changing colonial social order: issues of colour and social status became intertwined in the history of the coloured Jews and their incorporation in the inner circles of the Surinamese-Jewish community. The relation between the Jewish community and the coloured Jews is characterized by a remarkable combination of exclusion, inclusion and intermingling. The transformation from a racial to a *halakhic*-defined community, halfway into the nineteenth century, marks one of the critical events in Surinamese-Jewish history, and appears as a turning point in the history of the Surinamese Jews. By way of conclusion, I will revisit the historical questions and theoretical problems set out at the beginning and try to reflect on them, adding insights from the research itself.

Some notes on terminology

Writing about identity issues in historical studies brings along some anachronistic terminology. After all, the interest in and vocabulary of identity and collective identifications is a current phenomenon. The first time I encountered the term ‘identity’ in the Surinamese-Jewish community archives, as a designation of Surinamese-Jewish bounded groupness and its supposed characteristics, was in a document dated in the 1970s. The concept of identity was unknown to Jews living in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, nor did they perceive themselves as ‘Surinamese Jews’. They referred to themselves as ‘Hebrews of the Portuguese Jewish Nation’ or ‘Hebrews of the High German Jewish Nation’, or simply ‘being of the

[Portuguese or High German] Nation’ or ‘belonging to the Nation’, and ‘living in this colony’.

During the nineteenth and twentieth century, the official names of the congregations were altered into ‘Netherlands Portuguese Israelite Community’ (Nederlands Portugees Israelitische Gemeenschap) and ‘Netherlands Israelite Community’ (Nederlands Israelitische Gemeenschap). However, for convenience I will use the designations ‘Portuguese Jewish’ and ‘High German Jewish’ throughout this study. The High German community not only included Jews that originated from German territories; also, East European Jews from Poland, the Baltic area and Russia were included in the High German community.<sup>71</sup> The Portuguese Jewish community also included Jews of Spanish origin. Following Daniel Swetschinski’s objections against a general usage of ‘Sephardi’, I will only use ‘Sephardi’ to refer to the Jews of medieval Spain and Portugal and their immediate descendants.<sup>72</sup> The same goes for my use of ‘Ashkenazi’, a term I will only use as a general reference to the cultural orientation of East European Jews. Surinamese Jews never referred to themselves as ‘Sephardi’ or ‘Ashkenazi’.

In this study, the notion of ‘community’ is used often; however, some critical remarks are in place. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have pointed at the analytical problems that arise with the use of ‘community’. Whether used as a euphemism for civil society, in reference to an ethnic or religious group; or racially, to refer to a group of persons with a shared skin-colour; the notion of community in either case assumes a ‘given collectivity’ or ‘an organic wholeness’, which rarely fits reality.<sup>73</sup> In the words of Anthias and Yuval-Davis, ‘This ‘natural community’ does not allow for an ideological and material construction, whose boundaries, structures and norms are the result of constant struggles and negotiations, or more general social developments’.<sup>74</sup> It may seem somewhat paradoxical to use such an indefinite concept in a study of contested notions of belonging, but is in my opinion largely inevitable for want of a better, more definite concept.

‘Community’ will be used in different connotations throughout this study. First, ‘community’ is used to refer to the combined population of Jews in Suriname and their

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<sup>71</sup> The ‘High’ in High German refers to the mountainous features of the central and southern German territories. It found its way as a denominator of a Jewish group through the field of language. Yiddish, a Germanic language written in Hebrew characters that found its origin in the mediaeval ghettos in central Europe out of several Germanic dialects, is ranked amongst the High German languages. When Yiddish expanded eastwards during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the denominator ‘High German Jews’ came to include East European Jews as well. Today these Jews are often referred to as Ashkenazi Jews (Ashkenaz means German in Hebrew).

<sup>72</sup> Swetschinski 2000:xii.

<sup>73</sup> Anthias 1992:157-170.

<sup>74</sup> Anthias 1992:163.

mutual social relationships and also in a more restricted form to the religious Jewish congregations, especially when the topic under focus applies to both Portuguese and High German Jews. Persons of Jewish descent, who were non-observing, and not affiliated with either the Portuguese-Jewish or the High German community, are not excluded from this definition a priori. However, their stories do not predominate in this study as they generally manoeuvred outside the scope of the Jewish community leaders. When a certain passage refers to either the Portuguese or High German Jews this will be made explicit by referring to the Portuguese-Jewish community or High German Jewish community. Whenever a certain passage refers to the religious congregation, but not necessarily to all Portuguese and/or High German Jews, this will be made explicit by the use of the term 'congregation' instead of the more indefinite terminology of 'community'.

Colonial slave societies like Suriname were characterized by their general obsession with different shades of skin-colour and the status attached. In this study, constructed notions of commonality whether based on skin colour or religion play an important role. Some have argued that we should reject the categories and cultural distinctions on which colonial rule was once invested.<sup>75</sup> However, if we do reject these categories or name them differently, how are we to understand and study the subjects of these categories without running the risk of creating new categories with a-historic meaning? Throughout this study, I have chosen to leave denominations as 'white', 'black' or 'coloured' non-capitalized, nor use constant quotation marks, to emphasize their socially constructed character. A critical stance towards the constructed categories and their shifting meanings throughout the colonial era is however part of the general subject of this study.

Further, I have chosen to refer to the group of Jews from mixed Afro-Jewish descent as 'coloured Jews' (without quotation marks) throughout this study. In the historical documents, this group is generally referred to as 'mulatto Jews' (*mulatten joden*), while they referred to themselves as *couleurlingen* (coloureds). Although, I do not believe that we should always and automatically use the term by which people refer to themselves in academic studies; in this particular case, the different terms have a rather different connotation. In colonial Suriname, mulatto meant mixed blood with one white parent and one black parent. The term 'coloured' was far more indefinite, and included the lighter skinned people of mixed descent as well. In a colour sensitive society as Suriname, this may exactly be the reason why the group of mixed Jewish descent referred to themselves as 'coloureds' instead of 'mulattos'.

Finally, note that all translations of non-English citations are mine unless noted otherwise. When available, I have used English published editions of originally non-English literature to accommodate verifiability. In the case of *Essay Historique* of

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<sup>75</sup> Stoler 2002b:89.

David Cohen Nassy (1788), the English translation from 1974 contains many grammatical mistakes and odd phrasings. For the benefit of readability, some irksome errors have been removed in quoted excerpts taken from this edition.