

## Still Life: Sephardi, Ashkenazi, and West African Art and Form in Suriname's Jewish Cemeteries

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### Introduction: The Iconography of Tombstones

Tombstones represent a recently recognized yet still largely neglected source for unraveling the historical past. Cemetery and gravestone study is “increasingly multi-disciplinary, involving the arts, humanities, and social sciences, and while studies date back more than 100 years, it is still an emerging field.”<sup>1</sup> The investigation of Jewish sepulchres also commenced in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its development continues to be hampered by an academic print culture that regards sculpted stones and cemeteries as largely peripheral. The destruction of Jewish cemeteries through the ages, which has “obliterated most ancestral records and monuments,” has also contributed to the scholarly neglect of medieval and early-modern death memorials.<sup>2</sup>

The historian's focus on the written word has also meant that stone imagery is at most a secondary consideration. Research on Jewish

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\* This article is drawn from my forthcoming book, co-authored with Rachel Frankel, *Remnant Stones: The Jewish Cemeteries and Synagogue of Suriname* (Cincinnati, 2005). I thank Hebrew Union College Press for permission to publish it here. I am grateful to Susan Shapiro for sources on Ukrainian, Moldavian, and Bohemian and Moravian cemeteries, and to Kay Dian Kriz for her comments and helpful suggestions. Abbreviations are as follows: NA=Nationaal Archief (National Archives, the Hague); GAA=Gemeente Archief, Amsterdam (Municipal Archives, Amsterdam); C=Cassipora cemetery; J=Jodensavanne cemetery; OS=old Sephardi cemetery; OA=old Ashkenazi cemetery. The latter four abbreviations, referred to throughout this article, are meant for use with my co-authored book.

1. Gary S. Foster and Richard L. Hummel, “Applications of Developing Technologies to Cemetery Studies,” *Markers* 17 (2000): 111. Systematic inventorying of epitaphs began at the turn of the last century. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, Leopold Zunz (1794–1886) urged documentation of Congregation Shearith Israel's oldest burial ground. In 1902, Mrs. N. Taylor Phillips enlisted Reverend Abraham H. Nieto to transcribe the inscriptions of this modest necropolis. Nieto completed partial transcriptions of 75 out of 107 epitaphs. David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone: Early Jewish Settlers, 1682–1831* (New York, 1952), viii–ix.

2. Rochelle Weinstein, “Sepulchral Monuments of the Jews of Amsterdam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries” (Ph.D. diss., 2 vols., New York University, 1979), 1:

sepulchres has thus focused on inscriptions, and has been primarily concerned with local community history, genealogy of distinguished members, and linguistic aspects.<sup>3</sup> The primacy of epitaphic textual study over art is partly due to the dearth or absence of iconography on the earliest tombstones of Europe. In the Middle Ages, illustrative imagery on Jewish funereal slabs diminished in quantity and halted developmentally, resulting in the “forbidding and ascetic look” of diasporic cemeteries.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the methodological approach of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, with its generally exclusive attention to manuscript and published texts, has since the nineteenth century dissuaded investigators from considering ornamental stones as historical evidence.<sup>5</sup>

Only in the early twentieth century did serious consideration of commemorative imagery develop. Even when modest attention was drawn to these artifacts as objects of art, carved images were largely ignored because of the disdain among art historians for so-called folk art.<sup>6</sup> Modern historians, too, have been reluctant to consider stone pictographs as either aesthetically worthy or as narrative repositories. David de Sola Pool summarily dismissed the iconography of New York’s oldest Jewish tombstones as failing to exhibit “high artistic worth” and

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3. David Noevich Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones in Ukraine and Moldova* (Moscow, 1993), 7. See, for example, K. Lieben, *Grabsteinschriften des Prager israelitischen alten Friedhof* (Prague, 1856), and M. Schwab, *Inscriptions hébraïques en France* (Paris, 1898), among other items listed in Goberman’s bibliography at 26–27. Among non-Judaic Studies scholars studying U.S. sites, the “central focus of modern gravestone studies is the carved icon, not the words on the stone or the arrangements of stones in a burying ground or other possible emphases.” This perhaps represented the status of the field in 1980, as the authors clarify: “Literary approaches to gravestones and the early culture of death—and serious study of American epitaphs—has yet to begin. . . .” Dianna Hume George and Malcolm A. Nelson, “Resurrecting the Epitaph,” *Markers I* (1980): 85. In contrast, ornamental sepulchral monuments have long comprised a traditional aspect of art historiography. Rochelle Weinstein, “Women of Valor in Commemorative Imagery,” *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1982), 51.

4. Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones*, 7, 10. Goberman attributes this to “the restrictive spirit of medieval scholastics.” Another influence may have been Christianity, for elaborate catacombs and sarcophagi also disappeared in Christian art during the Middle Ages. Franz Landsberger, *A History of Jewish Art* (Cincinnati, 1946), 198.

5. For a discussion of this neglect see Vivian B. Mann, ed., *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, 2000), 17, 143, 205, n. 36. Leopold Zunz’s call to document Congregation Shearith Israel’s oldest burial ground, as noted above, suggests that some members of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement were receptive to non-conventional historical sources, but whether or not he had art in mind remains conjectural. For a personal reflection on the neglect of art in Jewish Studies, see Joseph Gutmann, *My Life of Jewish Learning: In Search of Jewish Art, the Forgotten Image—What can Jewish History Learn from Christian and Jewish Art?* (New York, 2002).

6. Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones*, 7–8, 10.

as betraying “primitive simplicity.”<sup>7</sup> Studies adorned on their front covers or inside pages with photographs of elaborately decorated stones devote little if any discussion to these non-verbal testimonies, treating ornamental tombstones as pleasing to the eye, but implicitly impenetrable or unworthy of in-depth analysis.<sup>8</sup> In the last decades, a handful of scholars, most notably Minna Rozen, Michael Studemund-Halévy, and Rochelle Weinstein, have developed theoretical approaches to the iconography and form of Jewish sepulchres.<sup>9</sup> Such studies demonstrate that pictorial depiction provides information that inscriptions and

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7. De Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, 162–63.

8. See, for example, Richard D. Barnett and P. Wright, *The Jews of Jamaica: Tombstone Inscriptions, 1663–1880* (Jerusalem, 1997), Johan Hartog, *The Jews and St. Eustatius* (St. Maarten, Netherlands Antilles, 1976), and the illustrious tombstones on their covers. Egon Wolff and Frieda Wolff pay scant attention to imagery. See their *Sepulturas de Israelitas: S. Francisco Xavier Rio de Janeiro* (São Paulo, 1976), and *Sepulturas de Israelitas-II: Uma pesquisa em mais de trinta cemitérios não israelitas* (Rio de Janeiro, 1982), which mentions only the occurrence of the star of David, the menorah, and the cross, as these generally distinguish Jewish from Christian decedents. They include a brief, general discussion of Brazil’s Jewish funereal iconography in their *Sepulturas IV: Simpolismo e Arte Sepulcral Judaica e Outros Ensaios* (Rio de Janeiro, 1989). Historians of Siret’s Jewish cemetery in present-day Romania have classified the artistic styles of tombstone iconography as neo-classical, baroque, and rococo. They have divided the art taxonomically into the following categories: animals; birds; mythological animals; botanical motifs; Jewish symbols; architectural elements; other objects (such as the altar and bookshelves); and geometrical motifs. The discussions are bereft of footnotes. Thomas Weggemann, et al., *Die sprechenden Steine von Siret* (N.p., 2001), 27, 39. Hannelore Künzl (*Jüdische Grabkunst von der Antike bis heute* [Darmstadt, 1999], 203–10) broadly categorizes Jewish tombstone iconography into “motifs concerning persons”; “general symbols”; and “messianic symbols”, with brief discussions of the motifs within each category. Isaac S. Emmanuel’s *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao* (New York, 1957) devotes seven thoughtful pages to a discussion of sepulchral art, but in his study of Salonika’s cemetery limits his discussion of iconography to less than a page, concluding only that the city’s Jewish tombstones are much simpler than those of Curaçao and Amsterdam. Isaac S. Emmanuel, *Matsevat Saloniki: be-tseruf toledot hayehem shel gedolei ha-kehila* (Jerusalem, 1963), part I, 18. Descriptive and some analytical information on iconography appear in D. Henriques de Castro, *Keur van grafstenen op de Portugees-Israëlietische begraafplaats te Ouderkerk aan de Amstel* (Ouderkerk aan de Amstel, 1999). See also Petr Ehl, et al., *Old Bohemian and Moravian Jewish Cemeteries* (Prague, 1991), 13–17.

9. Minna Rozen, *Hasköy Cemetery: Typology of Tombstones* (Philadelphia, 1994); Michael Studemund-Halévy, *Biographisches Lexikon der Hamburger Sefarden: Die Grabinschriften des Portugiesenfriedhofs van der Königstrasse in Hamburg-Altona* (Hamburg, 2000); and Weinstein, “Sepulchral Monuments.” See also Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones*. A pictorially lush, but methodologically unsatisfactory, attempt at tombstone typology is Jan Herman, *Jewish Cemeteries in Bohemia and Moravia* (Prague, 1981). A popular book, also richly illustrated, classifies Jewish funereal art into three “areas proscribed by the second commandment: the heavens above, the earth below, and the waters under the earth.” Arnold Schwartzman, *Graven Images: Graphic Motifs of the Jewish Gravestone* (New York, 1993), 16.

conventional archival sources often do not, including evidence of cross-cultural influence, religious worldview, aesthetic sensibilities, social status of women and children, and how all these aspects changed over time.

The present essay examines from a historical viewpoint the art of selected tombstones from Suriname's oldest Jewish burial plots, which date from the late seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries. Particular attention is given to influences resulting from the interactions of Jews with blacks and European-origin Christians, and Sephardim with Ashkenazim, identities that frequently converged in this frontier society.<sup>10</sup> Since knowledge of the Hebrew, Portuguese, and Spanish languages is almost completely absent among Suriname's contemporary population and tourists, the most intellectually accessible aspect of Jewish tombstones is not their epitaphs but rather their accompanying art. The aim here is both to suggest ways to approach the iconographic results of a thorough cemetery inventory, particularly to visitors and guides utilizing these burial grounds as outdoor museums, and to demonstrate how these findings may illuminate the past and inform larger historical studies.<sup>11</sup>

### Suriname's Jews and their Cemeteries

Suriname, just north of Brazil, sandwiched between Guyana and French Guiana, is a former Dutch colony roughly the size of the state of Georgia in the United States. Its population groups claim descent from Native America, sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, subcontinental India, China, and Indonesia, earning Suriname the nickname, "the land of seven peoples."<sup>12</sup> The official language of Suriname is Dutch, which is spoken by about half the population, while some 80 to 90 percent of the

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10. For a socio-historical approach to the frontier in Suriname see R.A.J. van Lier, *Frontier Society: A Social Analysis of the History of Surinam* (The Hague, 1971).

11. On the cemetery as open-air museum see Albert N. Hamscher, "Talking Tombstones: History in the Cemetery," *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History* 17: 2 (January 2003): 40.

12. F.E.M. Mitrasing, *Suriname: Land of Seven Peoples: Social Mobility in a Plural Society—An Ethno-Historical Study* (Paramaribo, [1979?]). Conventionally, the seven peoples are understood as Native Americans, maroons, Creoles, Europeans, Javanese, Hindustanis, and Chinese. In reality, the diversity is even greater, encompassing various Native American groups, six maroon tribes, and recent immigrants from Lebanon, Guyana, Haiti, and Brazil. Maroons are descendants of enslaved Africans who fled plantation slavery and forged autonomous communities in Suriname's wilderness. In Suriname, Creoles are Eurafricans who trace their ancestry to manumission or emancipation, as opposed to marronage.

populace speak Sranan Tongo, a mixture of English, Dutch, and West African languages, with some admixtures of Portuguese and Hebrew.<sup>13</sup>

Suriname was home to the largest Jewish community in the Caribbean by the late eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> The colony's first Jewish settlers were of Iberian origin and arrived beginning in the 1650s from various parts of Western Europe and the Americas. Under tolerant English (1650–1667) and Dutch colonial rule (from 1667), they established an agrarian settlement in the midst of the Surinamese jungle, some thirty kilometers south of the capital city, Paramaribo. Situated along the Suriname River, this settlement, whose two cemeteries and synagogue ruins survive to this day, developed into an autonomous village known as Jodensavanne

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13. Alan West-Durán, "Suriname," in Alan West-Durán, ed., *African Caribbeans: A Reference Guide* (Westport, CT, and London, 2003), 177; Jacques Arends, "The History of the Surinamese Creoles I: A Sociohistorical Survey," in Eithne B. Carlin and Jacques Arends, eds., *Atlas of the Languages of Suriname* (Leiden, 2002), 118–19; Norval Smith, "The History of the Surinamese Creoles II: Origin and Differentiation," *idem*, 139–41, 146–47. About 4 percent of Sranan Tongo consists of Portuguese-derived words. Sephardic immigrants brought with them the Portuguese and Spanish languages, while all Ashkenazi material thus far examined is in Dutch or, to a lesser extent, in Hebrew.

14. Suriname's only rival in terms of Jewish population size was Curaçao. Figures for Curaçao, ranging from 1,200 to 1,500 Jews, variably represent an inaccurate and speculative extrapolation based on number of families, or a misreading of a 1789 census. See, for example, Isaac S. and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, *A History of the Jews in the Netherlands Antilles*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati, 1970), 1: 277 ("1,200 souls, more or less"); Cornelis Christiaan Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in the Guianas, 1680–1791* (Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands and Dover, NH, 1985), 115, 239, 243, 509; and Jonathan I. Israel, "The Jews of Dutch America," in Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering, eds., *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450–1800* (New York and Oxford, 2001), 337. More systematic research and analysis of censuses indicate that there is no proof that Curaçao's Jewish population ever exceeded 1,100, culminating in the 1780s. See Wim Klooster, "Subordinate But Proud: Curaçao's Free Blacks and Mulattoes in the Eighteenth Century," in *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 68: 3/4 (1994): 283–300; Wim Klooster, *Illicit Riches: Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648–1795* (Leiden, 1998), 61; Wim Klooster, "Jews in Suriname and Curaçao," 365, n. 23. For an accurate transcription of the 1789 Curaçao census, showing a tally of 1,095 Jews on the island, see Maritza Coomans-Eustatia, "Het oog van de Engelsen gericht op Curaçao, Aruba en Bonaire," *Breekbare Banden: Feiten en visies over Aruba, Bonaire en Curaçao na de Vrede van Munster, 1648–1998* (Bloemendaal, The Netherlands, 1998), 142. Suriname's Jewish population peaked at 1,350 in 1791, including 900 Sephardim, a figure close to estimates of the Sephardi population in 1787 (834 souls). See Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in the Guianas*, 309, and Robert Cohen, *Jews in Another Environment: Surinam in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden, 1991), 63 (citing David Cohen Nassy's census). By comparison, the Jewish population of Jamaica in 1770 and Barbados in 1750 peaked at 900 and from 400 to 490, respectively. See Stephen Alexander Fortune, *Merchants and Jews: The Struggle for British West Indian Commerce, 1650–1750* (Gainesville, FL, 1984), 48.

(Jews' Savannah). By the mid-eighteenth century, Jodensavanne was surrounded by dozens of satellite plantations sprawling north- and southward, dominating the stretch of the river. These Sephardic-owned plots, mostly devoted to the cultivation and processing of sugar and worked by African slaves, collectively formed the largest Jewish agricultural community in the world and the only Jewish settlement in the Americas granted virtual self-rule. Despite religious and secular laws discouraging miscegenation, Jews and enslaved Africans did not always maintain their separate boundaries. Sephardic unions with female captives, presumably predicated not only on rape but also consensual relations,<sup>15</sup> gave rise to the conversion of slaves, and soon produced a small but influential mulatto Jewish community. Members of this class were second-class members of the community, relegated to burial in the outskirts of the cemetery until the turn of the nineteenth century, when social and legal distinctions between European- and African-origin Jews began to disintegrate.<sup>16</sup>

Sephardic settlement paved the way for the influx of hundreds of Ashkenazi Jews, who began to immigrate in the late seventeenth century from various parts of Europe. Arriving in Suriname, these Ashkenazim inherited some of the privileges and immunities granted their Jewish

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15. This is a tricky historiographical issue due to the reticence of sources. A master manumitting a slave child often cited his desire to acknowledge the captive mother's loyal service, but left unarticulated the precise nature of his relationship with these individuals. Such was the case of David Uziel de Avilar, owner of the Drie Gebroeders plantation, who in 1766 manumitted the infant Gabriel as a reward for "the good service I always had from my mulatta, Pequinmaem." As the child was "of the Judaic religion," it is reasonable to assume that de Avilar was the father. NA, Oud Notarieel Archief, no. 789, 142. Rape of African-origin slave women was rarely discussed, and even then only euphemistically. See, for example, F. A. Kuhn, *Beschouwing van den Toestand der Surinaamsche Plantagieslaven: Eene Oeconomisch-Geneeskundige Bijdrage tot Verbetering Deszelven* (Amsterdam, 1828), 3. Kuhn, a physician in Suriname, subtly indicates that sailors would rape African women and girls aboard slave ships, thereby transmitting sexual diseases to them. From the extensive diary of the eighteenth-century Jamaican planter Thomas Thistlewood we know that enslaved women often initiated and carefully cultivated sexual relations with their white masters. See Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

16. See Cohen, *Jews in Another Environment*, 156–74. An example of the erasure of social distinctions is the decision of Beraha VeSalom's communal leaders to abolish all differences in burial rites between *Jehidim* (Sephardim classified as white) and *congregantes* (Eurafrican Jews or white Jews intra-married with the former). In 1802, they concluded that "pious deeds must be carried out without prejudice," and that in cases of misvoth, that is, administering last rites to the dead, "every distinction is improper and disagreeable." NA, Nederlandse Portugees-Israëlitische Gemeente in Suriname, no. 437, Extracto do Registro de Notulas & Resolucoems do Collegio dos Sres ao MM & Deputados da Nacao do KKBVS, April 13, 1802.

predecessors, but were not permitted to own land on the Savanne nor establish their own tribunal. Generally barred from the colony's interior, most Ashkenazim settled in the capital city, where they usually engaged as petty traders and merchants. Slave rebellions, maroon attacks, the general collapse of Suriname's economy, soil depletion, absentee land ownership, and a ravaging fire, all contributed to the demise of the old Sephardic jungle settlement, beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century. By the close of that century, Ashkenazim formed over half the Jewish population of the colony, and the Sephardic transition to Paramaribo was nearly a *fait accompli*. By 1817, 82 percent of the colony's Sephardic Jews and 95 percent of Ashkenazim made their home in Paramaribo, together comprising over a third of the city's white population.<sup>17</sup>

Though Ashkenazim adopted many of the religious customs of Sephardim, they maintained separate cemeteries in Paramaribo. The earliest legible epitaph in the old Ashkenazi cemetery, originally adjacent to the old Sephardi, dates to 1716. Cartographic evidence reveals that the two adjacent burial grounds of Paramaribo, one Judeo-Hispanic, the other Judeo-German, were separated merely by a path in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, unwittingly symbolizing a sometimes fragile division between Sephardim and Ashkenazim that would become increasingly tenuous as the nineteenth century progressed. Evidence of cultural borrowing, shared space, and intramarriage is readily apparent. Tombstones in the Ashkenazi cemetery were laid flat, in consonance with Sephardi custom, and a number of names and titles carved on the stones speak to intramarriage and cultural exchange.<sup>18</sup> Jews of Germanic origin also emulated their Sephardic predecessors through extracommunal

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17. Robert Cohen, "Surinam Jews under British Rule: A Contemporary's Report," *Michael* 10 (1986): 41.

18. Generally, the Ashkenazi custom is to erect tombstones in the upright position. The reason for this divergence is unknown. Hirsch Jakob Zimmels, *Ashkenazim and Sephardim: Their Relations, Differences, and Problems as Reflected in the Rabbinical Responsa* (New York, 1996), 186; David Davidovitch, "Tombs and Tombstones; Art," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 15 (Jerusalem, 1971): 1223. Horizontally-laid stones reflect prevailing usage in the medieval Iberian peninsula and in the post-Expulsion eastern Sephardic diaspora. See Rozen, *Hasköy Cemetery*, 22, 27. David de Sola Pool postulates that the practice stems from the attempt to keep graves safe from ferreting animals. He notes that horizontally-placed stones have another pragmatic advantage: they withstand weathering far more than upright stones, which may fall and break, and are also more easily protected when soil and grass reclaim their territory. De Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, 26, 160. Hannah R. London provides the folkloric explanation that Sephardic "flat stones. . . indicate that in death all men are level with the earth." Hannah R. London, "Shades of My Forefathers," in *Miniatures and Silhouettes of Early American Jews* (Rutland, VT, 1970), 81.



relations, giving rise to a parallel Ashkenazi/African syncretism that endures until today.<sup>19</sup>

### Primary Sources for Suriname's Jewish History

The archives of Suriname's Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities were largely transported to the Netherlands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early in the twentieth century, researchers and communal leaders began to turn their attention to an unconventional historical repository: the in-situ brick and stone monuments of Suriname's Jewish community, particularly those of Jodensavanne. These sites were viewed as historic heritage sites, and thus the initial intention was solely to remove the thick overgrowth from the tombstones and synagogue ruins in order to restore them. P.A. Hilfman, leader of the Sephardic community of Suriname, decried the dilapidated condition of the abandoned village. "I was greatly moved by the sad condition which the two cemeteries there were in," he wrote in 1909. "Surinam can boast of an exceedingly small number of historical spots and I think it would be worth the while to take proper care of them in order to preserve them."<sup>20</sup> These efforts were repeated several times over the course of the century, sometimes under government sponsorship.<sup>21</sup>

Not until mid-century did researchers begin to envision the burial grounds as archives to be inventoried and analyzed. In 1948, researcher Frederik Oudschans Dentz published a partial inventory of Jodensavanne's cemetery, including Latin-scripted epitaphs (but excluding the Hebrew, which he could not read) and a scaled plan.<sup>22</sup> In the mid-1990s, Arthur Strelick, a staff member of the American Embassy in Paramaribo, and

19. For example, Gracia van Emden, born de la Parra and buried at Jodensavanne, was evidently married to an Ashkenazi (d. 1827, J152), while the reverse is true for the widow A.H. de la Parra, born Samson, also buried in Jodensavanne (d. 1858, J181). The Sephardic family name, Sanches, appears several times on epitaphs at the old Ashkenazi cemetery (see, for example, OA51; OA150; OA220). For Sephardic influence on language and first names on Ashkenazic tombstones, see OA87; OA89; OA90; and OA226. For a historical overview and inventory and analysis of Suriname's Jewish monuments, see Ben-Ur and Frankel, *Remnant Stones*.

20. P.A. Hilfman, "Notes on the History of the Jews in Surinam," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 18 (1909): 183-84.

21. See, for example, A.G. Besier, *De Groene Hel: Een Nederlands Concentratiekamp in Suriname, 1 maart 1942 tot 15 juli 1946* (Bunne, The Netherlands, 1994); and I. Harold Sharfman, "Jungle Jews of Guyana, Guiana, and Timbuctoo," *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, April 6, 1979, 29.

22. Frederik Oudschans Dentz, "Wat er Overbleef van het Kerkhof en de Synagoge van de Joden-Savanne in Suriname," *De West-Indische Gids* 7-8 (July-August 1948): 210-25.



John H. de Bye, a Surinamese surgeon, novelist, and historical researcher, partially inventoried the Cassipora cemetery, but made only their map of the cemetery layout available on their website.<sup>23</sup> In the absence of a published complete survey of these tombstones and cemeteries, researchers and scholars from Suriname and abroad visiting these burial sites over the years have resorted to their own selective studies, incorporating fragmentary references to tombstone epitaphs and art in their publications.<sup>24</sup> Archaeologists, too, have been lured to these burial sites. Suriname's Archaeological Service studied Jodensavanne's cemetery in 1981, but the results were not fruitful. The expedition, the director lamented, citing the deteriorating properties of the soil and mismanagement, provided field training, but few scientific results.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, between 1995 and 2002, the only extant remains of Suriname's oldest Jewish monuments were thoroughly documented and analyzed by New York architect and independent scholar Rachel Frankel and the present author. These include three Sephardic cemeteries dating from 1666 to 1873, one Ashkenazi cemetery dating from the 1680s to the late nineteenth century, and the brick remains of Kehilla Kodesh Beraha VeSalom (Holy Congregation Blessing and Peace), a seventeenth-century synagogue in the midst of the jungle. The results of this seven-year study will appear in 2005.<sup>26</sup> The newer Sephardi and Ashkenazi burial grounds

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23. <http://www.cq-link.sr/personal/debye/index/>. A 1980 expedition for a museum exhibition explored the synagogues and cemeteries of the Sephardic Caribbean, including Jodensavanne, but did not produce an inventory. Micha Bar-Am, Mordehay Arbell, et al., *'La Nacion': The Spanish and Portuguese Jews in the Caribbean* (Tel Aviv, 1981).

24. Günter Böhm, "The First Sephardic Cemeteries in South America and the West Indies," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 25:1 (Spring 1991): 3-14; Manfred R. Lehmann, "Surinam's Jodensavanne and Several of Its Religious Leaders," in Jozeph Michman, ed., *Dutch Jewish History: Proceedings of the Fifth Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, 3 vols. (Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands, 1993) 3: 239-51; Manfred R. Lehmann, "Our Own Banana Republic," *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, April 1978, 7; Jacob Beller, *Jews in Latin America* (New York, 1969), 109; Oudschans Dentz, "Wat er Overbleef"; Frederik Oudschans Dentz, "The Name of the Country Surinam as a Family Name," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 48:4 (June 1959): 262-64; Hilfman, "Notes on the History of the Jews in Surinam," 181-83; Mordechai Arbell, "Jewish Settlement in the Island of Tobago," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1994), 310; Mordechai Arbell, "Jewish Settlements in the French Colonies in the Caribbean (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Cayenne) and the 'Black Code,'" in Bernardini and Fiering, *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West*, 299, 311, n. 44 (citing an incorrect death date).

25. Benjamin S. Mitrasingh, "Een voorbeschouwing van het archeologisch onderzoek in Joden Savanne (Archaeological investigation at Joden Savanne: A Preliminary Report)," *Mededelingen van het Surinaams Museum* 41 (December 1983): 6.

26. Ben-Ur and Frankel, *Remnant Stones*.

in Paramaribo, still in use and dating from the nineteenth century, remain undocumented.

Numbering two hundred souls today, Suriname's Jewish community manages against great odds to survive. Nowhere is this more apparent than in its monumental efforts over the past decade to preserve, inventory, and open to the public its historic sites. The Stichting Jodensavanne (Foundation Jodensavanne), established in 1971 and revived in 1998 by descendants of Suriname's Jewish settlers, has joined forces with local and foreign researchers to preserve this abandoned village and promote it as part of Suriname's heritage, so that it is accessible and comprehensible to visitors. Professionals and volunteers from the former Dutch colony, either descended directly from Jews or related through intermarriage, are also responsible for the rescue of Paramaribo's Jewish burial grounds from environmental and human destruction. Their dedication to these historical monuments is perhaps the most enduring living legacy of Suriname's Jewish community.<sup>27</sup>

The table on the following pages briefly describes each site.

### Interpreting Symbols: The Worldview of Suriname's Jews

Messianism was one of the many religious currents informing early Sephardic communities in Brazil and the Caribbean. Both Isaac Aboab, the first New-World rabbi, and João de Yllan, Curaçao's first Jewish settler, were later secret followers of Shabbetai Tsvi.<sup>28</sup> A significant number of Sephardim present in Suriname by the 1670s had likely resided in Amsterdam when Tsvi's proclamations ignited the Jewish community with expectant fervor.<sup>29</sup> The opportunity to establish a self-ruling agrarian community may have evoked for new immigrants the diasporic ideal of religious and political self-determination in the agricultural setting of the Promised Land. Yet the Sephardic founders of the colony's first Jewish congregation preferred to turn inward, viewing

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27. Full acknowledgements appear in the preface of *Remnant Stones*. Special thanks go to the Israelitische Gemeente Suriname (formerly the Nederlands Israelitische Gemeente Suriname), the Foundation Jodensavanne, and Adriana van Alen-Koenraad, Philip Dikland, and Guido Robles, tireless professional volunteers and volunteer professionals.

28. Egon Wolff and Frieda Wolff, *Dicionário Biográfico I: Judaizantes e Judeus no Brasil, 1500-1808* (Rio de Janeiro, 1986), 77; Emmanuel and Emmanuel, *A History of the Jews in the Netherlands Antilles*, 1: 42.

29. This speculation is based on lists of Suriname's Jewish militia members and sugar plantation owners in 1669 and 1671, and the fact that much of Suriname's Sephardic population traced its recent origins to Amsterdam. See, for example, NA, Oud Archief Suriname, Raad van Politie, 210, Notulen, *passim*, and NA, Oud Archief Suriname, Raad van Politie, no. 210, notulen [minutes], January 10, 1671, 35b.

## Names, Locations, and Characteristics of the Cemeteries and Synagogue

Name of cemetery	Location	Dates of tombstones; total number of stones	Languages of tombstones (in order of frequency)	Distinguishing characteristics
Cassipora cemetery	In the jungle, off the Suriname River, and near the Cassipora Creek	1666–1873; 216 tombstones	Hebrew, Portuguese, Spanish, Aramaic, and Dutch	Oldest known Jewish cemetery of Suriname; Sephardic; inventoried 1998. Nearby was the oldest known Jewish settlement of the colony, whose synagogue was established by at least 1671.
Jodensavanne cemetery	In the jungle, off the Suriname River, roughly two kilometers from the Cassipora cemetery; in the heart of the Jewish village known as	1685–1873; 462 tombstones	Hebrew, Portuguese, Spanish, Aramaic, and Dutch	Sephardic; inventoried 1999; four known Ashkenazim are also buried here.

Kehilla Kodesh Beraha VeSalom	Jodensavanne (Jews' Savannah); a few meters away from the Beraha VeSalom synagogue	A few meters away from the Jodensavanne cemetery	Consecrated 1685	Brick remnants; surveyed 1997 and 1998
Old Sephardi cemetery	Paramaribo, originally located in what were once the outskirts of the city, in the Bloemendaal neighborhood, on the south side of the street known as Kwattaweg, in what is now the middle of the metropolis	1734-1904; 661 tombstones	Hebrew, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch Aramaic, English, and French	Original plot was sold in 1959; inventoried 2002. The stones were transferred to the new Sephardi cemetery and were haphazardly piled in the back of that graveyard and lay there until 2002, when they were transferred to the back of the Neveh Salom (Ashkenazi) synagogue on Keizerstraat.

Old Ashkenazi cemetery	Paramaribo, directly adjacent to the original site of the old Sephardi cemetery	1716 to 1883; 358 tombstones	Hebrew, Dutch, a few in Portuguese	Conservation and inventory work began in 2000.
New Sephardi cemetery	Paramaribo, on the Kwattaweg, eastward of the old Sephardi cemetery	1868-?; unknown number of tombstones	Unknown	Never inventoried; <i>sankofa</i> and <i>akoma</i> symbols are preserved here.
New Ashkenazi cemetery	Paramaribo; on the same street as and opposite to the old Ashkenazi cemetery	1825-?; unknown number of tombstones	Unknown	Never inventoried; <i>sankofa</i> and <i>akoma</i> symbols are preserved here.
Creole cemetery	In Jodensavanne, a few meters away from the Jewish cemetery	Late 19 <sup>th</sup> century to mid-20 <sup>th</sup> century; several dozen	Dutch	Most of the markers are wooden and severely effaced and/or rotted; a few bear metal plaques; inventoried 1998 and 2002.

their own settlement as a Jewish paradise. Their sense of apocalyptic “arrival” is expressed in the very name of the colony’s first synagogue, Beraha VeSalom. A commentary on the *Zohar* (*Book of Splendor*), which many contemporary scholars attribute to a kabbalist of thirteenth-century Castile,<sup>30</sup> indicates that Eden is found in the place of “the secrets of life, blessing, and peace [beraha vesalom].”<sup>31</sup> Eden, the paradise Adam and Eve enjoyed before their expulsion, was thus akin to Jodensavanne, a village where Jews were permitted to live autonomously and according to the strictures revealed to them by God. Prayer houses later established in the capital city would echo the idea that Suriname’s Jews were physically and spiritually fulfilled in their new homeland. The names of these *gebedshuizen* (prayerhouses), Sedek VeSalom (Righteousness and Peace) and Neveh Salom (Oasis of Peace), particularly when contrasted with the names of other colonial American congregations, depict a sense of actualized—as opposed to anticipatory—messianism.<sup>32</sup>

Jodensavanne’s founding members also expressed their localized Messianic worldview through architecture. Unlike any other synagogue in the Sephardi diaspora, to enter Beraha VeSalom one first traversed an open plaza. Four roads were laid in parallel and perpendicular pairs beside the riverfront. These came together in idealized geometry to form the synagogue plaza.<sup>33</sup> The quadrilateral layout mirrors one of the three occasions in the Hebrew Bible where “ideal (i.e., not extant) town planning is described.” In Numbers 2:1–31, the Lord directed each tribe “to encamp by its own standard, three tribes each on the north, south, east and west sides of a square in the center of which was the tent of meeting.” Jodensavanne was not the first site where such a plan was pondered. Architectural precedents can be found in Europe and colonial

30. Gershom G. Scholem explores this theory in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1974 [1941]), 156–204.

31. Shimon bar Yochai [traditionally ascribed author], Midrash Hane’elam, Bereshit, Parshat Hayei Sarah, in *Sefer HaZohar* (Vilna, 1923), 125a. The phrase is: ענין חיים ברכה ושלום. I thank Jonathan Sarna for pointing out this source, which confirms my idea of actualized, as opposed to, anticipatory messianism. On the Midrash Hane’elam see Scholem, *Major Trends*, especially 188.

32. Consider, for example, Philadelphia’s Mikveh Israel (Hope of Israel) and New York’s Shearith Israel (Remnant of Israel), which suggest anticipatory, as opposed to actualized, redemption. For an in-depth discussion of this theme see Ben-Ur and Frankel, *Remnant Stones*, Chapter Five.

33. The Messianic import of Jodensavanne’s layout and the architecture of its synagogue first appeared in Rachel Frankel, “Antecedents and Remnants of Jodensavanne: The Synagogues and Cemeteries of the First Permanent Plantation Settlement of New World Jews,” in Bernardini and Fiering, *Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West*, 394–436, and is more amply considered in Ben-Ur and Frankel, *Remnant Stones*.

North America (particularly New Haven, Connecticut), where visionaries sought to model their ideal or fledgling settlements on Christian utopianism, drawn from biblical directives for creating a “new Jerusalem.”<sup>34</sup>

While it is important to distinguish the village’s architects and founding members from later inhabitants, it is also reasonable to suspect that stone images in Suriname’s Jewish communities may have inherited some sense of this eschatological achievement, or perhaps drew from the larger well of traditional Jewish messianism. The temptation to “read” either actualized or anticipatory messianism into death monuments is enhanced by Jewish symbols themselves. Many commonplace icons, such as those relating to the ancient Temple cult, are derived from passages of the Hebrew Bible that were rabbinically interpreted as apocalyptic throughout the Jewish world. Such icons do not demonstrate Messianic fervor on their own, but may do so in conjunction with historical evidence derived from more conventional sources.

The complication is that Messianic sentiment is not found where one might expect it. Last wills and testaments of Suriname’s Jews through the centuries are mainly concerned with legal matters, particularly the transmission of moveable and immovable property. The few lines that do concern the spiritual are generally devoid of anything approaching apocalyptic content, such as references to the land of Israel, the resurrection of the dead, or national redemption.<sup>35</sup> Instead, decedents are typically concerned with the pragmatic, despite a long tradition of Hebrew ethical wills developed in both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi diasporas, and a larger European tradition of testaments as, first and foremost, religious statements.<sup>36</sup> Surinamese testators generally leave instructions for the burial of the body and prayers to be recited for the soul after death. Some declare their lifelong adherence to the Jewish faith and intention to die within it, reflecting an urge to shed their crypto-Jewish heritage, or commend their soul to God, begging His forgiveness for transgressing His “holy precepts.”<sup>37</sup> Special communal occasions, on

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34. Jodensavanne’s town plan was remarkably similar to that described in Johann Valentin Andreae’s utopian *Christianopolis*, published in 1619. John Archer, “Puritan Town Planning in New Haven,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 34 (1975): 140, 144–45. I am indebted to James Robertson for this source.

35. A similar pattern is observed in New York’s eighteenth-century Jewish wills. See Leo Hershkowitz, *Wills of Early New York Jews, 1704–1799* (New York, 1967).

36. Israel Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills* (Philadelphia, 1927); Philippe Ariès, *L’homme devant la mort* (Paris, 1977), 187–92.

37. Among the dozens of wills examined thus far that demonstrate these patterns are those of David, son of Isaac Messiah, February 8, 1717 (NA, Suriname Oud Notarieel Archief, no. 3); Ester de la Parra, widow of Samuel, son of Joseph Cohen Nassy, November 29, 1729 (NA, Suriname Oud Notarieel Archief, no. 9); Jacob Nunes d Larra, December



the other hand, did stimulate the composition of prayers or songs expressing redemptionist sentiment. These often evince actualized, as opposed to anticipatory, messianism. The centennial commemoration in 1785 of Beraha VeSalom's founding, for example, included a melodious Hebrew poem praising the congregation as a surrogate Jerusalem Temple.<sup>38</sup> It is not clear whether such manifestations expressed the perfunctory maxims of communal leaders, or are representative of collective communal sentiment inherited through the ages.<sup>39</sup> What is certain is that Judaism and Jewishness were transformed in Suriname through a complex combination of cross-cultural interactions and adaptation to a new, tropical environment, where individuals of African descent formed the overwhelming majority of the population.<sup>40</sup>

Anticipating the probability that future research will uncover further details on the worldview of Suriname's Jews, their values, and their aesthetic tastes, the following discussion suggests ways in which certain images lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. The aim here is not to produce a single, authoritative elucidation of this imagery, but rather to explore the production and reception of sepulchral art as a means of tapping information that only imagery can yield.<sup>41</sup>

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29, 1756 (NA, Oud Notarieel Archief, no. 781); and Abraham Gabay Fonseca, December 19, 1780 (Suriname Oud Notarieel Archief, no. 789). One of the few who mentioned the Land of Israel in his will was Isaac Bravo, who bequeathed 200 guilders to the *terra santa* (NA, Suriname Oud Notarieel Archief, no. 3, October 5, 1716). For an analysis of some seventy-five Sephardic wills from early modern Amsterdam, and a useful discussion of their worldview, see Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld, "Caridade Escapa Da Morte: Legacies to the Poor in Sephardi Wills from Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam," in Jozeph Michman, *Dutch Jewish History*, 3: 179–204.

38. David Baruh Louzada, Moses de Judah Piza, et al., *Beschryving van de Plechtigheden nevens de Lofdichten en gebeden, uitgesproken op het eerste Jubelfeest van de synagoguge der Portugeesche Joodsche Gemeente, op de Savane in de Colonie Suriname, genaamd Zegen en Vrede op den 12 den van Wynmaand des Jaars MDCCLXXXV* (Amsterdam, 1785), 3–5 in the Hebrew section.

39. Joseph Gutmann assumes that the increasingly Messianic art in Central European Ashkenazi synagogues in the early modern period is evidence that the synagogue was "a surrogate Temple," and that praying there reminded the worshiper that "he would behold the magnificent appurtenances of the messianic Temple of the future when all the exiles would be gathered to the Holy Land." Such an assumption is methodologically fraught, for we do not know the reaction of worshippers to these objects, much less the motivation for their design and execution. Joseph Gutmann, "Return in Mercy to Zion: A Messianic Dream in Jewish Art," in Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives* (Notre Dame, 1986), 240.

40. On the adaptation of Judaism and Jewish identity in Suriname, see Robert Cohen's groundbreaking *Jews in Another Environment*.

41. Here I am inspired by Kay Dian Kriz's approach to natural history in the early modern Caribbean. As she deftly summarizes: "Like the texts that accompany them, the

## The Provenance of Carved Tombstones

Materially, the orientation of Suriname's Jewish death memorials was poised to be wholly European, as most, if not all, stones were imported from across the Atlantic. In Cassipora, the oldest known jungle Jewish cemetery, 92 percent of grave markers are of sedimentary stone and 7 percent are of white marble, neither material native to Suriname.<sup>42</sup> Sedimentary stone includes limestone, an inexpensive and pliable material,<sup>43</sup> bluestone, and a bluestone/limestone mixture, and was preferable to marble, which was costlier and fragile. The colony's Jews, following the example of their Curaçaoan contemporaries, likely imported bluestone from Amsterdam and marble from Italy, via Amsterdam, which was the largest foreign importer of Italian marble by the second half of the seventeenth century. A few Sephardim may have had their tombstones imported from and engraved in Genoa, as did wealthy Iberian Jewish families in Curaçao.<sup>44</sup>

The cultural genesis of the stones' carvings is more difficult to trace. Since memorial sculptors generally did not sign their works, it is impossible to ascertain definitively the provenance of most of this art. Isaac S. Emmanuel found that several Sephardic sepulchral monuments in Curaçao at the beginning of the nineteenth century were executed on that island,<sup>45</sup> which would have been a conveniently nearby source for Suriname's Jewish clients, had not prevailing winds and currents impeded direct travel from the island to the Guyanas. It is thus likely that the majority of slabs originated in Amsterdam, whose Sephardic commu-

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visual images in natural histories serve a variety of functions that depend on the circumstances of their production and also on the particular conditions of their reception—that is, who was viewing them, when, and in what specific situations. No single analysis will produce a definitive reading of a particular natural history text or set of images.” Kriz’s strategy is to explore “one aspect of the complex and highly fluid process by which multiple meanings are produced through visual representation.” Kay Dian Kriz, “Curiosities, Commodities, and Transplanted Bodies in Hans Sloane’s ‘Natural History of Jamaica,’” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 57:1 (January 2000): 37.

42. 132 limestone; 56 bluestone/limestone; 9 bluestone; 15 white marble; 1 granite-white with black specks; and 3 undetermined.

43. Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones*, 8.

44. Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 129; Frits Scholten, *Sumptuous Memories: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Tomb Sculpture* (Zwolle, 2003), 50. White marble tombstones at Cassipora appear only in the eighteenth century and were most in demand by the de Meza and da Costa families, who occupied among the largest plots in the burial ground. Owing to the lack of on-site materials experts after the expedition in 1998, material inventories are not available for the Jodensavanne, old Sephardi, and old Ashkenazi cemeteries.

45. Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 129.

nity boasted accomplished calligraphers and carvers, and where the middle and upper classes, Jewish and Gentile alike, were avid consumers of “sumptuous” memorials.<sup>46</sup> Scattered tombstones in the Jodensavanne and old Sephardi cemeteries from the late eighteenth century bear incised signatures of artisans based in Boston and London, reflecting expanding trade with North America and Great Britain. None of these slabs bears ornamentation; these urban craftsmen—T. Patience of London and A. Cary of Boston—carved only letters.<sup>47</sup>

The artists of tombstone icons, like the authors of most poetic epitaphs, are in almost all cases unknown.<sup>48</sup> Though the identity of the sculptor is an important piece of the puzzle, it may not be as culturally relevant as the end-user, as Marc Michael Epstein has argued for illuminated Jewish manuscripts of the Middle Ages. Whether executed by a Jewish or Gentile sculptor, the *consumer* was Jewish. Not only did the client presumably have a say in choosing or styling the design, but he or she also imbued that design with Jewish cultural meaning, which became even more pronounced once the ornamental slab found the company of other decorated ledgers in a Sephardi or Ashkenazi burial ground.<sup>49</sup>

If carved icons convey cultural influences, it is important to remember that only a small number of Jews actually commissioned such designs.<sup>50</sup>

46. Jacob S. da Silva Rosa, *Geschiedenis der Portugeesche Joden te Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1925), 102, as cited in Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 129, and Scholten, *Sumptuous Memories*. Miriam Bodian in *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997), 157, argues that Old-World carvers were most likely non-Jews, given the long-term exclusion of Jews from guilds (until 1809). Weinstein, *Sepulchral Monuments*, 265, however, notes that Jews were admitted as members of Amsterdam’s booksellers’ guild, formed in 1662.

47. Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in the Guianas*, 285, 319; J172 (Boston, 1851); OS84, OS85 (Boston, 1837, 1851), OS208, OS358, OS359 (London, 1797, 1796, 1797).

48. Cr. Sigault of Amsterdam, not yet identified, carved his name on the ornate monument of Joseph Hayim del Castilho, who died in 1810. Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 129, supposes that some of Curaçao’s Jewish sculptures were executed by Christians (e.g., scenes depicting men with uncovered heads) and others by Jews (e.g. scenes “in conformity with the Jewish spirit”), both in Amsterdam. Landsberger, *A History of Jewish Art*, 258–59, assumes ornate tombstones of the western Sephardi diaspora were carved by Christians, but that Eastern European Ashkenazi stones were sculpted by Jews, most of whom remain anonymous.

49. Marc Michael Epstein argues, “Ultimately, it is clear that medieval Jewish art is Jewish not because it was produced by Jews, but because it was produced for Jews.” Marc Michael Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature* (University Park, PA, 1997), 7.

50. In New York’s oldest Jewish burial ground sepulchral iconography is also rare. De Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, 161.

In the four oldest Jewish cemeteries of Suriname, between 6 and 11 percent of tombstones bear iconography. This modest number should not lead to the assumption that Jewish tradition constrained artistic expression on death ledgers. Minna Rozen points out that the “history of Jewish funerary art is replete with various types of ornamentation,” and that the “tension between the Biblical prohibitions and actual practice was often a function of relations between Jewish and non-Jewish society in a given time.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the high cost of stone and marble, in addition to the skilled, labor-intensive work and transatlantic transportation from Europe required, rendered the commissioning of funerary sculpture so costly that only government officials and an exceedingly small upper class could afford it.<sup>52</sup> The paucity of sepulchral art in Suriname’s Jewish burial grounds is thus more indicative of class and expense than biblical or rabbinic proscriptions against imitation of life forms.<sup>53</sup> It is thus crucial to consider these images as largely the expression of a socially or economically privileged class of Jews.

A sizeable number of pictographical tombstones in Suriname’s jungle (75 percent for Cassipora, 43 percent for Jodensavanne), were produced through the first half of the eighteenth century, coinciding with 1650–1750, when “the most elaborate Sephardic monuments were designed,” and “the most ambitious Dutch Protestant sepulchral monuments were commissioned for heads of state and military heroes.”<sup>54</sup> In Paramaribo’s old Sephardi cemetery, the overwhelming majority (some 86 percent) date to the second half of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries. A similar pattern emerges in the old Ashkenazi burial ground, where about 90 percent date to the second half of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, and almost half (some 46 percent) to the first half of the nineteenth century. Ornamental slabs in the four oldest cemeteries ceased to be fashionable after the 1850s, and were evidently not affected by the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in the Nether-

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51. Rozen, *Hasköy Cemetery*, 53.

52. Scholten, *Sumptuous Memories*, 46, 52.

53. On this oft-explored, yet still misunderstood, matter, see Mann, ed., *Jewish Texts*. Similarly, the revival of illuminated Hebrew manuscripts in early modern Europe is traced in part to the rise of a wealthy Jewish class and their emulation of their wealthy Christian counterparts. Iris Fishof, “The Hamburg-Altona School of Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts of the First Half of the Eighteenth Century” (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1992, 2 vols. [Hebrew]), 1: 113–16. I thank Vivian Mann for leading me to this source.

54. Rochelle Weinstein, “Stones of Memory: Revelations from a Cemetery in Curaçao,” *American Jewish Archives* 44: 1 (Spring/Summer 1992): 95.

lands in 1853, which enhanced the popularity of sculpture.<sup>55</sup> Only in the new Sephardi and new Ashkenazi cemeteries of Paramaribo, dating from the late nineteenth century, does one witness the most elaborate sculptures, no longer prostrate, but standing tall and statuesque, no longer confined to the restrictive surface of the ledger.<sup>56</sup> As they abandoned the jungle for the city and their historic urban burial grounds for their newest cemeteries, Suriname's Jews continued to take their cultural cues from the fatherland.<sup>57</sup>

What were the specific sources of inspiration for illustrative stones? It is unlikely that Suriname's sepulchral art derived from Jewish grave markers of the pre-Expulsion Iberian peninsula, as these tend to be extremely simple and rarely exhibit imagery.<sup>58</sup> Researchers of early modern European and New-World Jewish cemeteries have determined that tombstone iconography usually draws on other art forms, particularly ritual objects, synagogue wall paintings, and book illustrations. In the 1970s, Rochelle Weinstein discovered a Sephardic tombstone in Ouderkerk (eight kilometers south of Amsterdam) with a floral ornamentation reminiscent of "the delicate stucco arabesques" adorning the walls of medieval Spanish synagogues.<sup>59</sup> The Russian-Jewish painter, El[eazer] Lissitzky (1890–1941), while investigating the art of Mohilev's painted wooden synagogue (in present-day Belarus), discovered in its library a book published in early modern Amsterdam with an endpaper whose motif was exactly replicated on a local Jewish tombstone. The sculptor's inspiration, Lissitzky concluded, was unequivocal.<sup>60</sup> Michael Studemund-Halévy has recently verified that almost all icons on Hamburg's Sephardic stones appear on ritual objects.<sup>61</sup> Since these sacred relics do

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55. Christiaan J. Roosen argues that Calvinist values made sculptures unpopular in the Netherlands until the 1850s, and that this only changed with the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1853. Christiaan J. Roosen, "Joseph Mendes da Costa: The Revitalization of Dutch Sculpture," in Jozeph Michman, *Dutch Jewish History*, 3: 261.

56. Personal observation.

57. Similar patterns are evident in the old and new Jewish cemeteries of Curaçao (personal observation).

58. Weinstein, "Sepulchral Monuments," 1: 52; Künzl, *Jüdische Grabkunst*, 80–83. I thank Michael Studemund-Halévy for leading me to the latter source. There are 118 known Jewish burial sites in Spain. Isidro G. Bango, *Remembering Sepharad: Jewish Culture in Medieval Spain* (N.p., 2003), 109–10.

59. Weinstein, "Sepulchral Monuments," 1: 356.

60. Joseph Shadur and Yehudit Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts: An Inner World of Art and Symbol* (Hanover, NH, 2002), 37, 39, translation of El[iezer] Lissitzky, "Vegen der mohilever shul" [On the Mohilev Synagogue], *Milgroim* 3 (1923): 9–13 [in Yiddish]. The tombstone featured a carved bas-relief of a bear incumbent on its hind legs and hugging an "ornamental flowering acanthus."

61. Studemund-Halévy, *Biographisches Lexikon*, 113.

not often survive, tombstone iconography thus becomes an important source for other types of art in a given community. Assuming the same is true of Suriname, sepulchral images can intimate much about lost material culture.<sup>62</sup>

Transatlantic sharing of pictographs among Sephardim is evident in a number of ledgers that are clearly imitative of carved slabs in other cemeteries. An elaborately designed sepulchre of a Sephardi woman buried in the Ashkenazi cemetery of Muiderberg (east of Amsterdam) exhibits almost the exact same imagery as that on a carved stone in Jodensavanne. The Muiderberg tomb belongs to Yachit, daughter of Samson Benez and wife of the Ashkenazi Sandor Levi, who died in childbirth on 21 Av 5491 (1731). Weinstein describes the triptych at the bottom of the stone as follows:

In a relief at the lower left corner of the slab a bier on struts rests beneath a fringed curtain which has been drawn up in the middle by a tassled cord; at lower right, also beneath a fringed curtain, is a skull and crossbones; the center bottom panel shows a geni emerging from the clouds at right wielding an ax in its right hand after having chopped down a tree on a cliff at left.<sup>63</sup>

The “sister” stone in Jodensavanne, memorializing the twenty-five-year-old Rachel (d. 1733), wife of Joseph de Meza, exhibits a subtle difference in the left-hand panel. Instead of an elevated bier, there appears a table, upon which rest three loaves of shew bread, a pun on the family name “[de] Meza,” which means “table” in both Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>64</sup> This small detail demonstrates how Sephardi families personalized their imagery, even when choosing from a standard array of sculpted patterns. The tombstone of David Rafael de Meza (d. 1716) in the Ouderkerk Sephardi cemetery also features loaves of shew bread, confirming this motif as a signature symbol of the de Meza family.<sup>65</sup>

Weinstein has traced the skull, crossbones, bier, and hourglass of Yachit’s stone to the title page of the amendments (*takkanot*) of the Ashkenazi Hevra Kadisha Society Gemilut Hassadim, printed by the

62. Inventory lists functionally describe ritual objects, but generally do not provide details of their artistic features. See, for example, NA, Nederlandse Portugees-Israëlitische Gemeente in Suriname, no. 141, Inventarissen van gewijde voorwerpen en andere goederen in het gebedhuis S.V.S. te Paramaribo en in en buiten de synagoge B.V.S. op de Savanne, 1816–1857 [Inventories of the sacred artifacts and other goods in the prayer house S.V.S. (Sedek VeSalom) in Paramaribo and in and outside the Synagogue B.V.S. (Beraha VeSalom) at the Savannah, 1816–1857].

63. Weinstein, “Sepulchral Monuments,” 1: 84–85.

64. Meza reflects early-modern Judeo-Spanish/Portuguese usage; in modern Spanish and Portuguese, the word for table is “*mesa*.”

65. Personal observation.

Ashkenazi Jacob Proops in 1777. Proops, a prolific Jewish publisher, reveals in the publisher's chapter of the book the extent to which Jewish and Christian printers shared imagery, some of it appropriate for tombstone motifs.<sup>66</sup> These details help to explain the appearance on Jewish tombstones of classical mortality symbols reworked in the Renaissance. But what these images do not convey is their meaning for their consumers.

Interpreting tombstone symbols as they were understood by their creators and consumers is nettlesome, since these icons do not come with accompanying explanatory texts.<sup>67</sup> Nor do last wills and testaments typically include instructions for the execution of epitaphs or images, suggesting that preferences for memorial designs were either orally transmitted or left to the survivors' discretion. Are these pictographs unreflecting ornamentation, meant to be purely decorative? Designed with intended kabbalistic import? Reflective of personal messages? Reconstructing individual biographies—a daunting task—is one approach to deciphering the full meaning of these icons. But such efforts for Surinamese Jews are only just beginning. In the meantime, the research must go in the opposite direction, with the historical context of ornamental motifs explored in order to shed light on both the individual and his or her community.

### *Symbols Derived from the Hebrew Bible*

During the Temple period, Levites were assigned the sacred task of purifying the priests in preparation for religious ceremonies. This was accomplished by pouring water from a laver onto the priests' hands and feet. The *cohanim* (priests), in turn, were directed to bless the congregation of Israel through a prayer recited with palms held together and

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66. Weinstein, "Sepulchral Monuments," 1: 85–86.

67. Manuals of Jewish symbols are helpful but still problematic, and there is still no definitive source on Jewish iconography. Such a text would function not only as a "dictionary" of symbols, but also an encyclopedia of material culture, documenting biblical, rabbinic, and Gentile provenance, and chronicling the various icons classified and described. A groundbreaking but in some ways dated guide is Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein's *Gestalten und Symbole der Jüdischen Kunst* (Berlin-Schöneberg, 1935). Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough's 13-volume *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York, 1953–1968) is temporally limited. Ida Huberman's, *Living Symbols: Symbols in Jewish Art and Tradition*, trans. Miriam Shlesinger (Ramat-Gan, Israel, 1988) is somewhat useful for more recent centuries, but includes few references. Ellen Frankel and Betsy Platkin Teutsch, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (Northvale, NJ, 1992), is more detailed, but includes few extra-biblical or extra-rabbinic sources. Some of these observations are mentioned in Shadur and Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts*, 56, 101.



fingers outstretched, according to the manner prescribed in Numbers 6:22–27. The ceremony, still performed in synagogues by descendants of priests of the Temple of Jerusalem, traditionally takes place in many diasporic Sephardi congregations on both Sabbath and festive days, and was incorporated into the Sabbath services of the Sephardic community of Amsterdam only in the 1660s, during the Sabbatean movement.<sup>68</sup> In Suriname's Sephardic cemeteries, these manual symbols are among the most popular.<sup>69</sup> Their frequency is largely attributed to the Cohen Nassy family, the founding clan of Suriname's Jewish colony, whose last name conveys not only priestly descent but also princely leadership. The image was evidently of great import to the family. David Cohen Nassy (1612–1685), a former *converso* and professional colonizer who launched several Jewish colonies elsewhere in the Caribbean, was laid to rest in Ouderkerk with the same symbol decorating his ledger.<sup>70</sup> The priestly benediction image is also found in the old Ashkenazi cemetery, but there Levitical symbols are more common.<sup>71</sup> The latter typically feature a Levite's hand pouring water from a ewer into a basin. Both of these male-specific icons indicate tribal descent, shared by Sephardim and Ashkenazim alike.

Another symbol related to the ancient Temple cult appears on the tombs of Rachel, wife of Jacob Raphael de Meza (d. 1752, aged thirty-one), and Rachel, wife of Joseph de Meza (d. 1733, aged twenty-five). Their ledgers include a pictograph of loaves of shew bread placed on a table, a charming pun on the family name. These examples illustrate the Bible's role in shaping family identity and a family's poetic esteem for its ancient heritage.

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68. It was introduced in Curaçao in 1762. Isaac S. Emmanuel, "Jewish Education in Curaçao (1692–1802)," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 44:4 (June 1955): 215–36.

69. A total of twenty priestly hands and one Levitical ewer appear in the three cemeteries.

70. GAA, archief 334, inv. nr. 1329, tombstone no. 39, p. 59. I thank Odette Vlesing for her assistance in retrieving this information. On Nassy, see David Cohen Nassy, *Essai Historique sur la Colonie de Surinam* (Paramaribo, 1788; reprinted Amsterdam, 1968).

71. A total of four priestly hands and ten Levitical ewers are found in the old Ashkenazi cemetery. In the Cassipora cemetery, all twelve priestly hand images belong to Cohen Nassy decedents. In Jodensavanne, two of the four images do not belong to this clan (stones of Samuel Cohen del Monte, d. 1744, and Rabbi Eliezer Soesman, son of Efrayim HaCohen, d. 1718). On another stone bearing this symbol, the name is no longer visible (d. 1739). Four pairs of priestly hands occur in the old Ashkenazi cemetery and four at the old Sephardi cemetery. Priestly symbols: C63; C72; C73; C81; C95; C96; C111; C114; C130; C131; C144; C193; J233; J247; J313; J459; OS56, OS113; OS152; OS490; OA 57; OA61; OA131; OA315; Levitical symbols: C12, C107; OA11; OA178; OA187; OA211; OA259; OA269; OA272; OA277; OA314; OA355.

The trumpet, frequently associated in Christian tradition with redemption and the coming of the Messiah, figured among the implements of the ancient Temple cult, and offered an opportunity for former crypto-Jews to infuse familiar Christian symbols with religiously acceptable Jewish meaning.<sup>72</sup> Two trumpeting angels appear on the Jodensavanne tombstone of seventeen-year-old Sarah de la Parra (d. 1769). A winged angel also plays this instrument on the slab of Joseph Hayim del Castilho, the sixty-one-year-old regent of Beraha VeSalom synagogue and captain of the Jewish militia (d. 1810). Cherubim, though prominent in Christian iconography, were already described and understood in Jewish terms in a treatise by the seventeenth-century artist, theologian, and teacher Jacob Judah Leon Templo (1602–1675), the Dutch Sephardi famous for his model-size reconstruction of Solomon’s Temple.<sup>73</sup>

The cultural orientation of willow trees appearing on two slabs in the old Ashkenazi cemetery is also ambiguous, as it resonates in both Christian and Jewish traditions. In the latter, this tree is a symbol of mourning for the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. At the same time, it may also symbolize fertility, based on Isaiah’s prophecy that “Jacob’s descendants will sprout up as rapidly as willows grow by running water.” In colonial North America by the mid-eighteenth century, weeping willows were associated with “melancholic meditation.” Their increasing appearance on tombstones has been linked to a transformation in attitudes toward death and nature. With the waning of colonial Puritanism came the idea that death was an “opportunity for sacrifice,” and that nature was not demonic but rather stimulated the soul spiritually. Willows seemed ideally suited for a more hopeful vision of death, inasmuch as they propagated quickly, and, like hope, “seemed to spring eternal.”<sup>74</sup> The willow trees carved on Paramaribo’s Jewish stelae may have borne a similar bittersweet message for the gravesite visitor. As if to embrace this Janus-faced interpretation, the inscription on one of the stones bears a reference to the Garden of Eden, transforming this symbol of grief into one of Paradise.<sup>75</sup>

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72. Gutmann, “Return in Mercy to Zion,” 235.

73. Lucien Wolf, “Anglo-Jewish Coats of Arms,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 2 (1894/1895): 157, citing Judah Templo, *Tratado de los Cherubim*.

74. Blanche M. G. Linden, “The Willow Tree and Urn Motif: Changing Ideas About Death and Nature,” *Markers* 1 (1980): 148–55. See also Edwin Dethlefsen and James Deetz, “Death’s Heads, Cherubs, and Willow Trees: Experimental Archaeology in Colonial Cemeteries,” *American Antiquity* 31: 4 (April 1966): 508.

75. OA257 (Moses, son of Jacob Sanches, d. 1813; poem alludes to the Garden of Eden); OA283 (Sarah Judith, wife of Moses Isaschar, d. 1817.). Its connection to mourning is derived from Psalm 137, recounting the Levites who hung their harps on

Notwithstanding the enduring controversy over whether or not Jewish art truly exists,<sup>76</sup> certain icons are widely acknowledged as specifically Jewish in origin. Archaeologists and historians of ancient Palestine have identified as unequivocally Jewish the seven-branched menorah, the ram's horn (*shofar*), the citron (*etrog*), and the palm branch (*lulav*). Also specifically Jewish are images of oil lamps, the sacred ark (*aron hakodesh*), grape clusters, and olive branches, carved on Jewish burial sites in ancient Roman catacombs.<sup>77</sup>

The only traditional ancient Jewish icon that appears in Suriname's oldest Jewish cemeteries is the grape cluster,<sup>78</sup> a symbol of the people of Israel. A number of hermeneutical texts (*midrashim*) equate the two, as did Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish in his aphorism: "The nation may be compared to a grapevine: its branches are the householders; its clusters, these are the scholars. Its leaves, the unlettered people. The dry twigs, the empty, good-for-nothing of Israel. And the clusters will intercede for the leaves, for without the leaves there would be no life for the clusters." In the Cassipora cemetery, where the grape image appears, the deceased is Rachel, wife of Jacob Raphael de Meza, who married at age thirteen and died at the age of thirty-one. The five children she left behind are symbolically depicted as five grape bunches clinging desperately to a vine that is tumbling to the ground after being axed by a celestial hand. With their life source truncated, who would intercede for these orphans? Perhaps they could take comfort in the messianic import of this viticultural symbol, which evokes the golden cluster of grapes that dangled "over the portal of Herod's Temple."<sup>79</sup> The grapevine in the form of a tree can also represent the tree of the Messiah. In Christian tradition, Christ identified himself with the true vine stock that carries the religiously devout, meaning that only he who derives his power from the savior can bear fruit.<sup>80</sup> Like the trumpet, the tree-like grapevine again

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willow branches and wondered, "How can we sing a song of the Lord on foreign soil?" Frankel and Plotkin Teutsch, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols*, 192–93.

76. See, for example, Landsberger, *A History of Jewish Art*, especially chapter one on "The Problem of Jewish Art" and Kalman P. Bland's more recent, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, 2000). Landsberger, 8–9, observes that the largely derivative nature of Jewish art calls into question its very legitimacy, while the derivative characteristics of national arts, such as Roman art echoing Greek, or Japanese art branching off from Chinese, do not provoke similar doubts.

77. Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones*, 9.

78. Cr 3 (Rachel, wife of Jacob Raphael de Meza, d. 1752).

79. Shadur and Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts*, 63–64, citing tractates Hullin 92a and Middot 3:28.

80. Thomas Weggemann, *Die sprechenden Steine*, 48.

provided an opportunity for former crypto-Jews to transform a familiar Christian symbol into one eminently Jewish.

### *The Tree of Life*

The cosmic Tree of Life, an ancient, widespread symbol representing the “promise of immortality and everlasting youth,”<sup>81</sup> variably signifies in Jewish tradition Judgment, the return to Edenic paradise, the future Temple, and Messianic Jerusalem. This symbol has appeared on Jewish sepulchral monuments in ancient and modern times and on medieval Jewish manuscripts, where it bore eschatological import. It is also mentioned in the *Zohar* as an object whose luminosity bestows “everlasting life to all creatures and endures to all eternity.”<sup>82</sup> Again in the *Zohar*, the Tree of Life soars up to heaven during the night and is replaced by the Tree of Death. At this moment, the soul must be delivered to the Tree of Life.<sup>83</sup> Sephardic culture was particularly influenced by the *Book of Splendor*, rabbinically attributed to Shimon bar Yochai; the very name of Jodensavanne’s Blessing and Peace synagogue, as noted above, is likely derived from a Zoharic passage.<sup>84</sup> This background discourages a conclusion that the trees appearing on Cassipora and Jodensavanne slabs (or the willow with the accompanying Edenic poem) are merely decorative.<sup>85</sup> The rabbinic and mystical import of the tree may infuse paradisiacal connotations into the Hebrew poem composed for Abigail, daughter of Raphael del Castilho, who passed away in 1758 at the age of seven and a half.<sup>86</sup> The last two verses read:

בת מרורים כלם בוכים  
תחיית המתים חוכים

The tree carved below this closing couplet may link symbolic everlasting youth with a return to an Edenic, earthly existence. These icons may also symbolize trees of life, representing Torah, or, alternatively, trees of knowledge, representing spiritual and intellectual understanding of the

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81. Zofja Ameisenowa, “The Tree of Life in Jewish Iconography,” *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2:4 (1939): 326.

82. *Ibid.*, 336.

83. *Ibid.*, 337.

84. Bar Yochai, Bereishit, Parshat Haye Sarah, in *Zohar, Midrash Hane’elam*.

85. Rachel Henriquez de Granada, wife of Aaron da Costa, d. 1751 (C159); Joseph Hayim, son of Isaac Baruch Louzada Senior, d. 1816 (OS377); Moses, son of Jacob Sanches, d. 1813 (OA 257).

86. J198. The couplet translates as follows: “Everyone weeps for the daughter of bitterness, And all await the resurrection of the dead.”

Hebrew Bible.<sup>87</sup> Floral and foliage motifs, of which several appear in all four cemeteries, are considered variants of the Tree of Life, and perhaps invite similar interpretations.<sup>88</sup>

Until the advent of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of colonial Suriname's population was African in origin.<sup>89</sup> Suriname's Jews lived in an environment deeply informed by sub-Saharan heritages, and many produced progeny with enslaved and manumitted descendants of Africa. How might have Afro-Surinamese inhabitants viewed these horticultural pictographs? For Jews of Western African descent, the trees may have evoked the cotton tree, a sacred place for communicating with ancestral spirits, linking supernal beings to their earthly descendants.<sup>90</sup> Along the Suriname River on the Jachlust plantation, such a tree stood from at least the early eighteenth century until around 1970. Known as the Hooge Boom (High Tree), this huge *kankantrie* (cotton tree), according to the animistic religion, *wisi*, was inhabited by spirits. The felling of such trees provokes religious outcries in Suriname until today.<sup>91</sup>

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87. Shadur and Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts*, 63.

88. *Ibid.*, 97. C4I; J1I; J1I3; J126; J164; J37I; OS2I; OS59; OS106; OA2I; OA59; OA106.

89. The vast majority of Suriname's population (96 percent by the late eighteenth century) were in fact both enslaved and of African origin. Data are derived by this writer from Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in the Guianas*, 279, 291, 309, 341, and 519. This ratio remained stable through the following century, though the population of free coloreds steadily increased as a result of manumissions. A 1738 census counted 598 free coloreds as opposed to 2,133 whites. Around 1770, there were 3,000 free persons (mostly whites), compared to 60,000 slaves in the colony. By 1787, there were 650 free men and women of color. By 1812, that number had jumped to 3,075, and in 1830 to 5,051. In 1863, there were 36,000 slaves, while the free population had sextupled. Alex van Stipriaan, "An Unusual Parallel: Jews and Africans in Suriname in the 18th and 19th Centuries," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 31: 1/2 (1997): 79; van Lier, *Frontier Society*, 8, 97. A travel account published in 1839 documents as many as 86,850 individuals of African descent dwelling in the colony (including 1,850 freedmen, 45–50,000 slaves, and 30–35,000 maroons), as compared to 2,150 whites, about 2 percent of the colony's population. Pierre Jacques Benoit, *Voyage à Surinam* (Brussels, 1839), 19–20. Statistics derived by this writer from Benoit's statement indicate that there were 4,000 free people (of which 2,150 were whites and the remainder, or 1,850, mulattoes and blacks), 45–50,000 "slaves," or 65–70,000, including maroons. Benoit does not include in this number "slave maroons and Indians who surround the colony." These references are unclear, but perhaps refer to maroons and Indians of British Guyana to the west and French Guiana to the east. Benoit does not offer a statistic for Suriname's Native American population.

90. George E. Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, OH, and Oxford, 2003), 23–24. The Ashanti people have also preserved the tradition that trees have souls and/or function as shrines in which spirits dwell. Robert S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London, 1959 [1927]), 5.

91. F.C. Bubberman, et al., *Links with the Past: The History of the Cartography of Suriname, 1500–1971* (Amsterdam, 1973), 59–60.

*Occupations and Tribal Affiliation*

Images sometime function as pictorial representations of information an epitaph explicitly conveys. The image of a hand pouring water from an ewer into a basin, for example, corroborates the tribal ancestry of Solomon Levy Zymenes, readily apparent in his middle name and in the verse on his 1747 epitaph, "And the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meetings."<sup>92</sup> This informational redundancy highlights the quest for distinction through art, and also suggests the role of costly pictographs in expressing or even developing early modern individualism.<sup>93</sup> In other cases, iconography implies or transmits information not revealed in text. Three tombstones in the old Ashkenazi cemetery of Paramaribo bearing similar iconography do not otherwise communicate the Levitical descent of the deceased, and these images are therefore critical for biographical identification.<sup>94</sup> A priestly manual symbol appearing on a Jodensavanne tombstone whose epitaph is almost completely effaced thereby confirms the gender of the deceased, as tribal descent is traditionally solely transmitted through the father.<sup>95</sup> Since all but one tomb bearing the benediction hands belong to the Cohen Nassy family, the decedent is probably also from this family, though he is buried in what appears to be the plot of the Robles de Medina clan. Confirmation of such ancestry can help reconstruct genealogical lineage, aids family reconstitution (in the case of family plots), and enables the visitor and historian to imagine the decedent's ritual role in the synagogue service and community. The priestly icon appears to be characteristic of Jewish cemeteries of Christian Europe, rather than the Sephardi diaspora in Ottoman lands.<sup>96</sup> The prevalence of hands may be reflective of Christianity's permissiveness in iconographically duplicating human forms, for such hands in the cemeteries of present-day Turkey appear almost without exception in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century tombstones of Jews originating from Christian lands.<sup>97</sup>

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92. Numbers 18:23. The full verse reads: "And the Levites shall do the service of the Tent of Meetings, and they shall bear their iniquity: it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they have no inheritance." C107.

93. On the rise of individualism during the era of Jewish Emancipation, see Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 3 vols. (New York, 1937), 2: 164–261.

94. OA178 (Elkana, son of Mordecai, d. 1799); OA312 (Isaac Solomon van Koerland, d. 1819); OA352 (Hayim Simon van Coerland, d. 1824).

95. J313. The position of the hands for the priestly benediction is discussed in the *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orekh Hayyim*, 128:12.

96. Rozen, *Hak y Cemetery*, 91–92.

97. In Muslim art the *hamsa*, a single hand, is a common manual symbol. *Ibid.*, 94.

Most symbols of circumcision corroborate the occupation of the decedent as specified in the epitaph. The elaborate depiction of a baby held by a *sandak* (the honoree chosen to hold the baby while he is being circumcised) on a Jodensavanne tombstone is only a suggestion of the decedent's life pursuit. The two are surrounded by four men, one of whom kneels to perform a circumcision. In the absence of the icon, the Hebrew verse that encircles the scene would remain merely poetic: "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn to David, my servant."<sup>98</sup> Similarly, an epitaph dating to 1807 in Paramaribo's old Ashkenazi cemetery is silent regarding occupation, and it is only the icon of a sugar cane and coffee branch that suggest the decedent's pursuit as a planter.<sup>99</sup> In the cases of two other urban burial monuments, involvement in agricultural endeavors is also implied through images of axes, spades, hoes, and scythes.<sup>100</sup> One of these men is also described as a leader and administrator of the holy congregation Neveh Salom, the Ashkenazi synagogue, and praised as someone respected by Jews and Gentiles alike. These pictorial job descriptions demand archival confirmation, and also highlight key individuals whose lives should be fully researched in order to approach a community history that considers individuals from all walks of life.

One of the most joyful images appears on the Paramaribo tombstone of a young man, Nathan, son of Hayim Pakker of Amsterdam, who passed away at the age of nineteen years in 1817. The Dutch poetic epitaph reads:

HY DIE IN DEN BLOEIDER [*sic*] JEUGD,  
AAN ZÿN OUDREN LUST EN VREUGD,  
AAN ZÿN VRIENDEN IN HET LEVEN,  
'T SCHOONST GENOEGEN HEEFT GEGEVEN,  
RUST HIER IN DER AARDE SCHOOT,

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98. David, son of Joseph Senior Coronel, d. 1739; J328. Psalms 89:3. Verses 3–4 read, "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn to David my servant, your seed will I establish forever, and build up your throne to all generations, Sela." In all other tombstones depicting circumcision scenes, the epitaphs confirm the occupation of the decedent as a *mohel* (ritual circumciser), and it is thus likely that David Senior Coronel's pictograph indicates his life's calling. Alternatively, the icon may be symbolic of something more abstract, such as messianic aspirations, particularly when considering other verses of Psalm 89.

99. Mordecai, son of Solomon and grandson of Jesse (OA214). The sugarcane is an icon of the family crests of the Lousada family of Jamaica. Wolf, "Anglo-Jewish Coats of Arms," 161.

100. Jacob Hayim Turgeman, d. 1763, OS13; David de Robles, d. 1765, OS82; Moses, son of Jacob Sanches, d. 1813, OA257.



EN BEDROEFT ONS DOOR Z'YN DOOD,  
 DAAR, WAAR SERAFIM HET:  
 :HEILIG HALELUIA ZINGEN,  
 ZAL TOT 'S SCHEPPERS LOF ZYN  
 KUNSTIG SPEL DER SNAAREN KLINGEN<sup>101</sup>

The incised violin, trumpet, and flute suggest he was a musician who played multiple instruments. The icon is also evocative of Psalm 150, which advises that God should be praised with an orchestral variety of stringed and wind instruments:

Praise Him with the sound of the shofar, praise him with the harp and lyre.  
 Praise Him with the timbrel and dance, praise Him with stringed instruments  
 and the pipe. . . .<sup>102</sup>

Though depicting modern instruments, the image is reminiscent of musical arrangements in the ancient Temple, and possibly alludes to its rebuilding. The trumpet and flutes may also be interpreted as angelic instruments, redolent with Messianic overtones. A separate tombstone from 1769, belonging to a girl who passed away at the age of seventeen and was buried in Jodensavanne, bears an image of angels blowing trumpets, reinforcing the apocalyptic import of these instruments and their expression of hope for the resurrection of the dead, an event traditionally understood to accompany the advent of the Jewish Messiah.<sup>103</sup>

Symbols depicting professions, also characteristic of early modern and modern tombstones in Eastern Europe, “reflect the democratic nature of this type of art, as well as the popular belief in the lofty vocation of the working man and the dignity of labor.”<sup>104</sup> These biographical motifs begin to appear in Jewish tombstones of present-day Turkey in the late nineteenth century, and at least by the seventeenth century in Eastern Europe, whence they were apparently imported to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>105</sup> It is notable that the opposite pattern emerges in Suriname:

101. He who in the blossom of youth/ gave pleasure and joy to his parents/ To his friends in life/ the most beautiful satisfaction/ rests here in the womb of the earth/ and saddens us by his death/ There, where seraphim/ sing the holy halleluyah/ the artful game of strings/ will sound to the praise of the Creator.

102. OA273. Biblical translation based on Harold Fisch, ed., *The Holy Scriptures* (Jerusalem, 1989), 799. See also Psalms 33 and 149.

103. J164, Sarah [de la] Parra. The angels with trumpets also symbolize the announcement of death and preparations for the decedent's reception in paradise. Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 125.

104. Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones*, 20.

105. Rozen, *Hasköy Cemetery*, 106–7; Mark Wischnitzer and Editorial Staff, “Guilds: Middle Ages and Early Modern Era,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 7, 971.

occupational insignia appear in Sephardi cemeteries in the mid-eighteenth century and in the old Ashkenazi burial ground only at the turn of the eighteenth century. Moreover, the range of professions depicted pictographically in all four cemeteries is limited to ritual circumciser, planters, and, in the aforementioned case, a musician. Europe's and Turkey's occupational insignia represent humble professions, such as scissors, thimbles, and measuring tapes for tailors and seamstresses, hammers, pliers, and nails for shoemakers, and various types of fish for fishermen. In Suriname, the occupations depicted are (with the possible exception of musician) hardly reflective of a "lower economic class whose social prestige was not high," and that sought to express self-esteem through such pictographs.<sup>106</sup> Here, it was apparently not fashionable to memorialize the decedent through his humble occupation, perhaps a legacy and imprint of prevailing tumulary customs among Sephardim. Of all professions, that of *mohel* is most often pictorially flaunted (eight times), suggesting that religious prestige dominated over even the lofty status of the planter.

### *Death in Childbirth*

Parturition scenes are among the most "visually arresting" motifs in the Jewish cemeteries of Muiderberg, Ouderkerk, Curaçao, and Suriname.<sup>107</sup> The death-in-childbirth scenes surveyed by Rochelle Weinstein in the first three of these burial grounds all memorialize Sephardic decedents.<sup>108</sup> A number of these images are rather graphic, depicting substantial nudity or a midwife with her arms underneath the laboring mother's skirt, the latter a typical illustration in illuminated Hebrew manuscripts of early modern Europe.<sup>109</sup> Weinstein, describing the Curaçaoan icon of "an almost naked full-bellied woman" sprawling with "her hair entwined in her arms overhead on her pillow," postulates that the ultimate source for this image is a rape scene from a sarcophagus of classical antiquity.<sup>110</sup> It is understood that the early modern stone carver was not working from the original model, of which he was likely unaware, but rather with illustrations successively modeled on or inspired by the ancient coffin, and meant to convey death rather than sexual violation. These images of death, ultimately transformed from a depiction of sexual assault, nonetheless communicate labor as a sexually

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106. Rozen, *Hasköy Cemetery*, 107.

107. Weinstein, "Sepulchral Monuments," 1: 323.

108. *Ibid.*, 90.

109. Fishof, "The Hamburg-Altona School," 1: 56–57; 2: image 215b.

110. Weinstein, "Sepulchral Monuments," 1: 332 and 2: 397–98.

violent and violating experience. They are to be understood within the context of Christian Europe, where, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, sepulchral depictions of the hour of death increasingly stressed the agony of the decedent and his or her survivors, overshadowing the previous focus on mystic intensity and idealized spiritual calm. These anguished images suggest an existential uncertainty, a yearning for divine intervention, and the paradox of “striving for heaven but actually clinging to the earth.”<sup>111</sup>

Similar scenes from Suriname occur only in the old Ashkenazi cemetery. All date to the 1730s, '40s and '80s and are much more sexually modest, featuring completely covered parturients, save for one who is bare-breasted with an infant lying passively at her nipple. It is also remarkable that in all four Surinamese cemeteries there are no deathbed scenes belonging to males (as there are in Curaçao, for example).<sup>112</sup> In his photographic survey in the 1990s of various Christian European cemeteries, David Robinson encountered a preponderance of mostly nineteenth-century sculptures depicting sultry and physically idealized women—not as decedents, but as grievers. Robinson concludes that these seductive sculptures symbolically served to imbue death with life. In Suriname, none of the icons depicts mourners—neither male nor female. There, it is the flesh-and-blood viewer who is the mourner, and there are no youthful feminine figures to defy the resoluteness of death.<sup>113</sup>

Deathbed scenes in Suriname strive to ennoble the deceased, through both their accompanying verses and images of luxurious appurtenances, suggesting opulence. The “modest woman,” Leah Gitkha, wife of David Sanches, expired while delivering a baby at age twenty-one and lies buried in Paramaribo’s old Ashkenazi cemetery. The carved image depicts her lying on her side underneath tassled curtains and enveloped in a shroud. The year of her death, 1792, is rendered in code through the citation of Proverbs 31:25: “Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.” Here, the dismal shroud is to be remembered not as defeat or humiliation, but as evidence of fortitude and self-respect, and perhaps as a harbinger of Messianic times, a

111. Henriette s’Jacob, *Idealism and Realism: A Study of Sepulchral Symbolism* (Leiden, 1954), 219.

112. See, for example, the slab of Isaac H. Senior (d. 1726), Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, plate 45, between 304 and 305.

113. David Robinson, *Saving Graces: Images of Women in European Cemeteries* (New York and London, 1995), 118.

rabbinic interpretation of laughter.<sup>114</sup> Penina Abigail, wife of Isaac Eleazar, also died during her travail and is buried in the same hallowed ground. Her Hebrew epitaph of 1759 informs the reader that she gave birth to a daughter, removed her from her breast, and did not nurse (perhaps because death arrived too swiftly?). The dramatic image depicts a woman felling a tree with an axe in her left hand and holding a baby, who is not suckling, in her right arm.<sup>115</sup> The consistent pictorial depiction of death-in-childbirth as a woman lying on a bed provides evidence for another tombstone whose text is effaced. The stele of [Rebec?]ca Hanna (d. 1783), daughter of Simon de Vries and wife of Judah, depicts a woman reclining on a canopied bed and suggests that she, too, died in birth throes.<sup>116</sup> The accompanying verse from I Samuel 2:6, “The Lord kills and gives life,” reinforces this, as the preceding biblical verse, omitted in the epitaph, reads in part: “The barren has born seven; and she that has many children has become wretched.”<sup>117</sup> Death-in-childbirth scenes are the only stone images in the cemeteries that capture the last day in the life of the deceased. Unlike the almost animated pictographs representing life pursuit through occupational tools, or tribal affiliation through manual symbols and ewers of water emptied into basins, the startling images of parturients convey the intensity and paradox of bringing forth life while descending into death.

### *Tombstone Ornamentation as a Mirror of Social Status*

What can this imagery tell us about social life among Suriname’s Jews? The sample from four cemeteries (with 216, 462, 661, and 355 burials, respectively), is perhaps too limited to produce the conclusions Minna Rozen reached, based on her inventory of 60,000 stones from Turkey’s Ottoman era. Still, social, linguistic, and mortality patterns have been derived from studies of even smaller cemeteries, and a statistical survey of Surinamese Jewish tombstones can also suggest similar trends, particularly when collated with outside evidence.<sup>118</sup> In the

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114. OA51. Diacritical marks above the verse’s letters indicate the date. On laughter as a messianic symbol and the joy of redemption, see Psalm 126 and commentary in *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, trans. and ed. by Rabbi Nosson Scherman, third edition (New York, 1990), 537–38.

115. OA70.

116. OA133.

117. OA134.

118. See, for example, de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, and Gérard Nahon, “Inscriptions Funéraires Hébraïques et Juives à Bidache Labastide-Clairence (Basses-Pyrénées) et Peyrehorade (Landes): Rapport de Mission,” *Revue des Études Juives* 127 (October/December 1968): 347–65, which draws conclusions from a cemetery of only sixty-two slabs.

Cassipora cemetery (dating from 1666 to 1873), children do not receive illustrative imagery. In Jodensavanne (1685–1873), 11 percent of all icons are verifiably devoted to children; in the old Sephardi cemetery (1734–1904), 18 percent, and in the old Ashkenazi (1716 to 1883), 5 percent. These statistics suggest that most families were reluctant to invest in monuments for minors, a possible indication of their lower social status. Gender status is more ambiguous. In the Cassipora cemetery, 33 percent of icons occur in female burials, at Jodensavanne 52 percent, at the old Sephardi 32 percent, and at the old Ashkenazi cemetery 37 percent. When considered together, the rural cemeteries (Cassipora and Jodensavanne) pay considerable pictorial homage to their women. This finding is in consonance with their unusual public role in synagogue and professional life. Analyses of epitaphs, synagogue architecture, and communal archives suggest that women worshipped at the Beraha VeSalom synagogue in separate services parallel to those of men, with their own female cantors and ritual honors, and that some enjoyed honored positions as midwives.<sup>119</sup>

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119. Rachel Mendes Meza (d. 1715), buried in the Cassipora cemetery, is identified on her tombstone as a precentor (*hazan*). Given the traditional Jewish prohibition against females occupying a public religious role in a mixed gender setting, this cantor likely paralleled the Askhenazi *firzogerin* (foresayer) of Central and Eastern Europe. In Jodensavanne's Beraha VeSalom, the room reserved for females was designated as the "women's synagogue" or "apartment," likely the balcony above the main sanctuary, referred to as the men's synagogue. While inventory and architectural evidence demonstrate that there was no separate female synagogue, the locution describing the space designated for females supports the possibility that independent worship was conducted in the women's prayer quarters as a parallel to the men's services in the main sanctuary. Furthermore, copper crowns found in the women's section suggest the use of Torah scrolls there, at least by the mid-nineteenth century. Women in Jodensavanne were endowed with a special religious status when designated "brides" of the Torah. According to her epitaph, [Deborah] Rebecca, wife of Benjamin Henriquez da Costa, died after childbirth in 1771 while "a Bride of Genesis" (*Nouva de Beresit*; C158). This honorific is sometimes applied to a bride on the eve of her nuptials. As the decedent was both married and pregnant on the eve of her death, it is more likely that the alternative signifier of "Bride of Genesis" is intended, namely, the "bride" refers to the honor of being called up to read the first chapter of the Pentateuch in the synagogue on the holiday of Simhat Torah. While such a title was usually conferred when a woman's husband received the honor of "Bridegroom of Genesis," and thus does not imply that the wife carried out this honor in the main sanctuary, the *Nouva de Beresit* may suggest parallel religious services in the woman's section of Beraha VeSalom. That this honor required active participation is suggested in the inscription of Esther Hanna, wife of Joseph Gabay Faro, who passed away just before she was to "undertake the charge of a bride of genesis" in 1725 (J341). These customs also prevailed on Curaçao, where in 1783, Sara Hanna, wife of Joseph Ezekiel Hoheb, died during her "nuptials." The epitaph refers to her husband's "marriage" and to Sara Hanna's departure for synagogue that day, decked out like a bride. Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*,

*The Untimely Death: Felled Trees*

The most popular pictograph in Suriname's oldest Jewish burial grounds is a grapevine or tree being chopped down. Among 137 tombstones bearing carved images that have been surveyed in the cemeteries, about 42 percent (or 57) depict a falling tree, usually toppled with an axe wielded by a heavenly arm or angel and emanating from a cloud. This emblem is also depicted on sixteenth-century Christian emblems, but in Jewish cemeteries it bears idiosyncratic meanings. In both Sephardi and Ashkenazi circles, this symbol represents spiritual and physical divine power. These images are never (or, according to some, almost never) seen on gravestones of those who reached the age of fifty, and refer to biblical punishment for certain sins or to punishment for the sins of the decedent's generation.<sup>120</sup> A comparison of these images to the decedent's age confirms that none of the Surinamese tombstones bearing a razed tree icon and also specifying the age of death memorializes a decedent younger than eight or older than forty-eight. Thus, when an epitaph does not specify an age or the number is effaced, this image is useful in providing an estimate. In Suriname's Jewish cemeteries, fifteen tombstones do not specify an age or contain a legible number, but do bear toppled tree imagery. The deceased buried underneath can thus be assigned an estimated age of below fifty. Of course, for women who died during childbirth, this image is superfluous, as the average age of menopause in early modern times likely did not approach fifty.<sup>121</sup>

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381. Suriname's Sephardic community, in both the jungle and the city, trained its own midwives. Sephardic epitaphs refer to nineteen *matronas*, either married or widowed, all practicing from the early eighteenth through early nineteenth centuries (ten of these are buried in the jungle). In the old Ashkenazi cemetery, only one epitaph relates to a female practitioner, described as a "sworn midwife" (*geswoorene vroedvrouw*) who "gave light to many," though she herself turned blind before "death closed her eyes at the age of 104." The honored status of midwives in the Sephardic community may be related to the difficulty of securing medical professionals for isolated plantations along the banks of the colony's rivers. See Chapters Three and Five of Ben-Ur and Frankel, *Remnant Stones*.

120. Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 125; Studemund-Halévy, *Biographisches Lexikon*, 122. For felled trees on New England tombstones dating to the eighteenth century, see "Photographs of Historic Gravestones Put Online," *Perspectives: Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* 42:1 (January 2004): 17. The divine hand, orchestrating earthly lives, has appeared in Christian sepulchral emblems from ancient times. S'Jacob, *Idealism and Realism*, 111–12; Wischnitzer-Bernstein, *Gestalten und Symbole*, 12.

121. Around the thirteenth century, the onset of menopause among European women came at approximately age thirty. Norman F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made* (New York, 2001), 42.

*Castles, Crowns, and Armorial Devices*

Traditionally in Christian Europe, armorial bearings were intrinsic to feudal society and were officially bestowed upon a family, granting the right to bear arms. Though Jews did not comprise a recognized sector of the feudal system, they possessed an indigenous tradition of family escutcheons, as witnessed in Jewish lore and seals, and were at times granted coats of arms by Christian sovereigns. The development of officially registered Jewish escutcheons gained new force after the fourteenth century in northwestern European cities, when openly Jewish descendants of Iberian New Christians clung to these emblems even after disavowing ties with the religion imposed on their forefathers.<sup>122</sup>

Other cemeteries, particularly in London and Ouderkerk, are more representative of Jewish armorial bearings than Suriname's, where only two such icons are found. Both occur in Paramaribo's old Sephardic cemetery. There, two majestic stelae featuring coats of arms clearly indicate strong cultural ties to the Iberian peninsula. The first belongs to Joseph Hayim del Castilho (1749–1810), described as a Regent of Congregation Beraha VeSalom and captain of the Jewish civil guard (militia). The emblem appropriately features a castle (in Portuguese, *castilho*), atop of which a winged angel stands, blowing a trumpet. Two additional winged angels are positioned on either side, carrying a banderole in their hands, an object conveying the idea of fame.<sup>123</sup>

The use of heraldry on Sephardic monuments traces back to the Iberian peninsula (before the forced conversions of 1391), dispelling the misconception that Jewish coats of arms emerged among Sephardim solely when their New Christian ancestors acquired them.<sup>124</sup> In Toledo's

122. H. Guttenstein and Joseph Jacobs, "Coat of Arms," *The Jewish Encyclopedia* vol. 4 (New York and London, 1912), 125–26. These authors trace the rise of officially registered shield devices, granting the right to bear arms, to the end of the twelfth century. On armorial traditions indigenous to Jews, see also Albert Wolf, "Seal," *Ibid.*, vol. 11, 136, and Wolf, "Anglo-Jewish Coats of Arms," 154.

123. OS494. Similar escutcheons belonging to the Castello family are described and reproduced in Albert M. Hyamson, et al., *Anglo-Jewish Nobilities: Their Arms and Testamentary Dispositions* (London, 1949), 88 and Plate VIII, but do not resemble the device in Suriname. I thank Rochelle Weinstein for insight into the banderole's significance. On coats of arms on Jewish tombstones in London and outside Amsterdam, see Wolf, "Anglo-Jewish Coats of Arms," 158–59. Descriptions, but no analysis, of so-called "weapon shields" (*wapenschilden*) appear in Henriques de Castro, *Keur van grafstenen*, 84, 85, 86, 91, 95, 96, 103, and 121.

124. Davidovitch, "Tombs and Tombstones; Art," 1223. Victor Perera in *The Cross and the Pear Tree: A Sephardic Journey* (New York, 1995), 29, seems to accept in his historical memoir that the Inquisition "foisted on [his] family the name Pereira, and engraved the pear tree on [his] family escutcheon." For more on the theme of Sephardic

opulent synagogue built by Don Samuel Halevi Abulafia in the 1350s (now the Santa María del Tránsito), the dedicatory inscription to the left of the Torah ark (*heikhal*) bears a coat of arms depicting diagonally positioned pairs of castles and lions, symbolizing the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, King Pedro's escutcheon. Below the armorial symbol begins the Hebrew inscription, "Behold the Sanctuary that is consecrated in Israel and the house that Samuel built."<sup>125</sup> This juxtaposition is an early example of the Jewish use of Christian armorial devices. Escutcheons also appear on medieval Ibero-Jewish seals dating from the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. There, castles are also frequent, but appear independently from lion icons. Except for the Hebrew inscriptions, these seals mimicked the devices of their Spanish Christian parallels.<sup>126</sup> In fifteenth-century Portugal, the chief rabbi was permitted to incorporate the royal arms on his seal.<sup>127</sup> An armorial device is also found on the Poblet

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coats of arms, see 39, 114, 116. Steven Nadler (*Rembrandt's Jews* [Chicago and London, 2003], 207) also associates armorial devices with "assimilation to Spanish and Portuguese Catholic culture." Armorial devices can indeed be found on the tombstones of former crypto-Jewish families, but again, these are not exclusive to Jews of New Christian origins. For examples of escutcheons on the slabs of former crypto-Jewish families residing in Lido and Leghorn, see Mair Jose Benardete, *Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews* (New York, 1952), 44, citing Michael S. Molho, *Contribución a la Historia de Salonica, 5692–1932*, a book in Rashi-scripted Ladino I have not been able to locate.

125. Yom-Tov Assis, "Synagogues in Medieval Spain," *Jewish Art* 18 (1992): 11–12; Esther W. Goldman, "Samuel Halevi Abulafia's Synagogue (El Tránsito) in Toledo," *Jewish Art* 18 (1992): 60. A responsum from David ibn Abi Zimra (Spain and Safed c.1480–1573) refers to a wealthy Jew in Candia who renovated and repaired the synagogue and afterward desired to place his family escutcheon, a lion with a crown upon its head, above the ark. The rabbi compared this image to that of idol worshippers and forbade it. Interestingly, he did not consider the icon in terms of Jewish symbolism. He also forbade it because it would encourage other Jews in the future to place their family coats of arms in the synagogue. Abraham Joseph Salomo Graziano (Pesaro, d. 1684) had less of a problem with the lion icon, but did object to its positioning above the ark. Mann, ed., *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, 117–23. Joseph Caro stated that "the lion is one of the four animals whose image is specifically forbidden as idolatrous," but in a separate responsum declared that forming even three-dimensional images of such creatures is permissible, "as long as it is known and unheard that they are worshipped at all." Solomon B. Freehof, *The Responsa Literature and a Treasury of Responsa*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1956, 1962; reprint ed. New York, 1973), 2: 110, 112.

126. Daniel M. Friedenberg, "A Bonanza of Spanish Jewish Pre-Expulsion Seals," *Jewish Art* 18 (1992): 100 and passim. Armorial devices are found on Jewish seals by Italian Jews from the seventeenth century onwards. See L. Y. Rahmani, "Three Desk Seals in the Jewish Museum, London," *Jewish Art* 19/20 (1993/1994): 160. For an armorial device in a Spanish haggadah, attributed to fourteenth-century Catalonia, see José Ramón Magdalena Nom de Déu, "The Poblet Haggadah: An Unknown Fourteenth-Century Illuminated Sephardi Manuscript," *Jewish Art* 18 (1992): 112.

127. Wolf, "Seal," 137.



Haggadah, dating to Catalonia in the latter half of the fourteenth century.<sup>128</sup>

Diasporic Sephardim also used heraldry on their synagogues and tombstones. Leghorn's Sephardic synagogue contained a marble monument bearing the escutcheon of the Franco family.<sup>129</sup> This heraldry bears similarity to the coats of arms more frequently carved on the tombs of the Sephardic cemetery of Ouderkerk. Often this symbolism was identical to that of Gentile Iberian families of noble descent.<sup>130</sup> Hamburg's Sephardic cemetery is also adorned with sepulchral escutcheons.<sup>131</sup> Heraldry on Sephardic tombstones, demonstrating cultural ties with Iberia, has been studied to determine genealogy reaching back to old Spanish and Portuguese nobility.<sup>132</sup> It has also been attributed to assimilation to Christianity, though similar escutcheons appearing on Ashkenazi tombstones have generally not provoked such assumptions.<sup>133</sup>

The other slab in Paramaribo's old Sephardi cemetery bearing an armorial device presents a similar image.<sup>134</sup> The epitaph is almost completely effaced, but clearly visible is a castle, on top of which are positioned a winged hourglass and a crown. This image suggests the decedent may also have hailed from the del Castilho family. Both of these carved slabs differ in important ways from the escutcheon commonly listed for the Castello family of England, notably in the absence of a lion icon.<sup>135</sup> In this second Surinamese stele, the diadem may refer not only to earthly royalty, but also to the mystical concept of *keter malkhut* (the crown of monarchy). In kabbalistic symbolism, the ten crowns of the Holy King represent the Supreme Crown; Wisdom; Intelligence; Love, or Greatness; Power, or Judgment; Beauty, or Mercy; Lasting

128. Nom de Dieu, "The Poblet Haggadah," 112, 116.

129. Hyamson, *Anglo-Jewish Nobilities*, 76–77.

130. *Ibid.*, 76.

131. Studemund-Halévy, *Biographisches Lexikon*, 114–15.

132. Weinstein, "Sepulchral Monuments," 1: 2.

133. Heraldry is also found on the tombstones of Eastern European Ashkenazim. See Davidovitch, "Tombs and Tombstones; Art," 1226, 1230, 1233. In the Jewish cemeteries of the former Czech Republic there is at least one tombstone bearing a coat of arms, that of Jacob Bashevi of Treuenberg. Herman, *Jewish Cemeteries*, 31, and photo 74. "Bassevi von Truenberg," as he was named, was the first Czech Jew to be raised to the rank of nobility (1621). Weinstein, "Sepulchral Monuments," 1: 51. On the use of armorial devices among Ashkenazim see Wolf, "Seal," *passim*, and Guttentstein and Jacobs, "Coat of Arms," *passim*. One scholar assumes, without evidence, that the use of armorial devices on Ashkenazi tombstones is indicative of Germanic Jewish imitation of Sephardic "hidalguism." Benardete, *Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews*, 44.

134. OS10.

135. Guttentstein and Jacobs, "Coat of Arms," 127.

Endurance; Majesty; Foundation (of the World), or Righteousness; and Kingdom, or the Diadem. They also recall King David's benediction of God in I Chronicles 29:11–12.<sup>136</sup> Crowns appearing above such objects as Torah scrolls, arks, and priestly hands convey the “lofty significance” of these symbols and imply a “highly esteemed person,” evoking the phrase, “crown of a good name” (*keter shem tov*).<sup>137</sup> *Ethics of the Fathers* (*Pirkei Avot*) 4:17 mentions three of these: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of the royal house of David, whence the Messiah will descend. The castle carved on the tombstone is perched atop an Ionic column, stretching the full length of the stone. Columns frequently symbolize Solomon's temple, though they usually occur in pairs, based on I Kings 7:21. These columns often appear on title pages of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Christian and Jewish books printed in Italy and the Netherlands.<sup>138</sup>

### *Heavenly Bodies, Hands, and Arms*

The handclasp is a symbol not specific to the Jewish heritage, but nonetheless came to resonate with the values and tastes of Caribbean Jews. At the bottom of an undated slab from the old Sephardi cemetery is something that resembles a handshake, with each hand emanating from a separate cloud. Here, the posture of the hands is critical for interpretation. The handclasp, particularly with the thumb in evident view, is a symbol of freemasonry, suggesting the deceased may have been a lodge member.<sup>139</sup> Masonic imagery, influenced by Jewish concepts and biblical icons,<sup>140</sup> must have held particular prestige for Suriname's Jews, who founded their own lodge, De Standvastigheid (Constancy), in 1780.<sup>141</sup> On the tombstone, the hands as cloud emanations suggest the afterlife. A study on hand imagery on North American gravestones proposes that similar manual devices extended horizontally symbolize “a

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136. Shadur and Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts*, Color Plates 24, 25 (unpaginated).

137. Compare the cemeteries of Ukraine and Moldova in Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones*, 17.

138. Shadur and Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts*, 60. A broken column may symbolize a premature death. Weggemann, *Die sprechenden Steine*, 44.

139. Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York, 1962), 131; Barbara Franco, *Masonic Symbols in American Decorative Arts* (Lexington, MA, 1976), 50; Wolf, “Anglo-Jewish Coats of Arms,” 156. For overtly masonic imagery in a Caribbean Sephardic cemetery, see Emmanuel, *Precious Stones*, 126.

140. Wolf, “Anglo-Jewish Coats of Arms,” 156; Franco, *Masonic Symbols*, passim.

141. Bubberman, *Links with the Past*, 150; Paul François Roos, *Eerstelingen van Surinaamsche Mengelpoëzy* (Amsterdam, 1783), 155. Roos also mentions five additional lodges in Suriname: Concordia; La Zelée; Cura et Vigilantia; L'Union; and La Solitaire.

continuum of being, and even interaction, between the below and the above, between the living and the dead, and between the human and the divine.”<sup>142</sup>

Similar eyebrow-raising symbols implicitly or clearly violating the second commandment against the physical representation of God<sup>143</sup> reveal an important theme in early modern Jewish memorials. Visitors to Suriname’s Jewish cemeteries will note depictions of human forms, or, seemingly, of God or parts of God’s “body.” Although they also occur in the old Ashkenazi cemetery, they are far more numerous on the former colony’s Sephardi tombstones. Certainly, none of these forms are as blatantly representational as is the tombstone of Samuel Senior Teixeira, laid to rest in Ouderkerk in 1717, with its pictorial depiction of God. Daniel Swetschinski may be correct to classify this as “the only such depiction in all of Jewish art,”<sup>144</sup> but faint reflections appear half a world away in the former Dutch colony. The tombstone of Esther Hana de Meza, for example, who died at the age of thirty-one in 1745, features a wingless, man-like figure holding an axe and chopping down a tree.<sup>145</sup> A hand—ambiguously God’s or an angel’s—felling a tree appears on several other tombstones. Depictions of heavenly intervention in the form of hands, arms, and full-fledged figures are the most prevalent in the three Sephardic cemeteries, followed in popularity only by priestly hands, but also occur in the old Ashkenazi cemetery.<sup>146</sup>

What outside evidence is there for how colonial Jews may have understood these heavenly, destructive hands? The tombstone of Walter Judah, buried in New York’s oldest extant burial ground, supports the divinity of these celestial appendages. Encircled within a rondel is an image of a winged angel emerging from a cloud and casting upon the city

142. Nancy-Lou Patterson, “United Above Though Parted Below: The Hand as Symbol on Nineteenth-Century Southwest Ontario Gravestones,” *Markers* VI (1989): 197, 202.

143. Exodus 20: 4–6. These verses read: “Thou shalt not make for thyself any carved idol, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, punishing the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of those that hate me; but showing mercy to thousands of generations of those that love me, and keep my commandments.”

144. Daniel Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (London and Portland, OR, 2000), 309. Landsberger, *A History of Jewish Art*, 257, assumed this slab was carved by a Christian, “to whom the representation of God was a natural thing.”

145. CI4.

146. At the Cassipora cemetery, 25 percent of the images include hands or arms axing down trees; in the Jodensavanne cemetery, 46 percent; in the old Sephardi cemetery, 51 percent; in the old Ashkenazi cemetery, 22 percent.

of New York a rod of fire, symbolizing the yellow fever epidemic that snuffed out Judah's life in 1798. To its right is a full-grown tree and a cloud, out of which emerges an axe-bearing hand. David de Sola Pool, who documented and analyzed the stelae of New York's colonial Jews, identified the icon simply as a "heavenly arm cutting down the tree of life." But here, in the same frame, God's angel of death is clearly distinguished from a hand, which can only be God's.<sup>147</sup> As the Jewish communities of New York and Suriname were connected through philanthropic endeavors, marital ties, and cultural heritage, Judah's emblem may serve as a symbolic touchstone for heavenly manual images in Suriname's Jewish necropoleis.

One striking feature of Suriname's oldest Jewish burial grounds is the virtual absence of pictorial biblical narrative. The sole exemplar, presenting the story of Jacob's ladder, occurs in the old Ashkenazi cemetery.<sup>148</sup> This contrasts with the copious biblical illustrations carved on Sephardic tombstones in Ouderkerk and Curaçao. In his study of Amsterdam's seventeenth-century Sephardic community, Daniel Swetschinski argues that detailed biblical representations on tombstones suggest in their liberal interpretation of the second commandment a "Jewish variant of the Christian patron saint" and a "predilection for private familial devotions." The religiously unorthodox images etched on grave markers, he maintains, communicate nostalgia for Iberian customs and an effort to preserve a sense of Sephardic sub-ethnic identity. Moreover, they are a means to resolve creatively the tensions between the Jewish void created by an oppressive past and a yearning for Iberian culture.<sup>149</sup>

Many biblical representations in Dutch Jewish cemeteries are culled from Protestant biblical illustrations and are heirs to sixteenth-century

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147. Studemund-Halévy, *Biographisches Lexikon*, 122, however, intimates that in such images the celestial hand is meant to be assigned to the angel. Another scholar deems the "hand of God," such as that appearing in Dura-Europos and, subsequently, in early and medieval Jewish art, as "a sign of Divine intervention, not a representation of divinity." In her view, such hands represent an "interpretation of biblical locutions" and are "meant as a metaphor." Elisha Revel-Neher, "With Wisdom and Knowledge of Workmanship': Jewish Art Without a Question Mark," in *Complex Identities, Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, ed. Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd (New Brunswick and London, 2001), 18–19, 31.

148. OA120.

149. Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, 312–13, 322. Human images, though apparently rare, are also found in the Prague Jewish cemetery, where the house-shaped cenotaph of Chief Rabbi Aaron Simeon Spira (d. 1679) is decorated with relief images of an official and the rabbi himself. Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones*, 16. This burial ground also includes figures of women on the tombstones of young, unmarried girls, depictions of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and a pictograph of a woman spinning the tassels of a prayer garment (*tsitsit*). Petr Ehl, *Old Bohemian and Moravian Jewish Cemeteries*, 17.

Dutch iconoclasm. It is therefore essential to consider how Protestants in the United Provinces viewed such sculptures or engravings. Rochelle Weinstein has argued that, for the Calvinist Dutch and the wealthy Sephardim who sponsored their illustrated works, the purpose of visual representations of biblical protagonists was to encourage not their worship, but rather the emulation of human virtues. Dutch Calvinists carefully specified in prefaces to illustrated Bibles the difference between idolatrous kneeling before church paintings and sculptures, and moral edification derived from contemplating images of ancient patriarchs.<sup>150</sup> Sephardic use of biblical representation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in both the United Provinces and Suriname, may have been understood from a Dutch Calvinist, as opposed to an Iberian, New Christian, worldview. Biblical scenes on Ashkenazi tombstones in Suriname and elsewhere in the Dutch Republic and the early modern Americas might also be understood in this light.

### *Jewish Symbols, Christian Symbols*

Images of a specifically Jewish nature, that is, identifiable solely as Hebraic (circumcision scenes and implements, priestly benediction hands, Levitical ewers and basins, shew bread tables), have a significant presence in all four cemeteries.<sup>151</sup> Other symbols (skulls and crossbones, winged hour glasses) represent classical mortality symbols reworked in the Renaissance,<sup>152</sup> and appropriated by both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. Icons such as axed trees, upright trees, and leaf fronds, though they maintain Jewish contexts and import, also occur on Christian emblems,

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See also Schwartzman, *Graven Images*, 48–49. Moses Sofer of Frankfurt-am-Main (1762–1839) ruled in 1832 that it was forbidden to pray over a grave bearing the image of a human being, “since one would appear to be bowing” to the tombstone’s image and recommended removing “this contemptible object.” Elyakim ben Joseph of Mainz (b. ca. 1170) alluded in a responsum to images of cherubim in Jewish cemeteries and forbade them. Mann, ed., *Jewish Texts*, 31–34, 75.

150. Weinstein, “Stones of Memory,” 90, 94; Weinstein, “Sepulchral Monuments,” 1: 33–34, 217. With the Protestant rejection of Catholic concepts of death and the afterlife, sepulchral monument in the Netherlands began to emphasize the individual, his faith, and his exemplary Christian conduct on earth. This new approach to remembrance shifted the emphasis from “the prospectively to the retrospectively eschatological.” Scholten, *Sumptuous Memories*, 18–19.

151. Cassipora cemetery, 63 percent; Jodensavanne cemetery, 29 percent; old Sephardi cemetery, 14 percent; old Ashkenazi cemetery, 39 percent.

152. For similar observations in Ouderkerk’s Sephardic cemetery, see Weinstein, “Stones of Memory,” 92. For ancient Jewish cult symbols see Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, vol. 4.

and thus cannot be considered specifically Jewish.<sup>153</sup> And yet, their usage may indeed prove quintessentially Jewish. In her study of Turkey's Jewish burial monuments, Minna Rozen found that many symbols, such as prayer rugs and the cypress, were borrowed from surrounding Gentile cultures. What distinguishes these stones is that they do not find their counterparts on Ottoman Muslim monuments. Rozen concluded that "funerary art in Hasköy in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and even nineteenth centuries drew deeply from the wellspring of Ottoman society and culture. At the same time, the Jewish offshoot was an original creation that was easily recognizable and distinct from the surrounding Ottoman style."<sup>154</sup> This conclusion invites another approach to the question of art in Suriname's Jewish cemetery. A careful study of iconography in local non-Jewish cemeteries and coterminous material culture can suggest the ways in which the colony's Sephardim and Ashkenazim appropriated and transformed foreign symbols by carving them on stone.

What of cross-cultural influences among Suriname's Jews themselves? In the Germanic-Jewish cemetery of Paramaribo we might have expected to witness human forms replaced by animals, such as a lion holding a Levitical ewer, or birds participating in human acts of piety, including alms-giving, witnessed so often in the cemeteries of Ukraine and Moldova.<sup>155</sup> In fact, tombstone imagery is largely shared among the two sub-ethnic groups. A few exceptions occur, namely a biblical scene depicting Jacob's ladder, a coffee plant and sugar cane, willow trees, circumcision tools, musical instruments, and death and childbirth scenes, all found in the old Ashkenazi cemetery. Grape clusters, shew bread, castles, and heraldry are present only in the Sephardi burial grounds. In all four cemeteries, only twenty-eight separate motifs occur. This small sample echoes Erwin Goodenough's limited tally of ancient symbols appearing in Jewish literary sources, archeological remains, and biblical paintings of Dura in present-day Syria. Goodenough concluded that "Jews obviously favored some pagan symbols, definitely avoided others," and thus selected symbols that they deemed Jewishly accept-

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153. Studemund-Halévy, *Biographisches Lexikon*, 122.

154. Rozen, *Hasköy Cemetery*, 115.

155. Gberman, *Jewish Tombstones*, 16. Images of grape-bearing bears can be found in Sadgora, dating to 1819 (photo 101) and Kishinev, dating to 1822 (photo 229) and 1831 (photo 246). Pitcher-bearing lions of the late eighteenth century can be found in Uzhgorod (photos 214 and 215). In the same cemetery is an epitaph of a young girl dating to the second half of the nineteenth century depicting a dead fledgling under a tree with three live fledglings standing by (photo 250).

able and of “symbolic value to themselves.”<sup>156</sup> Similarly, we may conclude that Suriname’s Jewish iconography suggests a general consensus among Suriname’s Jews about what was appropriate for memorializing members of the community and expressing their Jewish belonging. Moreover, following Goodenough’s methodology, it is noteworthy that a number of tombstones contain imagery from Christian iconography (e.g., winged hourglasses) alongside Jewish symbols (e.g., a table with shew bread). It is unlikely that the first was merely decorative and the latter purely symbolic. Rather, images of Christian and Jewish origin both likely carried representational import. Tombstones were a medium through which Suriname’s Jews could express their multi-heritage origins—including the non-Jewish elements of that legacy—as acceptably Jewish.<sup>157</sup>

### *The Form of Gravemarkers: Sephardi, Ashkenazi, and West African Influences*

The shapes of Suriname’s Jewish monuments are generally extremely simple. All lie flat, in accordance with Sephardi custom, even those of the old Ashkenazi cemetery, another example of how the Judeo-Germanic community chose (or was perhaps obliged) to conform to Sephardi norms. The exceptions are two prism-shaped slabs in the Cassipora cemetery.<sup>158</sup> Known in Hebrew as *ohalim* (“tents”), these prismatic stones date to Talmudic times, and have been traditionally reserved in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions for rabbis and other communal leaders.<sup>159</sup> The decedents buried underneath *ohalim* at Cassipora, David de Meza (d. 1739) and Abigail de Meza (d. 1732), lavishly praised

156. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4: 43.

157. *Ibid.*, 4: 44. Some symbols, such as the willow discussed above, bore religious meanings current among Jews and Christians alike. When these meanings do not overlap, the challenge of determining cultural compass is compounded, particularly when considering the direct experience of many former crypto-Jews with Christianity.

158. C32 and C33. Marten Douwes Teenstra (*De Landbouw in de Kolonie Suriname*, 2 vols. [Groningen: H. Eekhoff, 1835], 2: 141) witnessed in 1827 “an abundance” of such tombstones, “scattered in every direction.”

159. Weinstein, “Stones of Memory,” 92; Weinstein, “Sepulchral Monuments,” 1: 39, 48. The term “*ohel*” appears in the Babylonian Talmud and refers to “a tent-like structure often erected over the graves of rabbis and other prominent community members everywhere in the last two millennia.” Variations of these obelisk-shaped markers are also found in Ottoman cemeteries, where they were most fashionable in the eighteenth century. The prism-shaped stone in the Hasköy cemetery first appeared around 1610 and disappeared in the 1820s. At its height in the eighteenth century, some 40 percent of all gravestones took this form, many with more than three facets. Prismatic stones can also be found in other Turkish cemeteries, as well as those of Thessalonica, Sofia, Belgrade and Sarajevo. According to Rozen (*Hasköy Cemetery*, 34, 38, 44), the prismatic form originated in the tombs of the Seljuks, Turkic tribes that invaded Asia Minor in the eleventh century.

for her leadership, were likely important figures in the community. All other tombstones are rectangular, and those of smaller dimensions are typically reserved for children. A few Sephardi and Ashkenazi tombstones bear a square or rectangular engraved pocket, evocative of some Ottoman tombstones. On Jewish burial markers in Istanbul, these recesses are round in form, and may have served as candleholders or for oil, on top of which a candlewick would float. There, the niche for memorial candles was partly inspired by the Turkish custom of adorning gravestones with a single recess, meant to gather rainwater for birds.<sup>160</sup> Memorializing the dead through candlelight is a widespread Jewish custom mentioned as early as 1170, likely inspired by the biblical verse, “The soul is the lamp of God” (Proverbs 20:27).<sup>161</sup> The quadrangular shape of the recesses on Surinamese slabs, and the fact that one contains a smaller, identically-shaped stone block nestled inside, suggest that these depressions were intended for something other than memorial lights, possibly for the insertion of soil from the land of Israel.<sup>162</sup>

Most community members could not afford the expenses incurred through the purchase and commission of stone material, inscriptions, and transportation, as noted previously. This explains the abundance of engraved wooden markers, long since disintegrated but faithfully noted in communal archives and artistic etchings.<sup>163</sup> Today, the only remnants of such biodegradable markers are found in the new Ashkenazi and new Sephardi burial grounds of Paramaribo, which await documentation. Most of these wooden stakes are topped with heart-shaped or, when upside-down, spade-like symbols, sometimes superimposed with a hexagram, or “Jewish star,” an icon Jews worldwide have only recently appropriated as an ethno-religious motif.<sup>164</sup> When upside down, or spade-like, these icons evoke the *sankofa*, a symbol native to the Akan

160. Rozen, *Hasköy Cemetery*, 56.

161. *Ibid.*, 55.

162. C68; J66; OA88. I thank Adriana van Alen-Koenraad for this suggestion. Suriname’s Sephardic community maintained reserves of Palestinian soil for the burial of their deceased. NA, Nederlands-Portugees-Israëlitische Gemeente in Suriname, no. 131, Inventarissen van papieren, berustend onder de 1e voorzanger B.V.S., D.B. Louzada [Inventory of papers, in possession of the first cantor of B.V.S., D.B. Louzada]: “Hum pedasso de Terra Santa, pa. os difuntos.” Likewise, in Hamburg, Jews were sometimes buried with “holy soil” from the land of Israel placed under their heads and upon their eyes. Studemund-Halévy, *Biografisches Lexicon*, 93.

163. See, for example, NA, Nederlandse Portugees-Israëlitische Gemeente in Suriname, no. 131, and the artistic rendering of Jodensavanne’s cemetery in G.W.C. Voorduin, *Gezigten uit Neerland’s West-Indien, naar de natuur geteekend* (Amsterdam, 1860). The same may be true for New York’s oldest burial ground. See Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, 172.

164. See Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, 2004), 106–7.



people of West Africa, from whom many Surinamese people descend. The *sankofa* is emblematic of the maxim, “It is not a taboo to go back and retrieve if you forget” (*Se wo were fi na wo sankofa a yenkyi*). When right-side-up or heart-shaped, it evokes the *akoma*, a symbol of love, patience, goodwill, faithfulness, and endurance.<sup>165</sup>

While similar icons in the jungle Jewish cemeteries are no longer apparent, their parallels lie in proximity. Just a few meters away from Jodensavanne’s burial ground is the so-called Creole cemetery, likely the final resting place of free people of African descent.<sup>166</sup> In Suriname, “Creole” denotes a descendant of an African slave who traces his freedom to manumission rather than marronage. Many of the surviving grave markers, dating from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, some bearing Jewish last names, also exhibit the heart-shaped *akoma*. Descendants of the African diaspora in Suriname, not unlike Jews, cherished “the belief that wisdom was passed down by the ancestors to future generations.” Afro-Surinamese “expressed this belief on their tombs, in particular, through this age-old symbol”—as did Ashkenazim and Sephardim with their incised images of biblical episodes and Jewish iconography—“for the edification of posterity.”<sup>167</sup>

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165. Kwaku Ofori-Ansa, *Meanings of Symbols in Adinkra Cloth* (Hyattsville, MD, 1993); Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 165, 167. Rattray identifies both the *akoma* and *sankofa* as resembling a heart. The *sankofa*, according to him, is emblematic of the aphorism, “turn back and fetch it.”

166. Two researchers have assumed this is where Jewish masters buried their slaves. Lehmann, “Our Own Banana Republic,” 7, and M.R. Khudabux, “The Excavation of Skeletal Material at Joden Savanne, (Suriname),” *Mededelingen van het Surinaams Museum* 41 (December 1983): 19. However, this is unlikely. Rather, the Creole cemetery is probably the eternal abode of manumitted slaves and their descendants. A number of facts support this view. First of all, slaves were generally buried on a master’s plantation. Secondly, the Creole cemetery lies adjacent to Jodensavanne’s Jewish cemetery, and is thus situated on prominent public land. Such a site would never have been ceded to slaves for burial use. Third, some death and birth dates precede Suriname’s Emancipation of 1863. Typically, birth and death dates of slaves were not recorded. Thus, those interred in the cemetery were likely not captives. Finally, epitaphs include family names of the deceased, and slaves did not bear such names. The cemetery’s early burials possibly represent the free offspring of Jewish fathers and African-descendant mothers who were not accepted as Jews because their mothers were not Jewish. Alternatively, the cemetery may have been established by non-Jewish *kleurlingen* (literally, “coloreds,” denoting Eurafricans) who came to the area to serve the military of the Cordon Pad in the 1770s, or who inherited the land of their former masters or employers when the latter abandoned Jodensavanne. The Creole cemetery has some stone grave markers that resemble those of Jodensavanne’s Jews. The cemetery also contains a variety of carved wooden graves, apparently inspired by African symbolism, similar to those found in Paramaribo’s roughly contemporaneous Jewish cemeteries. For further discussion, see Ben-Ur and Frankel, *Remnant Stones*.

167. Frankel, “Antecedents and Remnants of Jodensavanne,” 425–26. For further discussion see Ben-Ur and Frankel, *Remnant Stones*.

In Paramaribo's nineteenth- and twentieth-century new Sephardi and Ashkenazi cemeteries, spade-like *sankofa* and heart-shaped *akoma* symbols are sprinkled throughout the burial grounds, often superimposed on the six-pointed star of David, and with the Hebrew name of the deceased etched upon the typical Sephardic horizontally-set slab. Sometimes the wooden African-origin icon is placed vertically atop the stone. Noticeably absent, however, are illustrative images. As Rachel Frankel has noted, "the horizontal stone tombs, European in origin, are joined by sepulchral art of [West] African origin, thereby forming the only uniquely Jewish-African style of tomb known in the New World."<sup>168</sup>

That West African icons on Jewish tombstones were more than simply decorative is evident in their status as "living symbols" in Suriname. In his study of ancient Jewish iconography, Erwin Goodenough attempted to determine whether or not pagan designs on Jewish monuments were "really religious symbols to the Jews" or served merely aesthetic purposes. He concluded that they were not purely ornamental, since these icons borrowed from paganism "were all living symbols, in paganism earlier and contemporaneously, and in Christianity contemporaneously and later."<sup>169</sup> In keeping with his methodology for using symbols as independent historical evidence, we may observe that the *sankofa* and *akoma* forms are dispersed throughout the Jewish and Gentile necropoleis of Paramaribo, apparently as a living West African symbol transmitted through manumitted slaves and their descendants. Moreover, the preponderance of these symbols in Paramaribo suggests a consensus among community members about what constituted an appropriate symbol for Jewish burial. It is thus clear that their use in the new Sephardi and new Ashkenazi cemeteries does not reflect the idiosyncratic taste of a few individuals, but rather a widely accepted consumer pattern.

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168. Frankel, "Antecedents and Remnants of Jodensavanne," 425–26. The *sankofa* and *akoma* symbols can be found more generally in Paramaribo's Protestant and Moravian cemeteries, speaking to the permeation of African influence across ethnic and religious lines. Surinamese cemetery keepers with whom I communicated during my 2002 expedition were aware of the Creole origin of these symbols. A parallel of this symbolic syncretism can be found on Crimean-Jewish tombstones, considered by some scholars to be of Khazarian origin. The engravings on one side of the stone show Jewish symbols, such as the menorah, shofar, and the staff of Aaron, while the other side is adorned with pagan tribal emblems of diverse geometric shapes. See Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century* (Ithaca, 1982), 27. For illustrations, see Abraham N. Poliak, *Kazariya: toldot mamlakhah Yehudit be-Eropah* (Tel Aviv, 1944), 11, 165. These dual-sided carvings may also indicate that the tombstone was "recycled" for the next client. I thank Rochelle Weinstein for this insight.

169. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4: 43–44.

The acceptance and transformation of non-Jewish symbols by Jews is witnessed in diverse communities throughout the early modern period. Amsterdam's Sephardic rabbis often denounced literary allusions to pagan deities and the Christian afterlife, but they usually remained silent about such influences in stone, suggesting, Rochelle Weinstein argues, that these foreign elements were generally accepted as appropriate for Jewish memorial use.<sup>170</sup> Similarly, Michael Studemund-Halévy concludes that the use of Christian and pagan symbols in Hamburg's Sephardic cemetery shows that Sephardim did not see these icons as heretical. These motifs, he maintains, achieved on tombstones a new Jewish meaning among Sephardim in the seventeenth century. For Minna Rozen, the Jewish use of Muslim-derived iconography on tumulary monuments—where Muslims have never placed it—are what renders these memorials unequivocally Jewish. While symbolic borrowing attests to permeable boundaries among Jews and Gentiles, it also provides clues to the historical process by which Jews simultaneously transformed their Judaism and broadened its locally accepted parameters.<sup>171</sup>

In an environment of close intercultural contact—often violent and oppressive, but also at times peaceful and symbiotic—it is not surprising that Jewish sensibilities were increasingly oriented toward the heritage of African descendants, particularly on the rural frontier. An inventory of the belongings of Aaron J. da Costa, living on the savannah in 1820, lists five Bush Negro plates (*Bosch Neeger Borden*), among other household goods.<sup>172</sup> Alas, the account does not provide details that would link these artifacts to the exquisite carvings for which maroons have been famous among scholars since at least the mid-twentieth century.<sup>173</sup> Whether utilitarian or intended for decorative enjoyment (or both), these relics reflect the Jewish community's receptivity to Afro-Surinamese influences.

170. Weinstein, "Sepulchral Monuments," 1: 7, 317.

171. This process finds its parallels in ritual practices. Folk customs of non-Jewish origins have often been infused with a post-facto fictional Jewish meaning. Such is the case with shattering a glass at a Jewish wedding, which likely originated as a folk belief that evil forces or demons intending to inflict harm on the newlywed couple could be startled or injured by the shattered glass. The custom was later rabbinically explained as a reminder of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temples. Joseph Gutmann, *The Jewish Life Cycle* (Leiden, 1987), 16–17.

172. NA, Nederlandse Portugees-Israëlitische Gemeente in Suriname, no. 545, folio of uninventoried papers, Inventaris van goederen toebehoorende aan de Heer Ah. J. da Costa aan 't comptoir der Gemeente ter bewaaren op de 4 July 1820. Da Costa likely died in June of 1820.

173. See, for example, Philip J.C. Dark, *Bush Negro Art: An African Art in the Americas* (London, 1954). For remarkably similar wood engravings in West Africa see Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, illustrations between 272–73.

They also provide a clue regarding the process by which Suriname's Jewish landscapes acquired their Creole features. The cultural impact of African descendants was as much present in life as in death: as mundane as the domestic, and as enduring as the eternal abode.

## Conclusion

In most studies of Jewish cemeteries, iconography is given short shrift, while in discussions of Jewish art tombstone imagery often slips through the cracks.<sup>174</sup> For the purpose of historical analysis, the inscription is indeed the most obvious aspect of the burial marker. On the simplest level, epitaphs provide data on genealogy, birthplace, causes of death, professions, honorific positions, group membership, and birth and death dates. More inductively and statistically, they may also yield information on seasons of conception and mortality, cultural orientation in terms of first-name choice and language, linguistic evolution, and how all these changed over time. Carved pictographs often communicate information written words do not, from practical data concerning the individual's life and death to more abstract elements, such as Messianic expectations and cross-cultural influences and identity. Informed consideration of the iconography of tombstones opens new worlds for the understanding of a community influenced by both European Christian and West African-origin Creole cultures. Conventionally, an epitaph inscription is the most eloquent feature of the modern necropolis. In Suriname, the non-verbal elements of the cemetery are often more articulate than words.

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174. Two examples are Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, and Richard I. Cohen, *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1998). A study of tombstone iconography, particularly of early modern Ashkenazi Jewry, would be particularly relevant to Epstein's arguments, which focus on animal imagery. A cursory and rather impressionistic discussion of stone pictographs appears in Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, 205–7, which devotes more attention to paintings of Ouderkerk's *beth-haim* (cemetery) than to the sepulchers themselves. Landsberger considers tombstone images and their artists in his *A History of Jewish Art*, 80–82, 87, 157–67, 197, 198, 256–57.