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# Portuguese Jews, Amerindians, and the Frontiers of Encounter in Colonial Suriname

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## Abstract

Oppression, exclusion, and alliance are themes common in frontier zones like Suriname where cultures come into contact, collide, and connect. This article shows how Suriname functioned as a frontier not only between European empires but also between cultures and peoples. The meetings, clashes, and exchanges between Jews and Amerindians are a lens through which to analyze this zone of encounter. This relationship also illustrates the dynamics at play on the frontiers of nation and empire. These are places where peoples who are “in between” such as the Portuguese Jews and Amerindians broker between two cultures and two worldviews.

## Keywords

Jews – Amerindians – Suriname – frontiers – go-betweens

Noach Isak van Coerland was, by all accounts, an unpleasant man from a disagreeable family. He was born in Amsterdam in 1752 and appears in the records of both the civil authorities and the Jewish community in Suriname by the

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early 1770s. His appearance in these records stems from precisely this tendency toward unpleasantness. In fact, the *parnassim* of the Ashkenazi community requested that Governor Jean Nepveu banish him because, they wrote, everyone in the colony was aware of “in what manner Noach, as well as his parents, have conducted themselves; in such a turbulent fashion that one heard daily nothing but their hitting, fighting, and brawling on public streets.” Noach was subsequently exiled from the colony and ordered to live among the “free Indians in the region of the river Courantyne.” The objectionable Jew was, in fact, evicted from the colony, though his appeal of his banishment eventually took him back to the Dutch Republic, instead of to live amongst the free Indians.<sup>1</sup>

Van Coerland may not have, in the end, gone to live with the Amerindians, but many other Jews in the colony of Suriname did have quite extensive contacts with these indigenous people throughout the colonial period. Yet this is not a relationship that has heretofore been examined in the historiography of Suriname, in general, or in the study of the Jewish community, in particular. If any attention is given to the relationship between Amerindians and Jews anywhere in the Americas at all, it usually concerns the pervasive messianic belief that the indigenous peoples were descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel (Perelis 2009:195–211).<sup>2</sup> This article will move away from this

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1 He was accused of selling gunpowder to slaves in the late 1770s and absented himself from the Dutch colony for some years. When he returned, he was soon charged with attacking his daughter and killing a slave. Van Coerland died sometime before 1823 in Amsterdam. His wife, Abigael de Vries, did not follow Van Coerland back to the Dutch Republic. She died in Paramaribo on August 13, 1823 when she was approximately 71 years old. Their daughter, Haja, also died in Paramaribo in 1831. These and all subsequent translations from the Dutch are made by the author. National Archive of the Netherlands (hereafter NL-HaNA), Gouvernementssecretarie Suriname tot 1828, 1.05.10.01, inv. no. 528; NL-HaNA, Raad van Politie Suriname, 1.05.10.02, inv. no. 137; NL-HaNA, Portugees-Israëlitische Gemeente Suriname, 1.05.11.18, inv. no. 8 (Minutes June 12, 1770–October 14, 1788); NL-HaNA, Portugees-Israëlitische Gemeente Suriname, 1.05.11.18, inv. no. 9 (Minutes December 1, 1788–May 17, 1818). See also Cohen 1991:139–144.

2 Antonio de Montezinos was a Portuguese new Christian and traveler who, in 1644 claimed, that he had found one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, the tribe of Reuben, living in the jungles of the “Quito Province” of Ecuador. The text was known as *Relación de Aharon Levi, alias Antonio de Montezinos* and was originally presented as an oral deposition by Montezinos himself to the ruling council (*Mahamad*) of the Sephardic community in 1644. This supposed discovery gave an impulse to messianic hopes in Europe, particularly on the part of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, in Amsterdam, who wrote a book about this narrative, *The Hope of Israel*. In it, Ben Israel, using Montezinos’s supposed evidence, argued that the native inhabitants

framework. Because, as fantastical and as influential as the idea—that the indigenous peoples were the descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel—was during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this same idea seems to have had little or no impact on how Dutch settlers, including Jewish settlers, in Suriname or the other Guianas interacted with the Amerindian populations with whom they came into contact.

Instead, this article will argue that a very real and almost entirely untold story lies in the interactions between Amerindians and Jewish colonists in Suriname, a history that has been, and remains, difficult to write because these largely forgotten encounters lie in scraps of evidence, or between the lines of recorded incidents. This task is not made any easier by the fact that the term “Amerindians” could encompass so many different individuals and groups, and moreover, it is not clear if these groups that are referred to in the historical literature are the same as the contemporary peoples (Carlin & Boven 2002:44, n. 11). Moreover, linguistic definitions were, and still are, uncritically used as political ones (Whitehead 1990:378). The sources, which begin around 1600, indicate that there were a variety of groups: the Kari’na (Caribs), Arawaks, Wauraus, and Parakotos, as well as the Yaos and the Nepuyo, all largely grouped in the coastal regions (Carlin & Boven 2002:18). The Waurau lived around the Orinoco Delta and in the swampy regions of Western Guianas, while the Arawak occupied the area further east, maybe even as far as the Marowijne River in Suriname. The Caribs inhabited the western part of the region, generally upstream from the Arawaks, east of the Courantyne and closer to the coast (Boomert 1984; Heinen & García-Castro 2000; Whitehead 1993).<sup>3</sup> And by the end of the seventeenth century, a new group of Kari’na-speaking people who were of mixed

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of America at the time of the European discovery were actually descendants of the [lost] Ten Tribes of Israel. The book was published simultaneously in Spanish and Latin as *Miqweh Israel: Esto es Esperança de Israel* and *Miqweh Israel: Hoc est Spes Israelis* (both Amsterdam, 1650). At least thirteen editions appeared through 1723 in Latin, Spanish, English, Dutch, Yiddish, and Hebrew. For a complete bibliography, see Coppenhagen 1990. It caused great controversy and polemics in England and was also hugely influential in the Dutch Republic and elsewhere. The bibliography on the importance of Ben Israel’s retelling of Montezinos’s story is enormous. To name just a few, see Kaplan, Méchoulan & Popkin 1987:1–95. Benjamin Schmidt (2001: 86–106) takes a more nuanced view and places the creation and reception of Ben Israel’s work in the ongoing Dutch discourse about the natives of the Americas.

- 3 “Carib” was something of a catch-all term in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources, and, as Carlin and Boven note, not all peoples who were subsumed under the name Carib were necessarily ethnic Caribs. They might even have been from an Arawakan group. See Carlin & Boven 2002:44, n. 5.

black and Amerindian origin, known as the Karaboegers, had emerged. They lived along the Coppename River (Carlin & Boven 2002:19). Broadly speaking, the groups of people to whom this article makes reference were likely from the Arawak, Carib, or Waurau peoples (Buve 1962:4).

There is a fair amount known about the precolonial ethnography of the indigenous peoples, largely drawn from archeology, material culture, and linguistics, but employing, as well, the myriad accounts of Europeans that describe their encounters with these groups (Kloos 1971; Kloos 1975; Whitehead & Alemán 2009; Penard & Penard 1927). The accuracy of these early accounts, is, of course, somewhat doubtful. Travel writers clearly drew heavily upon each other's work, sometimes employing almost the same wording and structure, even when their works were written in different languages more than a century apart. For example, George Warren (1667), J.D. Herlein (1718), Gabriel Stedman (1790), and A.F. Lammens (late eighteenth century) describe childbirth practices among the Amerindians of the Guianas.<sup>4</sup> Using nearly identical language, they tell how it is that the man rested after the birth of his child and was fed in his hammock while the mother cared for the baby and for him (Warren 1667:25; Herlein 1718:155; Stedman 1972; Lammens, n.d.). All of which points to the fact that these writers' anthropological observations may not have been based on first-hand experience. Though this article is largely based on sources created by the Europeans, including many of these above-mentioned travel accounts, it does utilize the available secondary literature, combined with these primary sources, to tease out a picture of indigenous life and Amerindian perspectives. Although it does not pretend to write any sort of Amerindian history, it will employ the tantalizing bits of information available in the archeological, anthropological, and, above all, historical, documentation to shed light on the intriguing relationship between Jews and Amerindians. It is through the prism of these scant primary sources—limited to the European perspective to be sure—that glimpses can be caught of the complicated dynamics of Amerindian and Jewish interaction in late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth-century Suriname.

The relationship between Jews and Amerindians was hardly clear-cut. Although there was certainly oppression and exclusion, there was also cooperation, alliance, and cultural brokerage. These are the themes common in any frontier zone where cultures come into contact, collide, and connect. Fron-

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4 Lammens's manuscript is based on a transcription of Johannes Sneebeling's personal observations of Amerindians and their culture. Not much is known about Sneebeling, but he might have been a plantation owner in the district of Para.

tiers (and their synonyms: borderlands, peripheral or fringe areas) are geographic zones of interaction between two or more distinctive cultures. They are generally seen as places where cultures contend with one another and with their physical environment to produce a dynamic that is unique to time and place (Weber & Rausch 1994:xiv). The historian David Weber goes so far as to argue that the frontier is the focal point of all history—the place where multiple cultures meet, clash, and exchange (Weber 1982:277; Weber 1992).<sup>5</sup> This article will emphasize that Suriname functioned not only as a frontier zone or borderland between European empires—the British, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and French had all vied for control of this space—but also between cultures and peoples. And the meetings, clashes, and exchanges between Jews and Amerindians can be a lens through which to analyze this zone of encounter specifically, as well as the dynamics of frontier encounters more generally.

### Frontiers of Exchange

On October 30, 1674, four men appeared at the office of Amsterdam notary P. Padthuijsen to sign an agreement with one another.<sup>6</sup> They planned a joint venture, or what they called a “company,” and every man made an initial contribution of 1,300 guilders, which was (very roughly) the equivalent of US\$78,000 today.<sup>7</sup> Considering that an outdoor laborer earned around 6.50 guilders per week or just over 300 guilders per year (US\$18,000) and a master carpenter earned 9 guilders per week or just over 450 guilders per year (US\$27,000), this was a large sum indeed (Soltow & Van Zanden 1998). They were pooling the modern-day equivalent of US\$312,000 to outfit a ship to conduct trade on the so-called “Wild Coast” of South America.

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5 Others use the “frontier zone” concept as well. See Thompson & Lamar 1981; Forbes 1959; and Forbes 1962.

6 Stadsarchief Amsterdam (Amsterdam Municipal Archives, hereafter SAA), Notarial Archives (hereafter NA), 2908b/1438.

7 The partnership would have very little resemblance to what a company today would look like. The “company” was understood to be disbanded when the period of time defined in the contract was up. It is extremely difficult to calculate equivalencies in currencies over time, and any and all estimates are extremely rough. With that caveat in mind, research on inflation and the consumer price index over the period from 1600 to 2000, as well investigations into the rate of exchange and changes in purchasing power, has lead to a very general guideline of a factor of 60. That means, taken with caution, 100 guilders in the 1600s would equal around US\$6,000 in today’s money. See Bernstein 2004: 231–235 and Ibbotson & Brinson 1993:251–252.

The ship was purchased jointly out of their combined funds. In this, and the other aspects of their agreement, they were following standard business practice in the Dutch Republic by establishing a *partenrederij*, a contract for the joint ownership of vessels for trade (or fishing or transport) that limited the liability of each of the partners to the value of his initial investment (Riemersma 1952; Posthumus 1953; Broeze 1976–1978). The first trading ventures to West Africa and Asia had been formed using such a construction (Gelderblom & Jonker 2004). By the time the four businessmen walked into the notary Padthuisen's office that day in late October, this system for the provision of capital with limited liability was widely used in almost all shipping-related endeavors such as whaling, the herring fisheries, and colonial trade in the Dutch Republic (De Vries & Van der Woude 1997:244–247).

Abraham Drago, Jacob Pruijs, Barent van der Linden, and Otto van Halmael, the entrepreneurs who banded together in October 1674, needed to limit their liabilities because they were embarking on a risky venture. They proposed to send their optimistically named ship, *The Hope*, sailing up the rivers “Carsewine” and “Michary or Aricharrij” into a contested frontier zone with only eight men, two of whom, Van der Linden and Van Halmael, were themselves investors in the enterprise. This was a region that had been heavily fought over by the European powers, as well as by the Caribs and Arowaks. This constantly shifting frontier for the contestation of European rivalries, not to mention indigenous resistance, was the prototype for what Bernard Bailyn termed a “marchland”—“an ill-defined, irregular, outer borderland” (Bailyn 2005:62–63).

By the time the enterprising businessmen of Amsterdam chose to make an expedition to the area, it was under the nominal control of the province of Zeeland, having been wrested from the rule of the English in 1667. This change, however, only exacerbated already existing problems between the Europeans, of whatever stripe, and the Amerindians. In fact, within two years after the expedition on the ship *The Hope* set out, a guerrilla war with the Amerindians which lasted nine years (until 1686) would break out. Thus, Drago, Pruijs, Van der Linden, and Van Halmael were sending their ship, and their investment, into a zone in which European control was nominal, disease rampant, and the risks high. Little wonder, then, that they had tried to limit their liabilities as much as possible.

Yet they would not have chosen to gamble roughly the equivalent of US\$ 312,000 if they did not think they had a chance of success. They proposed to sail up the various rivers on this “wild coast” to buy goods from the trading posts and the plantations that dotted their banks. But, most importantly where this article is concerned, they proposed in their notarial act to “buy what we can

from the Indians.”<sup>8</sup> In this they were following a well-established pattern in the region. Trade conducted by so-called *bokkenruylers*, merchants who traveled inland along the rivers to exchange goods with the Amerindians, was commonplace. Although the English had attempted to shift the settlements away from this sort of trade and toward plantation agriculture, with some modicum of success, when the Zeelanders took over the area, there was a resurgence in the inland trade (Fatah-Black 2013:40). In fact, a combination of trade with the plantations and with the indigenous peoples located in the interior of this frontier often went hand-in-hand, and trade with the Amerindians, particularly in tropical hardwoods, was of vital importance to the European settlers well into the 1680s (Hulsman 2009:235).

The Dutch had come to the region to trade, and their success (or failure) was heavily dependent upon the cooperation of the Amerindians. The Dutch set up posts in the Guianas in order to promote trade with the Amerindians, and these posts were able to survive, at least initially, largely because of the Amerindians, who were often eager to counterbalance Spanish influence in the area, and who would protect the settlements against rival Amerindian groups. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Amerindians would check if the European traders were Spanish or not, and if the traders were English, French, or Dutch, they proceeded to trade with them. These Amerindians also wanted, of course, the goods the Dutch could bring them, such as knives, axes, fishhooks, and beads. The Amerindians brought the Dutch food, tobacco, dyes, the aforementioned tropical woods, and, of course, slaves.<sup>9</sup> According to the Dutch-Scottish soldier and travel writer, Gabriel Stedman:

The trade or traffic which the Indians of Guiana carry on with the Dutch consists chiefly in slaves, earthen jars, canoes, hammocks, baskets, Brazil-wood, hiaree-roots, macaws, parrots, monkeys, balsam capivi, arracocerra, caraba or crab oil, and arnotta, for which they receive in return checquered cloth, fire-arms, gunpowder, hatchets, knives, scissars, different coloured beads, looking-glasses, fish-hooks, combs, needles, pins &c.

STEDMAN 1972:217

These trading relationships were often sealed with marriage alliances, according to Amerindian customs. The travel writer Edward Bancroft (1776:376) noted

<sup>8</sup> SAA, NA 2908b/1438.

<sup>9</sup> Amerindian groups had engaged in a trade in slaves before the arrival of the Europeans. However, the European settlers stimulated this already existing slave trade.



that as late as 1760, “Several of the most considerable families, in rank and fortune derive their origin from these alliances [between Dutch men and Amerindian women].”<sup>10</sup> Trade alliances were not always, or even often, clearly distinguished from family or kinship alliances, nor from military ones, as shall be discussed in the following section.

Much of the trade, even in the posts run by the Dutch West India Company (WIC), was conducted by private traders, often of mixed descent such as the ones described by Bancroft, though because they were not officially employed by the WIC, their identities are difficult to ascertain. It is clear that these men went into the interior, often for months at a time, and traded with the Amerindians. In this they were building on already existing native systems of exchange (Whitehead 1988:53–55; Whitehead 1999:393). Many travel writers noted that it was the custom of the Amerindians to take their canoes and travel to other groups in the interior and trade. Philip Fermin describes how the Amerindians “cannot but travel to visit each other to trade with their canoes” and “[they] sell hammocks, earthenware ... weapons, all sorts of rare animals, and balsam, which they exchange for the goods of the Europeans which they need or that they can use in making their goods. One can buy from them cheaply because, most of the time, they do not know the actual value of the goods they are selling” (Fermin 1770:77–78, 80–81).

The merchants of Amsterdam described earlier likely felt confident in their chances of turning a profit not only because they were following an established pattern of trade in the region, but also because of the first-hand knowledge of this trade that at least one of their number, Abraham Drago, had. Drago, a Portuguese Jew, numbers among the group of five “colonial entrepreneurs” whom the historian of the Dutch in the Atlantic, Wim Klooster, views as key to the establishment of Jewish settlements in the Americas in the seventeenth century (Klooster 2009).<sup>11</sup> Abraham Drago’s experience in the Dutch colonies

<sup>10</sup> See also Whitehead 1990:366.

<sup>11</sup> The other entrepreneurs named by Klooster are João de Yllán, David Cohen Nassi, Antonio Luis, and Abraham Cohen. Drago was born in Lisbon in 1628 and lived the peripatetic existence so common among Portuguese Jewish merchants engaged in Atlantic trade. He moved to Recife, in Dutch Brazil, around 1648. He had probably gone to Brazil from Amsterdam rather than directly from Lisbon. In any case, after the fall of the colony to the Portuguese, he went back to Amsterdam, as did many of the other Jewish settlers. He was one of the first Jewish settlers on Curaçao in 1651, and continued crossing the Atlantic. When Drago was in Amsterdam, as he certainly was documented as being in 1655, 1661, 1675, and 1697 (when he died), he encouraged migration to Curaçao, and brought seven families to Willemstad as late as 1680. See Wolff & Wolff 1979:30–31; Wolff & Wolff 1991; Bloom 1937:62; Klooster 2009:235, n. 76.

was not just limited to Curaçao, though. Drago had experience on the Wild Coast, and could have been expected by his partners Jacob Pruijs, Barent van der Linden, and Otto van Halmael to know enough about the inland commerce with the Amerindians to help make their mission a success, as this trade was a hallmark of life in the region. Drago had owned land in Cayenne, the short-lived Dutch colony in what is present-day French Guyana, and had contracted with various men in the Dutch Republic to help him cultivate his property (Bloom 1937:153–154; Zwarts 1927–28). Moreover, two relatives of Abraham's, Isaac and David Drago, likely cousins, were named in the notarial deed passed that distant day in October as being the factors in Suriname to whom Van der Linden and Van Halmael were to hand over the goods they had purchased from the Amerindians on their trip up the rivers of the Wild Coast. Isaac and David Drago were noted in this deed as living in Suriname at the time.<sup>12</sup> Isaac Drago had been living in the colony for at least five years by the time Van der Linden and Van Halmael were to have made contact with him, so would have known about how to conduct trade with the Amerindians (Klooster 2009:46).<sup>13</sup>

While it is clear, then, that Portuguese Jews had non-Jewish, Dutch trading partners, the notarial deed also shows that the Portuguese Jews in Suriname already had at least some knowledge of the advantages of trading with Amerindians and knew how to conduct this trade. In fact, this notarial deed brings to light a trade network set up between Portuguese Jews, Dutch Christians, and Amerindians—a small-scale network to be sure—but one that was important enough, and official enough, that it was acknowledged in the documentation of the Dutch legal system. Research by the historian Daniel Usner has brought to light a vibrant, multicultural frontier society comprising whites,

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12 SAA, NA 2908b/1438.

13 Isaac Drago also had extensive colonial experience. He is likely the same Isaac Drago who was later recorded as living in Curaçao. See Emmanuel & Emmanuel 1970:44, n. 41, vol. 1. Isaac Drago was first documented in the colony in 1669 as the husband of Sara Nassy, daughter of David Nassy, another one of the “colonial entrepreneurs” named by Klooster. Sara herself was an experienced settler in the Guianas, having first gone to Cayenne as a colonist in 1659. The importance of the Nassy family in the history of colonial Suriname would be hard to over-estimate. The Nassy and Drago families were closely connected. Not only were Isaac and Sara married, but David Nassy's wife was Rebecca Drago. See Emmanuel & Emmanuel 1970:43, n. 37, vol. 1. Abraham Drago was the factor in Amsterdam for Samuel Nassy, Sara's brother and David Nassy's son. See Klooster 2009:46. Likewise, Josua and Jacob Nassy, two of David Nassy's other sons, were named in the notary Padthuijsen's deed as alternative factors for Van der Linden and Van Halmael should the Dragos not be available. See SAA, NA 2908b/1438.

Indians, and blacks in colonial Louisiana. These groups created a wide-reaching network for trade. Usner labels their interaction “frontier exchange,” defining it as “the form and content of economic interaction between these groups.” Usner argues that for too long, “frontier” has connotated an interracial boundary, across which advanced societies penetrated primitive ones. But Usner believes that frontiers were more regional in scope, and should instead be seen as networks of cross-cultural interaction through which native and colonial groups circulated goods and services (Usner 1992:6; Usner 1987). The picture that Usner paints for colonial Louisiana is similar to that of the Portuguese Jews, Amerindians, and Dutch traders on the frontier in the Guianas. The society that clung to the edges of the South American mainland was a multicultural frontier society comprising whites, Indians, and blacks. These groups, particularly the whites, including the Portuguese Jews, and the Amerindians, created a wide-reaching network for trade—a network that included the geographical spaces of this vast frontier, but ranged as far as the European continent, because at least some of the goods acquired from the Amerindians were to be taken back to Amsterdam. In addition this was also a vibrant frontier society on the borderland between cultures and territories where encounter could be based on exchange and cooperation between and among groups.

### “His Good Indians”: Jews, Amerindians, and Civil Militias

The Prussian correspondent of the Surinamese Jewish community in the late eighteenth century, C.W. von Dohm, recognized the importance of military service in the early modern world when he inquired of these Jews living in the far reaches of the Dutch empire, “Have you the right to defend the common fatherland as soldiers, and to serve it as civil or military officers?” (Marcus & Chyet 1974:13). Dohm’s questions, which inspired the now-famous retrospective of the Portuguese Jews’ residence lasting more than a century on the frontier of the Dutch empire, the *Historical Essay*, touched on a key aspect of Jewish settlement in Suriname—their role in the military. The claim that one was a responsible community member who, in turn, expected certain privileges for supporting the government by serving in the civil militias was reiterated by many settlers in Dutch-controlled territories when they first ventured into the Atlantic world (Maika 2005:97). As Wim Klooster notes, “In other New World holdings of the Dutch West India company [WIC] like Curaçao, participation in the burgher guard was an obligation of a citizen” (Klooster 2002:184). On Curaçao, for instance, each man—Dutch-born or not—who took up his abode on the island, was registered with the civic guard after a stay of one year and

six weeks.<sup>14</sup> In Suriname, too, each able-bodied man was expected to serve in one of the eleven companies of the civil militia.<sup>15</sup> The Portuguese Jews had their own company based in Jodensavanne, their agricultural settlement in the interior on the frontier with the wilderness.

The fact that the Jews not only served in the civil militia, but had their own regiment in Suriname, underlines the difference from Curaçao, where Jews served as part of the general militia and it was certainly a far cry from the Dutch Republic itself.<sup>16</sup> In the Republic, Jews in Amsterdam or other Dutch cities did not serve in the civil militias, and, instead, paid a fee in exchange for service.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Jews in the Dutch colonies were expected to serve in the militias was likely an entirely pragmatic decision. Such a high percentage of the white male population in the Dutch colonies was Jewish—approximately 40 percent in Curaçao (50 percent in the capital city of Willemstad) in the eighteenth century, and in Suriname about one-quarter of all whites in the seventeenth century which grew to about one-half of the total white population by the

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14 For more on Jewish service in the colonial civil militias, see Roitman 2012:75–76.

15 The sources use the terms *burgerwacht* in Dutch to describe these groups. For the sake of clarity, I use the more contemporary “civil militia.”

16 *Fiscaal* Petersen tried to exclude Jews from serving in the militia on Curaçao in 1737 and 1738. Petersen submitted a report to the WIC directors saying that Jews should be excused from serving in the militia because they “were not adept at the use of arms” but should, instead, pay a tax in lieu of service. NL-HaNA, WIC, 1.05.01.02/585, 608v–628. This despite the fact that Jews had been noted by various observers as having been quite active in the military defense of the island, especially during the famous attack of the French pirate Jacques Cassard in 1713. For instance, “Aan de Cornetsbajj anders Maripompoen Lagen omtrend 40 Israeliten op een hogge berg gecampeert onder commando van Mordochajj Henriquez als capitijn, hebbende tot haar verchansingen eenige broot en meelvatte met steenen en gront gevult, egter door de hoogte van de bergh waren genoegzaam schoot vrij voor 't canon van passeerende scheepen.” This account is confirmed in a letter written by Governor van Collen to the WIC directors, in which he lists “40 Israeliten” serving on the Cornetsbaai. See De Gaaij Fortman: 1924–25:247, 249. Petersen was not successful in his attempts to exclude Jews. NL-HaNA, WIC, 1.05.01.02/210, 55–76.

17 A major conflict had broken out in New Netherland about Jewish service in civil militias. In 1655, Asher Levy, an Ashkenazi Jew who had settled in this outpost of the Dutch empire demanded to be allowed to fulfil the obligations of citizenship within the colony by serving in the civil guard. In a resolution passed that same year, Peter Stuyvesant, Governor of the colony, and his council exempted Jews from military service in the civil guard and imposed a special tax on them in lieu of serving. This exclusion was justified because the captains and other members of the militia felt “aversion and disaffection ... to be fellow soldiers ... and to mount guard in the same guardhouse” with Jews. See O’Callaghan 1868:191–192.

end of the eighteenth century—that to have excluded Jews would have left the militias and, by extension, the colonies, in a dangerously weak position.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, these militias were vital to the defense of the colony, and Jewish service was an integral part of this defense. This need for defense was particularly acute in Suriname, as the colony was in a fairly constant state of conflict. This conflict raged not only between European powers—the English and Dutch had squabbled over the colony for decades in the early part of the seventeenth century, and the French privateer Cassard struck at the heart of the territory in the eighteenth century—but it was also caused by Amerindians and the Maroons. These African escapees banded together, sometimes, though very rarely, with various Amerindian groups, and created settlements in the interior of the colony. From these bases deep in the jungle they conducted raids on the plantations, stealing provisions and occasionally killing those living on the plantations. Therefore, the Maroons were greatly feared, especially in the interior where the majority of the plantations were located. As a consequence, the militias were regularly sent out on missions to capture or kill the Maroons.

The Jewish militia of Jodensavanne, the primary site of Jewish settlement (along with Paramaribo) in the colony, was especially important in the ongoing fight against the Maroons. Founded in 1682 by the Nassy family, it was located in the interior on the frontier with the wilderness. It was a particularly vulnerable settlement because despite the “harsh reality of the threat of slave revolts or of raids from former slaves living independently in their newly established villages in the interior, from European powers, and from native Americans, the town was laid out as in a perfect world” (Frankel 1999:3). The community’s open plan left it vulnerable to raids by the Maroons, and, therefore, the Jewish

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18 Estimates vary as to the exact number of Jews and the precise percentage of the white population they comprised. According to the foremost historians of the Curaçaoan Jewish community, Suzanne and Isaac Emmanuel, Curaçao’s total population in 1785 was 8,500, of which 3,000 to 3,200 were white and around 1,200 of these whites were Jews. In other words, close to 40 percent of the white population of the island was Jewish (Emmanuel & Emmanuel 1970:277). Wim Klooster examines the population of Jews in Willemstad, Curaçao’s capital and major city, and estimates that by the middle of the eighteenth century, the number of Jewish families was nearly half that of white non-Jews. Based on WIC tax records, Klooster believes that by 1789 there were about 6,000 free residents in Willemstad, which included free blacks and “coloreds”, most of whom were Catholics, as well as 2,469 Protestants and 1,095 Jews (Klooster 2001:353, 355). In 1748, for instance, of the 175 residents serving in the guard on Curaçao, 44 were Jews. NL-HaNA, WIC, 1.05.01.02/210, 55–76.

militia could be counted on to act swiftly against any perceived threat to their settlement.

David de Isaac Cohen Nassy, author of the *Historical Essay*, reported:<sup>19</sup>

Captain David C. Nassy was at all times a robust man, accustomed to the work of the plantations and of intrepid courage ... It is known that these Indians, although weak by temperament, are the most adept at discovering the tracks of the runaway slaves in the woods, and since they [the Indians] were afraid of falling into their hands, they placed spies in the forests in order to reconnoiter the place of their dwellings and all the movements that they made.

MARCUS & CHYET 1974:66–67

David Nassy exploited the knowledge the Amerindians had of the forest to his, and the colony's, advantage. This knowledge was invaluable for patrols, and the Amerindians were prized scouts, guides, messengers, and spies, as Nassy describes in the passage above. But it was not only in these functions that the Amerindians participated in the (Jewish) militias. As the *Historical Essay* goes on to report, "He gave them firearms, taught them to use them as well as a soldier." Though certain Amerindians were considered "as allies in war or as friends so outstanding and so fearsome enemies, more assured and unyielding than one might think" (Whitehead 1990:359)<sup>20</sup> they were also viewed as needing training to learn to be "real" soldiers. As the travel writer George Warren observed of the Amerindian warriors:

Their arms are Bowes, with poisoned Arrowes, and short Clubs of Specklewood, some, for Defence, carry Shields made of light wood, handsomely painted and engraved. They observe no Order in their Fighting, nor, unless upon very great advantages, enterprize any thing but by night.<sup>21</sup>

WARREN 1667:26

19 Although the names of other members of the *Mahamad* are given at the end of the opening epistle of the book, archival research by several scholars has definitively established that David de Isaac Cohen Nassy was the author. See Cohen 1991 and Davis 2010.

20 Whitehead quoted this passage referring to the Caribs which was written by the governor of Essequibo on February 21.

21 Warren's account of undisciplined fighting is somewhat contradicted by Robert Harcourt, the early English traveler to the region. He describes a rather disciplined force of Amerindian warriors. (Harcourt 1928:87–88).

This is the training that Nassy, who was serving under Jacob d' Avilar, Captain of the Jewish regiment, gave these fierce yet, apparently, undisciplined, fighters. And it seems to have been Nassy, with whom the Amerindians appear to have had such good rapport, who led the expedition made in 1718 against the Maroons in the Saramaca region, rather than Captain d' Avilar. In his troop were eleven Jews, some slaves owned by Nassy, and "a troop of fifty good Indians" (Marcus & Chyet 1974:66–67).

Nassy "knew the use he could make of these Indians ... He put himself at their head." The expedition was a success, many rebels were killed, a few prisoners were brought back alive, and none of this cost the government of the colony a penny, because Nassy had paid for the expedition himself, "being then very rich and in a position to make many expenditures" (Marcus & Chyet 1974:66–67). Such expeditions were encouraged by the administrative council in its publication of 1717, "to whoever wished to undertake raids against the runaway slaves, at a fixed price according to the progress which they would come to make" (Hartsink 1770:756). It is hardly surprising that Nassy was promoted to captain of the important Jewish militia. He had managed to leverage his relationship with "his" Indians to increase his own status within the Jewish community and the colony as a whole.

Nassy's success encouraged him to continue utilizing Amerindian allies in the hunt for Maroons. The *Historical Essay* states that he undertook at least thirty expeditions. That there were at least thirty more expeditions is not particularly surprising given the continued state of unrest plaguing this frontier. It is not clear how many of these thirty expeditions incorporated Amerindians. One that did was mounted in 1731, and yet another one was formed in 1743, when the administrative council, led by Governor Mauritius, ordered the militias to organize an expedition against the runaway slaves. Nassy was by all accounts "very old" when asked to form a detachment to chase down the Maroons, and this expedition seems to have been his last. According to contemporaneous accounts, Nassy left that August "with twenty-seven civilians [presumably fellow Jewish militia members], twelve soldiers, fifteen Indians, 165 Negroes, and sixty canoes" (Marcus & Chyet 1974:68).

This sort of Amerindian military assistance was vital to the survival of the colony of Suriname, as it was, indeed, for many of the Dutch settlements (Whitehead 1990; Kars 2011; Meuwese 2011a and 2011b). In fact, throughout the early modern world, Amerindian allies were instrumental in Europeans' acquisition of, and their subsequent control over, their colonies. The Dutch colonies were chronically short of soldiers and grew to depend upon their Amerindian allies' military skills, which were often specially suited to the terrain. They were in possession of the local knowledge and skills which the Europeans lacked.

Moreover, they served in secondary or supportive roles such as hunting and gathering food, hauling materials, and rowing boats up the many waterways. With reinforcements slow to arrive from Europe, tropical diseases which struck down many of the soldiers who did arrive, and the ever-present threat of mutiny by the soldiers due to the dreadful conditions and slow pay, it is little surprise that the Dutch colonial government and the colonists such as Nassy depended on their Amerindian allies to safeguard their settlements.<sup>22</sup>

The sources are silent as to whether there was further cooperation with Amerindians and Jewish militias in the constant skirmishes with the Maroons after this date. One thing that is clear is that Nassy must have had a particular ability to interact with the Amerindians which fostered cooperation and alliance on the personal level. The *Historical Essay* records that “He [Nassy] had ... a special inclination to converse often with the Indians who were in great numbers in the settlements, and with whose language he was familiar” (Marcus & Chyet 1974:66). Nassy’s familiarity with an Amerindian language was no doubt invaluable in facilitating the logistics of cooperation within these military units. In fact, “Indian translators” were so vital a component of military expeditions in Suriname that in 1713 they were paid 350 guilders, which was more than the 288 guilders paid to the smith and a little less than the 400 guilders the carpenter earned.<sup>23</sup> This knowledge of their language and, it can be assumed, at least some aspects of their culture, was doubtless also helpful in winning their trust so that they would agree to ally with him and his Jewish militia to begin with.

Of course, this cooperation with the Amerindians (and blacks) was advantageous to Nassy. Serving in and leading a militia, as other male settlers did, underscored Jewish belonging in the colony, as such service was part and parcel of belonging to the larger community. Serving in the civil militias, particularly in the colonies, demonstrated the fulfillment of obligations to the larger community by a (male) citizen, and, in turn, there was understood to be a reciprocal obligation on the part of this community to the citizen who served. Yet it is highly doubtful that such a sense of the reciprocity of obligations was the case for the Amerindians (or the blacks) who served in Suriname. Though they may have been “good Indians,” they were brought along with the Jewish militia on

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22 The first Dutch governor of Suriname, Cornelis van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck, was killed by mutinying soldiers who were unhappy with their provisions. For an account of the mutiny, see Herlein 1718:54–55. Stedman described the privations the soldiers endured in his famous account of his time in the colony (Stedman 1972:66).

23 NL-HaNa, Sociëteit van Suriname, 1.05.03, inv. no. 564.



expeditions to serve a specific function, not to become part of the larger community. This was also the case with the enslaved Africans who also sometimes accompanied the militias.

Those who did join in Dutch expeditions in the Guianas, most likely also including those operated by Nassy's Jewish militia, were paid for their services. Amerindians were given liquor, Indian cloth, beads, mirrors, scissors, knives, and, perhaps most importantly, guns, in exchange for their help.<sup>24</sup> Nassy who was "very rich and in a position to make many expenditures" very probably paid the Amerindians in some way (Marcus & Chyet 1974:66–67). But it is unlikely that they fought only for material gain, though this was obviously an important consideration. They also fought to retain their positions as favored trading partners. Steel tools, cloth, and firearms were made available only to the Amerindian leaders who favored the Europeans as a reward for their political allegiance (Whitehead 1990:376).

Moreover, many Amerindians were unfavorably inclined toward the Maroons, although some did take in runaway slaves. They saw the Maroons as encroaching on their land, as competitors for women, and, sometimes, as the aggressors who attacked their villages (Kars 2011:267). The colonial authorities were only too happy to fan the flames of conflict between the two groups because the Amerindians could, and sometimes did, facilitate the escape of slaves.<sup>25</sup> In fact, as a stipulation for ending the conflicts in the late seventeenth century, the Caribs and Arawaks, among other Amerindian groups, had signed treaties in which they agreed to return runaway slaves. This stipulation benefited the colonial government in several ways, including the discouragement of any alliances between the Amerindians and enslaved Africans (Mulert 1919; Wekker 1993; Van Lier 1971:76). As one Governor, Storm van Gravesande, very bluntly acknowledged, "These occurrences [Carib slave hunting] cause a great embitterment between the blacks and them, which, if well and reasonably stimulated cannot fail to be of much use and service in the future to the colonies" (Harris & Villers 1967:478; Whitehead 1988:164).

But personal relationships between Amerindians and colonists, including the Jewish settlers, were crucial in securing the help of indigenous fighters. As one Dutch official noted:

Since these are free-born people and not to be subordinated nor always won over by money or presents; it follows that one must act carefully

<sup>24</sup> NL-HaNA, Sociëteit van Berbice, 1.05.05, inv. no. 226.

<sup>25</sup> NL-HaNA, Second West India Company (WIC), 1.05.01.02, inv. no. 187.

in this matter [recruiting them to hunt down Maroons]. They will only serve out of goodwill and inclination to their neighbors or out of a kind of primitive pride in considering themselves honored by being in a position to perform a service for the whites. For this reason it should not be looked upon as an act for which we pay them, but as a favour received from them, in return for which we make them a present as a memento and to encourage friendship for the future.<sup>26</sup>

This quotation illustrates an important point, which is that the balance of power between the Amerindians and the Dutch colonists, including the Jews, was not clear-cut. Most Amerindians were making their own decisions about if, how, when, where, and why to assist the settlers based on calculations of military, economic, and political advantages that would accrue to them by offering such help. And they were making these decisions as individuals or as small bands, not necessarily as a larger “tribe” of Caribs, Arawaks, or other groups, as a whole. The Dutch authorities and settlers could not blithely count upon Amerindian aid, even from the Amerindians most dependent upon them. Their willingness to help depended on many factors, not least of which were their personal connections to the Dutch colonists and administrators (Kars 2011:267).<sup>27</sup>

Richard White explores the relationships between Indians and Indians, Europeans and Europeans, and Europeans and Indians in the Great Lakes region of North America between 1649 and 1815 in his now-classic *The Middle-Ground* (White 1991). White demonstrates that during this time, the peoples on this frontier of the British and French empires attempted to find a middle ground in which significant cultural differences could be bridged and a sort of equilibrium could be maintained that allowed not only for significant economic exchange, but also for cultural interchange as well. White argues that for the middle ground to work, neither side could militarily dominate nor extract the other. Because of the demographic balance, all were forced to live together which necessitated a sort of tolerance. White’s theories have some limitations in their applicability to the frontier in Suriname. White, for instance, postulated that the middle ground minimized warfare and kept violence to the interpersonal level, whereas at least low-level warfare was a constant well into the eighteenth century in Suriname. Nevertheless, his overarching point is relevant.

26 NL-HaNa, Second West India Company (WIC), 1.05.01.02, inv. no. 915.

27 NL-HaNa, Sociëteit van Berbice, 1.05.05, inv. no. 226; Kars 2011:267.

The white settlers could not militarily dominate the escaped slaves, as the ongoing Maroon raids and the military expeditions against these formerly enslaved Africans testify. They were eventually forced to sue for peace with some Maroon groups (Thoden van Velzen 1995). They were also careful to ensure that these peaceful relations were maintained. Neither could the Amerindians completely resist the seemingly inexorable progress of white settlers into their former territories, nor the incursion of the escaped slaves into this same territory. Therefore, on this multisided frontier between white (Jewish) settlers, Amerindians, and Maroons, Nassy's "good Indians" chose to leverage their knowledge and skills for their own political, economic, and military advantage. And it is certainly clear that a sort of uneasy equilibrium was maintained in which these divergent cultures did manage to find ways to accommodate each other to varying degrees.

### The Frontiers of Communication: Go-Betweens and Translation

This uneasy equilibrium had not always been maintained. The Wild Coast was a hotly contested territory among the European colonizers in the seventeenth century. The English had controlled Suriname but lost out to the incursions of the Zeelanders by 1667. This shift in territorial control was of importance not only to the Dutch and English. It had a clear effect on the Amerindians. Governor Johannes Heinsius blamed the outbreak of the so-called "inland war" with the Indians in the late 1670s on traders such as Abraham Drago and his partners—the *bokkenruylders*—who were said to have stirred up unrest by their trade practices.<sup>28</sup> The *bokkenruylders* could have contributed to the conflict and, in fact, ordinances were passed outlawing this sort of trade (Schiltkamp & Smidt 1973:156–157). But the *Historical Essay* opines that "They [the Amerindians] did not want their country to be governed by any nation other than ... the English" (Marcus & Chyet 1974:35). This is, perhaps, an allusion to claims that the Zeelanders, particularly Abel Thisso, the military commander and interim governor, were less than diplomatic in their dealings with the Amerindians (Benjamins & Snelleman 1981:678). Whatever the precise causes of the uprising, it is clear that the various Amerindian groups took advantage of the confusion occasioned by the shifting boundaries of colonial

28 Zeeuws Archief (hereafter ZA), Ingekomen stukken betreffende Suriname en omliggende kwartieren, 1667–1683, inv. no. 2035.3 282. Letter from Abel Thisso, December 18, 1678; 2035.3.312, Letter from Johannes Heijnsius, December 28, 1678.

control and began to strike back at the plantations encroaching on the frontiers with their lands (Buve 1962:21–25).

Among the plantations attacked was that of Samuel Nassy. Heinsius wrote that the Amerindians raided “from above around [the plantation of] Samuel Nassy and from there to further down [Para Creek].” He estimated that there were around 10,000 Indians who attacked the vulnerable plantations on the edges of the colony.<sup>29</sup> And apparently they were successful. Abel Thisso wrote that there were forty planters killed and that the Amerindians hoped “to exterminate the entire Dutch and Jewish nation here.”<sup>30</sup> That he specifically mentioned the “Jewish nation” shows that their plantations were particularly hard hit, though this was likely due to their location rather than any particular desire to attack Jews, as such. It also shows, of course, that Thisso did not view the Jews as belonging to the “Dutch nation.” The *Historical Essay* tells how the Amerindians “began to devastate the houses and to massacre the whites who had the misfortune to fall into their hands.” According to David Nassy, author of the *Historical Essay*, the help sent by the Zeeland admiralty was “of no use at all.” Therefore, they had to form regiments to defend themselves against the Amerindians who “were already becoming very redoubtable” (Marcus & Chyet 1974:35).

At least one Jew, Samuel Nassy, played a key role in brokering peace with the Amerindians. The *Historical Essay* emphasizes this role by telling how “Monsieur de Sommelsdyk [the new Governor] ... turned his attention to the damage which the Indians were wreaking on the plantations. But, not having sufficient means to check their hostilities, he resolved to seek means to make peace with them. The Jewish community, according to its traditions, still takes pride in having greatly facilitated this peace” (Marcus & Chyet 1974:40). But this role is also verified in other sources. A contemporary report, most likely written as an appendix to a letter sent to the Dutch Republic, describes the crucial role Samuel Nassy, along with Jan van Ruyven, a member of the colonial council, played in putting an end to hostilities. In what can only be described as a sort of “divide and conquer” strategy, Nassy “spent five days with the Arawaks and other Indians on our side to try to convince them to attack our enemies [other Indian groups]” (Mulert 1919:224).

29 ZA, Ingekomen stukken betreffende Suriname en omliggende kwartieren, 1667–1683, inv. no. 2035.3.310, Letter from Johannes Heijnsius, December 28, 1678. This is most likely an inflated estimate.

30 ZA, Ingekomen stukken betreffende Suriname en omliggende kwartieren 1667–1683, inv. no. 2035.3.282, Letter from Abel Thisso, December 18, 1678.

Although this attempt was, apparently, unsuccessful, Nassy was, by all accounts, integral to the eventual settlement with the Amerindians. The *Historical Essay* concludes that Nassy was able to broker this peace because “He had known these Indians since the time of the English (when they were on friendlier terms with the whites), [and] persuaded them to put aside their evil intentions towards the inhabitants” (Marcus & Chyet 1974:40–41). In fact, Samuel Nassy could have been among the group of Jews who sailed from Cayenne with the son of an Indian chief to talk to the Dutch in Suriname.<sup>31</sup> At any rate, “It was through him, too, and by means of a great number of gifts, that a sort of preliminary peace was concluded” (Marcus & Chyet 1974:41).<sup>32</sup> Gift giving was of great importance in the Amerindian communities. The travel writer J.D. Herlein described this importance in his account from the early seventeenth century, in which he explains that “It would be an incredible impoliteness to go for a visit [to an Amerindian community] ... without gifts to give. Therefore, all strangers always have some bits of coral glass or of Crystal or some fish hooks, Needles, Games, or small knives, and other small things on their persons” (Herlein 1718:147). Indeed, the centrality of the ritual exchange of gifts with the Amerindian groups that fell under the umbrella term of “Caribs” was well understood by Europeans. The French were known for their lavish gift-giving, and believed it a price worth paying (Taylor 2012:44). It was, then, Nassy’s knowledge of these rituals and their importance—a knowledge based on his personal relationships with various Amerindians—that was essential for an agreement to be reached.<sup>33</sup>

This highlights Nassy’s role as an intermediary, cultural broker, or go-between between the Dutch colonial government and the Amerindians. Go-betweens often inhabit what Richard White defines as the middle ground “in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the nonstate world of villages.” This space, he argues, is the periphery of the world system; it is the “area between the historical foreground of European invasion and occupation and the background of Indian defeat and retreat.” What is particularly compelling is White’s contention that in the middle ground, “minor agents, allies,

31 ZA 2035.04, June 19, 1668. The Nassy family had been instrumental in setting up the Jewish settlement in Cayenne.

32 Supposedly, the Amerindians were only appeased by Van Sommelysck marrying one of the daughters of the Amerindian leaders of the uprising.

33 Samuel Nassy continued his productive relationship with the Amerindians. In 1680, several years after the events detailed in this section, Nassy wrote to Governor Heinsius to say that he wanted to sell runaway slaves that had been captured for him by Amerindians. ZA 2035.390, January 30, 1680.

and even subjects at the periphery often guide the course of empires" (White 1991:x–xi).

And there is little doubt that Nassy, as a minor agent, guided, at least in some small way, the course of the Dutch empire in the Americas by helping to put an end to the brutal and costly war with the Amerindians in Suriname. The end of these hostilities, in turn, allowed for more settlements and settlers to arrive in the colony and establish plantations. This led to an increase in the importation of enslaved Africans for plantation agriculture, which irrevocably shifted the demographics of the territory. And so forth. Go-betweens such as Nassy operated on a middle ground where the influence of empire was relatively weak. This weakness made brokers such as Nassy, who had intimate knowledge of the various cultures coming into contact on the frontier, invaluable for the arbitration of relationships. Who became go-betweens and who was served by go-betweens were not inconsequential factors, and Nassy and his ilk were vital to the outcome of the meetings, encounters, negotiations, and conversations which could determine the course of empire (Metcalf 2005:8). As the historian James Merrell emphasizes, go-betweens were perceived as fundamental to the negotiations between colonial officials and Indians (Merrel 1999:28–41).

The Dutch colonial officials needed go-betweens such as Nassy because they had little or no knowledge of the Amerindians with whom they were coming into contact in this frontier zone. The need for greater knowledge is tellingly revealed in a prescient report penned by Governor Lichtenberg in 1669. He wrote:

It is of great importance for the security of the plantations that we have the Indians on our side, which we can accomplish by means of as much civility and politeness towards them as possible. To this end I shall do my best to learn their language, as should we all, because these are a people who can be led where we will if we but speak their language. This was a great advantage for the English and could be for us if our nation will but learn their speech.<sup>34</sup>

As the subsequent hostilities with the Amerindians proved, not many Dutch settlers had heeded Lichtenberg's good advice, perhaps because of the perceived difficulty of the various languages spoken in the area. George Warren described one of the languages (it is not clear from his account which one) as

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34 ZA, 2035.3.164–166, Report made by Julius Lichtenberg to the States General of the Dutch Republic, June 17, 1669.

“sound[ing] well in the expression but is not very easie to be learn’d, because many single Words admit of divers Senses, to be distinguish’d only by the tone or alteration of the voice” (Warren 1667:25).<sup>35</sup> Fellow Englishman, Edward Bancroft, writing about the “Worrow” (Waurau) language over a century after Warren, opined, “Their language is dissonant, and the articulations very indistinct, being pronounced with a slow, disagreeable tone” (Bancroft 1776:265–266). Herlein seems to be the exception among early authors describing the Guianas, because he endeavored to include translations of the Carib words in his account (Herlein 1718:249–262). All of which made men such as Nassy who knew the language of the Amerindians even more important as cultural brokers and as translators. This was seen in his ability to employ Amerindians in his forays against the Maroons. But there were other incidents, as well, in which Jews served as translators.

For instance, there is a fascinating story told by the Dutch travel writer Johannes Herlein which illustrates the importance of translation—cultural and linguistic. Herlein wrote about the governor of the colony at the time, Van Sommelsdijk, who had a conflict with someone who was described as “one of the lords of the Indians” in the area of Fort Zeelandia.<sup>36</sup> This man killed one of his three wives whom he claimed was adulterous. Polygamy was common in the Amerindian communities, at least for the chiefs. Robert Harcourt’s early seventeenth-century account makes mention of the fact that “The better sort of persons [among the Amerindians] have every one of them two or three wives, or more, the rest but one; accounting him that hath most wives, the greatest man” (Harcourt 1928:86). George Warren remarked that “These Chiefs or Heads of Families, have commonly three or four Wives a piece” (Warren 1667:25). According to Stedman’s account, it was not just chiefs, but “every Indian is allowed to take as many wives as he can provide for” (Stedman 1971:208).

When this Amerindian man was arrested by the Dutch colonial authorities and sentenced to death, both the man himself, and many of the other

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35 Stedman (1972:212) described the language (again, it is not clear which one), as “much resemb[ling] the Italian, their words being sonorous and harmonious, mostly terminating with a vowel.”

36 Herlein may be referring to an incident that occurred sometime between 1684 and 1685 in which an Amerindian “Captain” named Tararica killed an Amerindian woman. Governor van Sommelsijck sentenced him to death, despite the protests of the colonial council. The council was concerned that sentencing an Amerindian ally to death during a time of such unrest in the colony would lead to their other allies deserting them and illustrates, as well, the aforementioned importance of Amerindian allies to the success of the Dutch colonial endeavors in the Guianas. See Bijlsma 1925.

Amerindians, were extremely upset. They did not understand the ruling. Within their legal and moral code, Herlein related, being sentenced to death for killing one woman was strange because the man had two others (Herlein 1718:52–53). Moreover, physical punishment, at the very least, or the death penalty, seems to have been the norm for adultery within Amerindian communities. Stedman wrote that, “[an Amerindian man is] extremely jealous, and ... he knocks [his wife] on the head the moment he receives a decided proof of her incontinency” (Stedman 1972:208). Harcourt’s earlier account was more explicit. The English traveler stated that “they [the Amerindians] commonly chastise murder and adultery by death, which onely are the offences punished amongst them ... the Indians take wives over whom they are extremely jealous, and expect great continencie in them; for if they [the men] take them [the women] in adultery, they [the men] presently cause their [the womens’] brains to be beaten out” (Harcourt 1928:86). Men were also liable to be punished for committing adultery with another man’s wife. “To violate the chastity of a wife is almost the only injury that draws down this fatal vengeance [death]” related Robert Bancroft (1776:268). A.F. Lammens added that, “Even if he was a white, he [the Amerindian husband] would kill him and his wife then and there” (Lammens, n.d.).

These descriptions highlight the oft-remarked upon low status of women within the Amerindian communities. Warren wrote that “[Wives] who may indeed more properly be term’d their [their husbands’] Vassals than Companions, being no less subjected to their Husbands than the meanest Servants amongst us are to their Masters, they Men rarely oppress their Shoulders with a Burthen, the Women carry all, and are so very humble and observant in their Houses, that at Meals they always wait upon their Husbands” (Warren 1667:25). Warren’s account of the treatment of Amerindian women finds confirmation in Stedman’s, who wrote that “No Indian wife eats with her husband, but serves him as a slave” (Stedman 1972:215). And, even earlier, Harcourt had reported that “Their wives ... are as servants unto them” (Harcourt 1928:86) while Herlein and Lammens remarked upon the same thing in their descriptions of Amerindian communities (Herlein 1718:141; Lammens, n.d.).

Herlein goes on to describe how the governor made use of a translator to talk to this Amerindian chief. Van Sommelsdijk went to “one of the leaders of the Jewish synagogue who understood the Indian language.” It seems likely that this Jew was Samuel Nassy. Nassy was one of the most prominent of the Jewish colonists and was, therefore, probably a leader in the synagogue. Moreover, Nassy was mentioned by name in the same document in which Van Sommelsdijk relates the incident, though in another context, which shows that Van Sommelsdijk was acquainted with him (Bijlsma 1925:45). No matter



whom amongst the Jews the translator was, however, it would seem that the Dutch colonial authorities turned to him not just for an actual translation of the words. After all, there must have been some ability to communicate between the governor and his legal representatives and the accused Amerindian for events to have proceeded as far as they had before the Jewish translator was brought in. The governor, according to Herlein's account, requested that this Jewish man "talk to the Indian and say that God who had created Heaven and Earth had forbidden us to shed blood and that those who shed human blood were condemned to have their blood shed" (Herlein 1718:53).

Various writers have remarked upon religion among the Amerindians. George Warren claimed that "They have no Religion amongst them that ever I could perceive, though they'l [sic] talk of a Captain of the Skies, but neither worship him nor any other ... They have also a glimpse of an after Life, in which shall be Rewards and Punishments for the good and bad" (Warren 1667:26). Stedman, in contrast, asserts that "All the Guiana Indians believe in God as the supreme author of every good, and never inclined to do them an injury; but they worship the devil, whom they call *Yawahoo*, to prevent his afflicting them with evil, and to whom they ascribe pain, disease, wounds, and death" (Stedman 1972:207). Robert Bancroft's description is almost the same as both Warren's and Stedman's, and it is likely that he drew upon Warren (and other writers) heavily (Bancroft 1776:308–309).

It seems clear that the governor felt the need to communicate the theological concepts that were the foundation of their legal decision-making. After all, within the social structure of the Amerindian communities, the man's act was not only not punishable, but was, indeed, expected of him and, therefore, laudable.<sup>37</sup> As Lammens described it, "in this matter [adultery] every Indian was responsible for the maintenance of his own authority and had the right to do as he pleased and no one would say he was wrong because it is known by everyone that he is free [to make his own judgment/law] in this matter" (Lammens, n.d.). Adulterous wives within their society were punished by death.<sup>38</sup>

37 What is particularly intriguing about this case is that, according to a law promulgated in 1669 in Suriname, married adulterers of either sex were to be given the death penalty. "Criminele en penaele wetten ende ordonnantien," February 19, 1669 (Smidt & Van der Lee 1973:34). Thus, the Amerindian's wife would have likely been eligible for the death penalty in any case, though it is not clear if the law was intended to be applied to the Amerindian population.

38 The law mentioned in note 106 seems to have been the exception. Adultery does not even appear as a named offense in the law codes of the rest of the Dutch Americas. The *West Indisch Plakaatboek(en)* for Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, St. Maarten, St. Eustatius, and Saba

So translating the punishment meted out by the governor would have required more than just a knowledge of the two languages, as well as some knowledge of the legal structures and cosmologies upon which these legal structures were built within these two cultures. In fact, Stedman recounted an incident in which just this confusion about cosmologies was played out. In a possibly apocryphal passage, an eloquent Amerindian responded to a Swedish minister as follows:

Do you then really believe, that we and our forefathers are all, as you would teach us, condemned to suffer eternal torments in another world, because we have not been taught your mysterious novelties? Are we not the work of God? And can the Almighty not manifest his will without the help of a book? If this is true, and God is just, then how is it consistent with his justice to force life upon us without our consent, and then to condemn us all to eternal damnation, because we did not meet with you. No, Sir, we are convinced that the Christians are more depraved in their morals than we Indians, if we may judge of their doctrines by the general badness of their lives.

STEDMAN 1972:207

So there was already a basis for misunderstanding between Amerindians and the Dutch colonists. Herlein's otherwise relatively extensive lexicon of Carib words reflects this difficulty in translating religious concepts. It is noticeably short in section 10 on "Spiritual or Religious Things" and contains long descriptions in Dutch in order to try to explain the theological and philosophical concepts behind the Carib words (Herlein 1718:261–262). Nevertheless, contemporary observers agreed that the Amerindians had some sort of religious structure with various equivalencies to Christianity, such as the beliefs that Herlein related, "that the soul after death journeys to the Stars, and then goes

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do not mention adultery (*boeleren, echtbreuk, overspel, fornicatie*) (Smidt, Van der Lee & Schiltkamp 1978; Smidt & Van der Lee 1979). It is, of course, very possible that some *plakaaten* have yet to be recovered from the archives. In Amsterdam, which became reformed in 1578, and elsewhere in the United Provinces, punishments for infidelity ranged from a warning from the church, to imprisonment, heavy fines, stripping of ecclesiastic honors, and banishment for a period of six to fifty years (Helmerts 2002:226–278; Verhaar & Van den Brink 1989:64–71; Van der Heijden 1998:143). For a discussion of adultery within the Portuguese Jewish communities of the Dutch Americas, see Ben-Ur & Roitman 2014.

under the Horizon, to a Paradise of pleasure" (Herlein 1718:133).<sup>39</sup> It was just that translating this terminology and really grasping these concepts seemed particularly problematic.

The event illustrates the well-known importance of the translator in the New World as being essential to encounters between Europeans and Americans. Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions*, for instance, details how essential translators were in encounters between Europeans and Amerindians. Reflecting on Doña Marina, Cortés's translator, Greenblatt represents her as "The figure in whom all communication between the two opposed cultures was concentrated" (Greenblatt 1991:143). While it might be going too far to say the same of this Jewish translator, it is, nevertheless, clear that he took center stage in a middle ground of a linguistic, cultural, and religious encounter. From this position, he was able to broker between two cultures and two worldviews. In this sense, he had a great deal of power during that moment in time—a moment that was shaping key interactions between Europeans and Amerindians.

### Conclusion: Frontiers of Encounter

Abraham Isaac, and the Dragos, David and Samuel Nassy, and no doubt many other Jews, all had real and, to date, unstudied interactions with the Amerindians in Suriname. This is a story that has heretofore been obscured because it lies scattered in documents written for other purposes, and, therefore, this history is concealed between the lines of recorded incidents. Yet these scant primary sources, limited, of course, by having been written by Europeans for their own purposes, which means, in turn, that the Amerindian perspective must be teased out, do allow for glimpses of the complicated dynamics of Amerindian and Jewish interaction in late-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth-century Suriname. The notarial archives of Amsterdam, travel tales and colonial reports, along with the *Historical Essay*, evidence a relationship between Amerindians and Jews that was, in many ways, based on a relative equilibrium of economic and military power, as well as cultural knowledge. This balance was not always maintained in all situations, of course.

For instance, the Jewish communal records of Jodensavanne evidence a large dose of oppression and exclusion. In a suit filed in October 1739, Rebecca Cohen Nassy accused Judith, widow of Jacob Hayim Coutinho, of refusing to return Florinda, an Indian slave who had been transferred to her temporary

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39 Herlein gives a relatively extensive description of Amerindian beliefs on pp. 132–140.

ily.<sup>40</sup> And Jewish ownership of Amerindians had, by then, been going on for at least fifty-six years, as a notarial deed from faraway Amsterdam proves. Two Portuguese Jewish merchants went to the notary Daniel van den Groe in Amsterdam. On May 11, 1683, Antonio Alvares Machado, who lived in Amsterdam, gave Isaac Semach Ferro, then living in Middelburg, power of attorney. Machado authorized Ferro to buy “for a reasonable price” half of a sugar plantation in Suriname. This plantation, called “The Red Bench,” was to be purchased from the widow and heirs of a man with the last name of Fannius. The purchase of the plantation included not just the land and the sugar mill, but also the “slaves, black children, black women, Indians, horses, cattle, ovens, and boats.”<sup>41</sup>

In the ownership of Amerindians, the Jewish population was much like the rest of the non-Jewish white population. The English settlers had enslaved Amerindians from the beginning of their settlement in the territory. The enslavement of Amerindians was stimulated by the arrival of Europeans on this frontier, but was often brought about by the Amerindians themselves. Prisoners were taken and enslaved in conflicts amongst Amerindian groups. This was a long-standing practice that had existed before the arrival of the Europeans. The arrival of Europeans eager to purchase these slaves probably lent a stimulus to the initiation or continuance of hostilities (Whitehead 1999). The Amerindian groups living along the lower loop of the Orinoco were particularly affected by increasing warfare driven by the market for slaves, something noted by various authors at the time (Hartsink 1770:11, 91, 218; Quandt 1968:27, 293; Stähelin 1912:23, 94). These Amerindian slaves were desirable for their role in augmenting the food supplies available on the scattered plantations by means of hunting, gathering, and fishing. Many of these plantations were not self-sufficient and imports of foodstuffs was spotty—a situation which made trading visits such as those made by Abraham Drago and his associates in 1674 who delivered much-needed supplies especially welcome.

The European settlers on the Wild Coast had hoped, with the help of the Amerindians, to be able to produce for themselves the products they traded. However, this hope was quickly proven to be in vain. As one planter remarked, “[The Amerindians] were totally unwilling [to work on the plantations], very sparsely settled, and unsuitable for heavy field work” (Netscher 1888:15). Therefore, the West India Company began importing enslaved Africans to the region

40 NL-NaHa, Portugees-Israëlitische Gemeente Suriname, 1.05.11.18, inv. no. 324, October 6, 1739.

41 SAA, NA 4106A/447. The first name of Mr. Fannius is not given.

by the middle of the seventeenth century. Yet the supply of these African slaves was unreliable and, when shipments did arrive, there were rarely enough slaves to meet the demand of the colonists. This, in turn, meant that colonists, including the Portuguese Jewish settlers, continued to use enslaved Amerindians, despite their presumed “unsuitability” for working in the fields.

But despite this clear exploitation and abuse, these same documents show there was also cooperation through trade and the constant Maroon wars. Abraham Drago and his Dutch partners cooperated with Amerindians in the interior of the Guianas in order to conduct trade and connect this frontier of the Dutch empire with Europe—and Amerindians were vital to this connection. There was alliance against what was likely a common enemy—the Maroons—in a few decades’ worth of military operations. And there was also cultural brokerage with Jews acting as translators and as go-betweens, mediating between the Amerindians and the Dutch colonial authorities, linguistically, culturally, and even religiously.

This last function—the function of translator and go-between—is the most intriguing aspect of Jewish and Amerindian interactions in colonial Suriname. Oppression such as the enslavement of Amerindians was hardly unique to the Portuguese Jewish community in Suriname. It was widespread amongst all the European settlers, despite intermittent government attempts to stop it. Likewise, trade with the Amerindians along the waterways of the Wild Coast was established early in the seventeenth century, and was conducted by the Dutch, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English. Though the Portuguese Jews may have been highly visible in these activities, this visibility is most likely due to their high percentage among the overall white population rather than any particular proclivities for either enslavement or trade.

There was not necessarily anything especially Jewish about these interactions. But the role of go-between and of translator between the Amerindians and Dutch colonial authorities is the interaction that does seem to have been at least somewhat unique to the Portuguese Jews in colonial Suriname. The other go-betweens noted in the records of the colonial Guianas were people of mixed race such as the male members of the free “Christian mulatto” Broer family who were called upon by the colonial government in nearby Berbice for their language skills and positions of trust to mediate between the Amerindians and the colonial authorities (Kars 2011:266). R. David Edmunds has recently suggested studying mixed-bloods, individuals of mixed cultural and genetic lineage, such as the Broer family, as a way of furthering the understanding of the concept of the middle ground. Once regarded as unimportant, mixed-bloods are being reappraised. “Far from being outcasts between two cultures, [they] bridged cultural gaps between these groups and also served as intermediaries

between frontier societies and European or American governments” (Edmunds 1989; Edmunds 1995).

That the Portuguese Jews were also playing the role of go-betweens and translators, despite not being mixed-bloods, is perhaps not so surprising. Translators and go-betweens were often displaced people, who had been “translated” themselves from one region and one culture to another. This is clearly the case of Portuguese Jews such as Samuel and David Nassy, who lived literally and figuratively between worlds. As Portuguese Jews they had experienced exclusion, uncertainty, and constant migration, both voluntary and forced. Their migrations had given them a linguistic advantage, but also a cultural step-up in interacting with the Amerindian population. Interpreters and go-betweens formed a distinctive group in which members of marginal communities were important. They were often émigrés, exiles or refugees taking advantage of their liminal position and making a career of mediating between people (Burke 2005:23).

When an anonymous Jew, likely Samuel Nassy, translated the Dutch Reformed theological concepts of retribution to the unnamed Amerindian condemned by the Dutch Governor van Sommelsdijk, he took center stage in a middle ground of a linguistic, cultural, and religious encounter. From this central position, he was able to broker between two cultures and two world-views. He stood, in fact, in the middle ground where history was occurring—where various peoples interacted. And it is at these localized areas that the local “agents of empire” such as Samuel Nassy determined how the empire itself would play its role. Because words, exchanges, and interactions had far-reaching consequences for all parties involved.

Oppression, exclusion, and alliance are themes common in any frontier zone such as Suriname where cultures come into contact, collide, and connect. Frontiers are, after all, geographic zones of interaction between two or more distinctive cultures and are places where cultures meet, clash, and exchange. As this article has shown, Suriname functioned not only as a frontier zone or borderland between European empires but also between cultures and peoples. And the meetings, clashes, and exchanges between Jews and Amerindians can be a lens through which to analyze this zone of encounter, specifically, as well as the dynamics of frontier encounters more generally. Ultimately, the relationship between Jews and Amerindians incorporates many of the thematic narratives of colonial Suriname—discovery, exploration, the history of indigenous groups, slavery, and the development of commercial agriculture, the influence of (minority) religious groups, and the formation of religious and ethnic identity. But this relationship also illustrates the dynamics at play on the frontiers of nation and empire. These are places where peoples who are “in between” such as the Portuguese Jews and Amerindians inhabit ambiguous

and shifting spaces where boundaries cross and change, where what is central and what is peripheral is often uncertain, and where the divisions between individual, groups, and states is porous.

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