

H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen, *Prophets of Doom: A History of the Okanisi Maroons in Suriname* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2022, 404 pp., ISBN: 9789004516366).

This *Magnum Opus*, published posthumously, resulted from H. U. E. ‘Bonno’ Thoden van Velzen’s life-long dedication to the socio-politics of the Okanisi – one of the Surinamese self-emancipated communities with African roots – formerly known as Aukaners, Djoeka or Ndyuka. It includes local voices and historicities transmitted orally by Okanisi historians. The foreword by his daughter, together with chapter 12, offers a glimpse into the setting and conduit of the author’s fieldwork. The author brought together ethnographic data, written archival sources and oral histories, albeit in the form of redacted translations. With the paperback published during the Dutch slavery commemoration year (July 1, 2023 – July 1, 2024), it comes at a time of a renewed interest in the history, culture and religion of Afro-Surinamese and Maroon communities. This book, with its introduction by Richard Price, will serve as a point of reference and a source for future studies on the history and religion of Maroon communities in Suriname and beyond.

The work follows the conventional linear and progressive historiography. Its first half contains nine chapters pertaining to the exodus or *loweten*: the era of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century when enslaved Africans decided to flee from the plantation system in the colony of Suriname – leading up to the 1760 Peace Treaty between the Sociëteit van Suriname and the Okanisi. The next seven chapters address the socio-political upheaval during the twentieth century and the rise of new religious movements. The author discusses in detail the doom scenario messages proclaimed by Wensi (active in the 1930s), Dewini (active in the 1950s and 1960s) and Akalali (active in the 1970s), who stated that the land of the Okanisi was in disarray, in a state of disgrace, and that corrupt practices undermined decent relationships. Next, the work explicates the reputation of Okanisi religious practice during Suriname’s Interior War (1986-1992). The book closes with instances of the traditional Okanisi belief system which conflicted with the Surinamese nation-state in the twenty-first century.

This book strongly resonates with *The Great Father and the Danger* by Thoden van Velzen and his wife Wilhelmina van Wetering (1988), which consisted of the couple’s PhD theses focusing on political control and witchcraft, respectively. The Okanisi concepts used throughout both books often do not have a proper equivalent in the English language; the author translated *wiseman* as ‘witch’, and *obiyaaman* as ‘shaman’, and did not provide an Okanisi term, nor definition, for the concept of ‘prophet’ featuring in the

title. *Prophets of Doom* would have benefitted from a guide through the labyrinth of Okanisi concepts, names and places – as was included in *The Great Father and the Danger*. In that work, Thoden van Velsen made use of perhaps the first publication on the daily and religious life of the Okanisi, Willem Frederik van Lier's *Aantekeningen over het geestelijk leven en de samenleving der Djoeka's (Aukaner Boschnegers) in Suriname* (1940, edited by Claudius H. De Goeje) – which provided insight into key concepts of Okanisi religion and socio-political control. Van Lier already argued that the priests of *Gran Tata* (The Great Father) were generally no *obiyaman*.

An important contribution of *Prophets of Doom* are the dozens of translations of oral histories narrated by local Okanisi historians between 1961 and 2020 – mostly collected between 1960 and 1980 during the author's fieldwork. Unfortunately, no transcriptions in the Okanisi language are included. Occasionally, a narrative from an Okanisi historian is divided over two or more chapters. It would have been beneficial if stories pertaining to the same event or protagonist had been brought together in a coherent whole – or at least in the same chapter. The author comments that Okanisi historians apply what he referred to as a 'compressing of historical facts', in which elements in a narrative may contradict facts derived from other Okanisi historians. Instead of neglecting these discrepancies, as the author did, it could be more thought-provoking to study the origins of these contradictions – especially when the Okanisi historians in question belong to another faction or to an entirely different maroon community altogether. Unfortunately, the author does not elaborate on these discrepancies between different Okanisi historians, neither did he cross-reference these contradictory elements in the oral histories with written archival sources.

Regarding those written archival sources, the author relied on copies of archival material from the Dutch National Archive, provided by his colleague Wim Hoogbergen, rather than conducting his own archival research. Furthermore, the inventory numbers provided do not correspond with the National Archive inventory numbers – even when updated to the current referencing system – which makes the scientific task of verification and fact-checking rather challenging. And when archival sources can be retrieved, such as in the case of the 1760 Peace Treaty, it becomes clear that the author did not provide comprehensive and verbatim translations. This book would have benefitted greatly if (translated) transcriptions from (written) archival sources and the author's fieldwork notes, analysis and interpretations, as well as the (translated) oral histories and personal testimonies by the Okanisi had been presented side-by-side, visually differentiated from each other, similar to those in Richard Price's 1990 *Alabi's World*. Instead, the author has provided an amalgamation of redacted written sources and interpretations of archival sources with the insertion of modern Okanisi terms and spelling.

Furthermore, the readability of this book would have profited from a comprehensive digestion of the oral histories in dialogue with the written

archival sources. The same goes for a subsequent regrouping of the book's sixteen chapters into five parts following the historical timeline as defined by the Okanisi historians themselves, which starts with their African origins, is followed by the time they were enslaved (*katiboten*) and the era of their exodus from the plantations (*loweten*) and then leads to the time of their freedom (*fi*) and the final period, which is made up of testimonies and personal stories of the descendants (*bakakiyoo*) of the protagonists in the oral histories from the first four periods.

Theoretically, this study on the entanglement of spiritual movements and political control in the context of processes of acculturation in a former colony would have benefitted greatly if the author would have analysed the data from the perspective of messianic or millenarian movements. A large body of historical-anthropological literature exists on local spiritual-political movements in Amazonia following contact with evangelical missionaries, such as Alfred Butt's *The Birth of a Religion* from 1960 and the two volumes of *Transformando os Deuses* edited by Robin Wright (1999, 2004). The *obiyan* in Thoden van Velzen's work resonate with the 'horizontal shamans' in Wright's *Cosmos, Self, and History in Baniwa Religion* (1998), whereas the priests of *Gran Tata* (The Great Father) resemble 'vertical shamans' that according to Wright could later become 'prophets'. The Okanisi *Gran Tata* appears to concern a religious phenomenon interwoven with social movements taking place in a community living under colonialism and undergoing a fundamental societal transformation which disrupted preceding social arrangements rooted in African structures.

Due to its richness in amplifying local Okanisi voices, this book is highly relevant in the present discussions on the Dutch colonial past and Dutch slavery. It reaches beyond the standard twentieth-century historical retrospectives and historiographies, even though a critical review of the used archival sources and oral histories is needed. As this work strongly hinges on oral histories provided by Okanisi historians, the editor could have brought it into the twenty-first century by including them as co-authors. At least, the translated narratives and testimonies could have been followed by an oral history source citation – in the present edition, each Okanisi historian is literally reduced to a mere footnote.

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