The original Ketubah which R. Bijlsma used to prove the Roos Ketubah had been misdated

(courtesy of the Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, Netherlands)

The Ketubah published by Rev. J. S. Roos

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The Misdated Ketubah: 
A Note on the Beginnings of 
the Surinam Jewish Community  

Robert Cohen

In its early years the American Jewish Historical Society paid considerable attention to the beginnings of American Jewry. America was understood in its broadest sense, so that the early volumes of the *Publications* abound with scattered references to Jewish settlements in the Caribbean and South America. In one of these early articles, a mistake, which subsequently found its way into every publication dealing with Surinam Jewry, appeared. It was stated that the Jewish community of Surinam had come into existence in or before 1643. This note intends to lay to rest the claim of Surinam Jewry’s early origins.

The myth was born in 1905, when Rev. J. S. Roos, rabbi of the Dutch congregation in Paramaribo, published the *Ketubah* of Haham Ishac Meatob and Yehudith, daughter of Yehiel Meatob. The *Ketubah* was dated 14 Ellul 5404 (1643), and Roos therefore concluded that the first Jewish settlement took place before 1643, “as it is not likely that they married soon after their arrival, for they had to build houses and to prepare all necessities themselves.”¹ Some years later P. A. Hilfman published, again in the *Publications*, a marriage register of Surinam Jewry, once more dating the Meatob *Ketubah* as 5403.² Both Roos and Hilfman based their argument on copies of the original *Ketubah* kept in the congregational archives in Paramaribo, Surinam. On the basis of this evidence, E. Oudschans Dentz, author of the first book on Surinam Jewry, dated the first Jewish settlement there from 1639.³ Although written in Dutch, the book found its way to later scholars dealing with the subject, and they all accepted the Meatob *Ketubah* as an indication of the early beginnings of Surinam Jewry.⁴

None of them was aware that already in 1920 the Dutch archivist R. Bijlsma had proven the *Ketubah* to be misdated. He compared the
copy used by Roos and Oudschans Dentz with the original Ketubah in the General State Archives in The Hague, and showed that in the copy, “the words VeShivim (and seventy) had been left out; instead of 5403 (1643) the act carries the date 5743 Ellul 14 = 1713 September 6.”

Oudschans Dentz was aware of Bijlsma’s article, but accepted Roos’s version on the basis of a photograph of the copy of the Ketubah taken by Hilfman on Roos’s request. He even claimed to have found Bijlsma’s “mistake.” Presumably, it was caused by the Ketubah of Haham Meatob’s daughter, Abigail, who married Jesosuah de Moshe Cohen Nassy on 15 Ellul 5473.

Only after the publication of the book did Oudschans Dentz realize that the photograph was made of a copy. He examined the original Ketubah in The Hague and published a retraction in several Dutch newspapers, accepting fully Bijlsma’s point of view. At present, the original Ketubah is barely legible. Even so, internal evidence proves Bijlsma’s point.

1. Between 1702 and 1724, Haham Ishac Meatob witnessed, and presumably also officiated at, some twenty-five wedding ceremonies which took place in Jodensavanne, Surinam. Unless there were two Hahamim by the same name in Surinam within half a century, this is clearly impossible, as Haham Meatob would have been at least one hundred years old in 1724.

2. The copy used by Roos reads: Beshlishi beshabat arba’ah asar yom lechodesh elul shnat chameshet alafim veot veshlosha. The fourteenth of Ellul 5403 fell on a Shabbath, not on a Tuesday, but the fourteeneth of Ellul 5473 did indeed fall on a Tuesday.

3. The Ketuboth of Haham Meatob and of his daughter Abigail were both witnessed by David de Meza and Immanuel de Solis. A centenarian Haham in eighteenth-century Surinam is implausible, but two more centenarians in the same community would constitute a geriatric miracle.

The only remaining puzzle is the fact that Haham Meatob married the day before his daughter. The Haham was probably a widower, who remarried the day before his daughter’s wedding, or even on the same day, for either economic or sentimental reasons. Unquestionably, there was no Surinam Jewish community in 1643. As Bijlsma pointed out, it was probably founded in 5422 (1661/62). The Askamoth of 1748 of the Beracha VeShalom synagogue quote the Livro
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*Politico* La A anno 5422, f. 1, to that effect, though the *Livro* unfortunately no longer exists. Furthermore, the oldest circumcision register lists the first circumcisions as having occurred in Adar and Nissan 5422. Undoubtedly, the community existed on the first of Tishrei 5423 (September 14, 1662) when the *Mahamad* met in session.

Robert Cohen teaches modern Jewish history at the University of Haifa, Israel, and is the editor of *The Jewish Nation in Surinam: Historical Essays* (Amsterdam, 1982).

**Notes**

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6. Oudschans Dentz, *De kolonisatie van de Portugeesch Joodsche Natie in Suriname*, p. 11.


8. Archives of the Portuguese Jewish Community, General State Archives (Algemeen Rijksarchief), N 408, p. 76.


10. A marriage ceremony performed after nightfall would, according to Jewish law, be considered as being held on the next day.

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The Orthodox community has a highly communal way of life. Families are often large and multigenerational.

Credit...Mark Abramson for The New York Times. Orthodox Jewish leaders said they believed that the authorities had unfairly singled Jews out for criticism over gatherings but did not express similar alarm when Black Lives Matter protesters filled the streets in recent months. Mr. Cuomo’s decision to announce the new lockdown in the middle of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, with an enforcement deadline that is one day before Simhat Torah, a holiday that celebrates the reading of the Torah, has only entrenched some Orthodox Jews’ belief that officials treat religious events as unimportant or reckless. Underneath the peace and prosperity of the new world is an undercurrent threatening to destroy everything he has worked for, questioning his role and reason for being born again.