

Jewish Cemeteries as World Cultural Heritage

Jodensavanne and Cassipora Cemetery: Unique Jewish Heritage with Outstanding Universal Value In the Surinam Rainforest

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Abstract:

The Jodensavanne settlement, literally “Jews’ Savannah”, was established in the 1660s in Suriname by European Sephardic Jewish community. Jodensavanne is a phenomenon unique in the world and the first and only example of a practically virgin landscape in which New World Jews had the opportunity to design according to their needs, beliefs and hopes. Jodensavanne was the first and only place in the New World where Jews had been granted an autonomous settlement and it was the only town in the world where only Jews lived.

While in Europe Jews still lived mostly in cramped and, in some instances, walled cities, where permission to build a synagogue was difficult to obtain and rarely any choice of site was given, at Jodensavanne, the Jews found themselves in a dense tropical forest landscape, with full liberty to position and build their synagogue, cemeteries and town.

The site is considered as one of the earliest and largest tokens of Jewish presence in America. It can be viewed as an historic point of entrance of the Jewish community in the New World. The site contains the first synagogue of architectural significance in the New World and holds three historic cemeteries, two of which are each over three hundred years old with 678 preserved gravestones.

Jodensavanne and the Cassipora Cemetery have been nominated in 2009 by the Government of Suriname as National Monuments and are as such protected under the Monuments Act. The Jodensavanne Foundation is in charge of the management and executes this in partnership with the local Indigenous village of Redi Doti. The site has been placed on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List in 1998. By the end of this year the official Nomination Dossier will be presented to the World Heritage Committee.

Introduction

The Republic of Suriname, the former colony of the Netherlands, often referred to as *Dutch Guiana*, is in the center of the Guiana’s, enclosed by French Guiane, Brazil and the Republic of Guyana, at the northern coastline of South America. After several colonization attempts and short occupations of the Spanish, English and French, the Dutch generally ruled the plantation colony from 1668 to 1975, when Suriname earned its independency.

Suriname is literally “the best kept secret” and is hardly known internationally. The country is though growing in global attention for its multicultural and mosaic society, with roots and heritages from American Indigenous, sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, India, China, Indonesia, and the Middle East. Living harmoniously, mainly in the capital city of Paramaribo, the population (some half million people) values its cultural heritage more and more. This is clearly confirmed by the Jodensavanne and Cassipora Cemetery National Monument which is a national symbol

and highly valued, while active members of the Jewish Congregation count around only 0.05% of the total residents. Another indication of harmony in Suriname's growing heritage understanding is that mainly non-Jewish citizens are responsible and active in the conservation and management of the unique cultural assets. However, as Suriname's popular novelist Cynthia Macleod once said: "If you shake a Surinamese family tree, surely a Jew falls out", indicates how Jewish roots have penetrated large parts of the population.

Jewish Colonization and the Jodensavanne Settlement

As part of the government policy to attract Jewish settlers (following the British colonizers) they were given special privileges, which granted them freedom of religion, freedom of ownership and the right to have their own judicial court. Jewish colonists from Brazil were famous for their knowledge in sugar cultivation and production, while Jewish merchants were especially wanted for their expertise on international trade. Under tolerant Dutch colonial authorities, Sephardim received rights, exemptions, and immunities both as an ethnic minority and as burghers. It was the most liberal treatment Jews had ever received in the Christian world.

In 1665 the group of Jewish colonists who partly came from Brazil and Cayenne under leadership of the "patron" David Cohen Nassy a colonial entrepreneur, achieved a piece of land close to the Cassipora Creek to build a synagogue and to layout a cemetery. Shortly afterwards, the community moved to a hill overlooking the River Suriname where the settlement of Jodensavanne was founded. The Jewish settlement of Jodensavanne, named by its residents "Jerusalem by the riverside", was autonomous and received legal rights from the colonial Dutch government. Apart from political autonomy, landownership and freedom of religion and traditions, Jodensavanne was the only settlement in the 17th century in the world with its own militia for the defense of Jewish plantations.

Situated along the Suriname River, some 48 kilometers South from the capital city of Paramaribo, Jodensavanne was surrounded by dozens of Jewish plantations, mainly devoted to the cultivation of sugar, where plantation labor was mainly carried out by enslaved Africans. At the end of the 17th century approximately 600 people lived in and around the flourishing agricultural settlement of Jodensavanne owning more than 40 plantations. The Jewish community also had part in the protection of the colony. In the vicinity of the settlement lay the military supply post 'Post Gelderland' of the defense line 'Cordon path'. This line, which started at Jodensavanne and ended at the coast, was constructed to protect the plantations from attacks of Maroons, runaway slaves. It consisted of a wide bridle path with military posts at regular intervals.

By the end of the eighteenth century, a population shift took place from Jodensavanne to Paramaribo, due to slave rebellions, Maroon attacks, soil depletion and the general collapse of Suriname's economy. At that time, Suriname was home to the largest Jewish community in the Caribbean. In the 19th century most of the Jews living in Jodensavanne had moved to the capital of Paramaribo. After a ravaging fire in 1832 the settlement was left desolate.

Cemeteries of Cassipora Creek and Jodensavanne

After varying periods of neglect and attention regarding the historic Jewish monuments since the great settlement fire, the Jodensavanne Foundation was established in 1972, with the aim to conserve the unique Jewish heritage. Although, it was first between 1995 and 2002 that the remains of Suriname's oldest Jewish monuments were thoroughly documented and analyzed under guidance of Rachel Frankel and Aviva Ben-Ur, the authors of *Remnant Stones I and II* assisted by fieldwork teams. They included the Cassipora Creek Cemetery, the Jodensavanne Cemetery and the Creole Cemetery in the rainforest, the Old Sephardi and Old Ashkenazi Cemeteries of Paramaribo and the remains of Kahal Kodesh Beraha VeSalom (Holy Congregation Blessing and Peace), the oldest synagogue of architectural importance in the Americas.

The cemeteries of Cassipora and Jodensavanne are of exceptional grandeur. The Cassipora Creek Cemetery, also referred to as *beth-ahaim velho (old cemetery)* was probably consecrated as a burial ground in 1666, the date of its oldest known marker. Beneath the savanna vegetation with creeping vines, lianas and numerous colonies of leaf cutter ants lie 216 known stone markers; the oldest known in Suriname. With the exception of two prism-shaped gravestones, all are horizontally laid slabs of various types of limestone and marble. The cemetery was probably used for the last time in 1873, the date of its youngest gravestone. The Cassipora Cemetery reveals epitaphs in five languages: Hebrew, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and Aramaic.

About 2 kilometers downriver from Cassipora, peddling northward, the Jodensavanne Cemetery (beth-ahaim) is situated partly on a light slope and a clearing, surrounded by towering kapok trees (*Ceiba pendantra*) and other typical savanna vegetation, some fifty meters from the brick and wood remnants of the Beraha VeSalom (Blessing and Peace) synagogue, consecrated in 1685. The 462 gravestones, bearing epitaphs in the aforementioned languages and spanning nearly two centuries, from 1685 through 1873, have been documented between 1997 and 2000. All visible gravestones are horizontally situated, and many contain elaborate pictorial carvings, collectively more striking than the generally simpler stones at the older cemetery. Burial registers confirm that there were many more burials at the Cassipora Creek and Jodensavanne Cemeteries than there are known gravestones. The reverse is also true; most of the names collated from epitaphs do not find their match in communal archives. The two Jewish cemeteries are the only ones in a rainforest environment and the best preserved in the America's.

The third cemetery of the monumental site is the African/Creole cemetery which is located some 150m east from the Jewish cemetery, in the "backside" of the Jodensavanne settlement. It is roughly half a hectare with still 141, mainly severely effaced, hard wooden grave markers that carry names of descendants of manumitted and emancipated slaves, dominantly of mixed Jewish-African background. The ones buried in this cemetery had close connections to the Jewish village and the nearby Jewish plantations, and some have been the offspring of Sephardi or Eurafrican Sephardim, who were assumingly not permitted internment in the Jodensavanne cemetery.

In 1685, the 'Beraha VeSalom' (Blessing and Peace) synagogue was inaugurated. It was mainly made of bricks imported from abroad. The synagogue formed the central point of a rectangular village. The remains of the town plan and the synagogue, and the cemeteries are testimony to the longevity and wealth of the Jodensavanne settlement.

Imagery in the rainforest tombstones

In the oldest Jewish cemeteries in Suriname hidden in the rainforest, only around 10 percent is enriched with iconography. Ben-Ur and Frankel (2009) point out that the paucity of sepulchral art in Suriname's Jewish burial grounds is indicative of class and expense, not biblical or rabbinic proscriptions against imitation of life forms, which is often misunderstood in a diasporic context. It is thus crucial to consider these images as largely the expression of a socially or economically privileged class of Jews.

Suriname's Jewish tombstones are flat and generally very simple, in accordance with Sephardi custom. The exceptions are two prism-shaped slabs in the Cassipora Cemetery, known in Hebrew as *ohalim* ("tents"). These prismatic stones date to Talmudic times, and have been traditionally reserved in both Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions for rabbis and other communal leaders. The decedents buried underneath *ohalim* at Cassipora are David de Meza (d. 1739) and Abigail de Meza (d. 1732), lavishly praised for her leadership. All other gravestones are rectangular and those of smaller dimensions are typically reserved for children.

The tombstones are dominantly positioned in family burial plots. The majority of the limestone, bluestone and marble slabs came from Amsterdam, whose Sephardic community boasted many calligraphers and carvers. Though, the artists of icons and authors of poetic epitaphs are mostly unknown. White marble gravestones at Cassipora were mostly used by the De Mesa and Da Costa families, who occupied the largest plots in the cemetery. In the Jodensavanne Cemetery most of these white marble slabs are related to the La Parra clan.

The sepulchral images on the Jewish tombstones are dominated by the grapevine or tree that is being chopped down by a heavenly arm. About 42 percent (57) of the 137 gravestones with images (including the 'old' cemeteries of Paramaribo) depict a falling tree. At the Cassipora Creek Cemetery, 25 percent of the images include hands or arms axing down trees and in the Jodensavanne Cemetery this is 46 percent. They all memorialize decedents between the ages of 8 and 48 years.

The priestly blessing hands can also be found in the old cemeteries. In the Cassipora Cemetery all twelve priestly hand images, the benediction hands, are attributed to the Cohen Nassy family the early members of Suriname's Jewish colony. Images of loaves of shew bread also occur. In some cases the illustrations are shaping family identity, such as the icon of loaves of shew bread placed on a table for the De Meza clan.

An ancient Jewish icon that appears in Suriname's oldest Jewish cemeteries is the grape cluster, but also non-specific Jewish iconography is encountered such as winged angels that play an instrument, skulls and crossbones and winged hour glasses. It is noteworthy that the rainforest

cemeteries of Cassipora and Jodensavanne pay considerable pictorial homage to their women. This finding is in consonance with their unusual public role in synagogue and professional life.

Jewish Cemeteries in Paramaribo

The Jewish Cemeteries in Paramaribo are all located in the Kwatta neighborhood at the outskirts of town. The Old Sephardi and Old Ashkenazi Cemeteries date back to the 18th century. Some 661 gravestones were recovered from the Old Sephardi Cemetery, which experienced a great destruction in the 1950's when the plot was sold as a result of urban developments. The Old Ashkenazi Cemetery counts 355 gravestones, dating from 1716 to 1883. Heading to the East at the same Kwatta road, are the New Sephardi and Ashkenazi Cemeteries .that were consecrated in the 19th century. Both Old Cemeteries have been documented between 1995 and 2002 and were portrayed in *Remnants Stones*, Volume I. Until the publication of *Remnant Stones*, Volume One, Suriname's oldest Jewish cemeteries had not been fully documented.

The Outstanding Universal Value of Jodensavanne and the WHC Criteria

Jodensavanne's historic cemeteries, together with the remnants of the synagogue and the settlement are of Outstanding Universal Value. Since 1998 they are placed on the World Heritage tentative list and as of 2009 they are protected legally through the Monuments Law as Suriname's National Cultural Heritage. The management of the monuments is entrusted to the Jodensavanne Foundation that operates in close cooperation with the Indigenous village of Redi Doti, which is adjacent to the site.

The following criteria to justify the inscription on the World Heritage List, as defined in the Operational Guidelines 2008 by the World Heritage Committee, are appropriate in the nomination of Jodensavanne and Cassipora Cemetery:

- (ii) They exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or landscape design;*
- (iii) They bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;*
- (iv) They are an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.*

The application of these criteria resulted in the following phrasing:

Criterion ii: *Jodensavanne and the Cassipora Cemetery exhibit the interchange of Indigenous, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish and African traditions and values. The Jews came from Spain and Portugal, mainly through Amsterdam. They had mostly African slaves but Indigenous were also enslaved or acted as guides for the Jewish militia to capture runaway slaves. Many Maroon clans still have Jewish-related names and traditions. This interchange is demonstrated in oral sources, traditions, epitaphs and language.*

Criterion iii: *Jodensavanne and the Cassipora Cemetery bear the exceptional testimony of 17th century Jewish Sephardic civilization.* The Sephardim that fled inquisition in Europe were colonists, who developed an agrarian-based and autonomous settlement, unique in the America's. Several attempts have been made to develop Jewish communities, but only Jodensavanne succeeded and prospered more than one hundred years.

Criterion iv: *Jodensavanne and the Cassipora Cemetery contain outstanding examples of an autonomous Jewish settlement, well-preserved Jewish cemeteries in the Western hemisphere and the remnants of the Beraha VeSalom synagogue.*

Management and Community Involvement

- The Jodensavanne and Cassipora Cemetery Management Plan 2008-2012 is the formal document approved by all stakeholders that provides important guidelines and actions for the sustainable management of the site;
- The Jodensavanne Foundation (1971) is the formal authority responsible for the management. The board has representations of public, private and community stakeholders;
- The monuments are on public land, but through a land management authorization granted to the Jodensavanne Foundation;
- The State Party represented by the Minister of Education and Culture, has declared the site as National Cultural Monument in 2009 under the Monuments Act of 2002;
- Since 2009 Government subsidy is provided for management to JSF (\$ 8,000 py.)
- The local community of adjacent Indigenous village Redi Doti is an important partner and co-manager of the site. An Agreement of Cooperation between the Jodensavanne Foundation and Redi Doti Village, which is represented in the Jodensavanne board of directors with two persons was signed in 2008.

Jodensavanne is a reminder of pioneers of American Judaism that should be conserved for its unique and universal values.

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