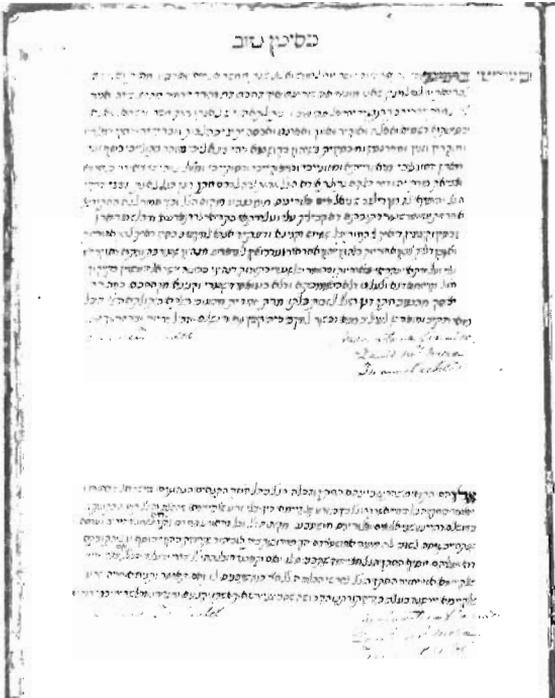


The original Ketubah which R. Bijlsma used to prove the Roos Ketubah had been misdated

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



The Ketubah published by Rev. J. S. Roos

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

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, F. 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 misdaded. 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.”⁵ 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 Jesusuah de Mosseh Cohen Nassy on 15 Ellul 5473.⁶

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.⁷ At present, the original *Ketubah* is barely legible.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 ve arba meot veshlosa*. 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.¹⁰ Unquestionably, there was no Surinam Jewish community in 1643. As Bijlsma pointed out, it was probably founded in 5422 (1661/62).¹¹ The *Askamoth* of 1748 of the Beracha VeShalom synagogue quote the *Livro*

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.

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Notes

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1. "Additional Notes on the History of the Jews in Surinam," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (hereafter cited as *PAJHS*), 13 (1905): 127-128.
2. "Notes on the History of Jews in Surinam," *PAJHS* 18 (1909): 181.
3. *De kolonisatie van de Portugeesch Joodsche Natie in Suriname en de geschiedenis van de Joden Savanne* (Amsterdam, 1927, repr. Amsterdam, 1975), pp. 9-11, 51.
4. Herbert I. Bloom, *The Economic Activities of the Jews of Amsterdam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Williamsburg, 1937), p. 154; Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492-1776* (Detroit, 1970), p. 143; Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, London, and Philadelphia, 1973), vol. 15, p. 67.
5. R. Bijlsma, "De stichting van de Portugeesch-Joodsche gemeente en synagoge in Suriname," *De West Indische Gids* 2 (1920): 59-60.
6. Oudschans Dentz, *De kolonisatie van de Portugeesch Joodsche Natie in Suriname*, p. 11.
7. *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, December 27, 1927; *Algemeen Handelsblad*, December 23, 1927; *Het Vaderland*, December 22, 1927.
8. Archives of the Portuguese Jewish Community, General State Archives (Algemeen Rijksarchief), N 408, p. 76.
9. Register of *Ketuboth* of the Netherlands Portuguese Israelitic Community "Beracha VeShalom," Surinam. General State Archives, Acquisitions, First Section, 1929 XIV-2.
10. A marriage ceremony performed after nightfall would, according to Jewish law, be considered as being held on the next day.
11. Bijlsma, "Stichting," pp. 58-59.