

# Antecedents and Remnants of Jodensavanne



*The Synagogues and Cemeteries of the First Permanent Plantation Settlement of New World Jews.,*

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On October 12, 1785 the synagogue, *Bracha veShalom* (Blessing and Peace), in Jodensavanne (Jews' Savannah) of the Dutch colony of Suriname, celebrated its hundredth anniversary. Governor Wichers, The Councils of Police, notable citizens from the capital city of Paramaribo, and some sixteen hundred other people attended. There were tables with over three hundred dishes and one thousand Chinese lanterns. People ate and drank. Speeches were made, Hebrew prayers were delivered, and poems were recited. The concluding celebration, a splendid ball at midnight, lasted until dawn (1).

Today all that remains of Jodensavanne, the first permanent Jewish plantation settlement in the Americas, is a brick ruin of the formerly grand synagogue (see Fig. 1), the first of any architectural significance in the New World. Additionally there remain two overgrown cemeteries each with marble and bluestone graves inscribed primarily in Hebrew and Portuguese, some with illustrative imagery. Also, there exists a third weathering cemetery with uniquely and artistically crafted wood and concrete gravemarkers. Furthermore, it is possible that remains of an earlier and more modest synagogue of the settlement lies buried in the jungle (2). Jodensavanne is remotely located north of the Amazon River Basin.

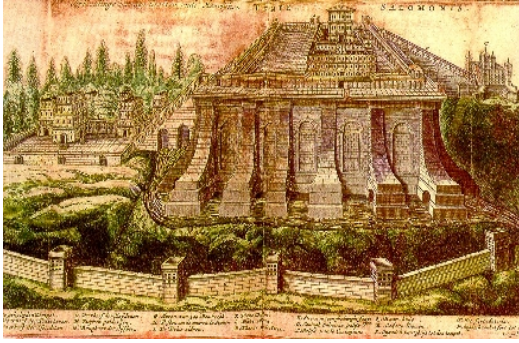
**Fig. 1** Courtyard entrance gate synagogue, *Bracha veShalom*, Suriname. Built in 1685. Last used Frankel, 1995.



*posts and east wall remains of the Jodensavanne [Jews' Savannah], in 1865. Photograph by Rachel*

Planting primarily sugar, the Jews on the upper reaches of the Suriname River in 1667 (see Fig. 2) were predominantly Sephardic. They came to Suriname from a variety of places. Some came from Amsterdam as well as other cities in Europe. Others came from Brazil where mainly they had been planters (3) and been introduced to the practice of slavery. By 1664 roughly two hundred Jews, who had been settled for less than a decade in neighboring Cayenne while it was in Dutch hands, came to Suriname. The Jews from Cayenne originated in such places as Livorno (Italy), Amsterdam, and Brazil. Jews might also have come to Suriname from the Pomeroon settlement in what was the Dutch colony of Essequibo (today, the Republic of Guyana) (4). Some claim that Jews came to Suriname in the 1650s from Barbados, with the English Royalist Willoughby. While the exact demographic make-up of the Jews who settled Suriname may be debated, it is certain they were not a homogenous group. Amsterdam's Sephardic community served as the religious authority, but the Jews of Suriname had many other places, references, and experiences from which to draw to form their identities.





**Fig. 3** Anonymous colored engraving of Solomon's Temple according to Jacob Juda Leon Templo, taken from "*Biblica Hebraica*", published 1667. Courtesy of the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, from the book "*The Esnoga: a monument to Portuguese-Jewish culture*, Amsterdam, 1991"

The magnificent synagogue of Amsterdam (see Fig. 4), built ten years prior to that of Jodensavanne, provided a significant precedent for Jodensavanne's synagogue, for not only were the Jews of Amsterdam closely linked through business, family ties, and historic background to those in Suriname, they also observed the faith identically. The services in Suriname attempted, if not succeeded, to duplicate those of Amsterdam. The Jews of Amsterdam and those of Suriname both referred to themselves as "of the Nation," the nation of Portugal, or as "Portuguese Jews." Both groups of Jews were of the same double Diaspora, first from Roman-occupied Palestine, and secondly, fourteen centuries later, from the Iberian Peninsula.



**Fig. 4** Southwest view of Amsterdam's Esnoga, inaugurated in 1675: auxiliary buildings in foreground fortress the sanctuary building.

Nonetheless, however much the two communities resembled one another, there were significant differences. Although both communities used outsiders to design and build their synagogues, these outsiders were quite different from each other. In Amsterdam, where Jews were banned from the Dutch guilds, the congregation's leaders selected Elias Bouman, a gentile, as the architect for their new synagogue. Similarly, a gentile, Gillis van der Veen, served as

the Amsterdam synagogue's master carpenter. In Suriname, likewise, the Jews presumably depended on others (10); primarily Africans (11), to build their synagogue, but it is still unknown who designed Bracha veShalom. Additionally, the two communities existed in different environments. The Jews of Amsterdam lived in an urban and cosmopolitan environment surrounded and dominated by Gentiles. The Jews of Suriname lived in an isolated autonomous colonial agricultural settlement (see Fig. 5) with 105 Jewish men, in 1684, outnumbering Jewish women by a ratio of almost two to one. Enslaved Africans constituted eighty four percent of the total Jodensavanne population, with 543 males and 429 females.



**Fig. 5** View from the west of the synagogue "Bracha veShalom", taken from the lithograph "*Vue de la Savanne des Juifs sur la Riviere de Surinam*", P.J. Benoit, "*Voyage A Surinam, La Haye*, 1839

Additionally, there was a small minority of enslaved American Indians as well as those more numerous who maintained their freedom (12). Furthermore, in Amsterdam there was an Ashkenazic community of Jews who had their own monumental synagogue. In

Jodensavanne, there was no Ashkenazic community, only ten to twelve Ashkenazic Jews who, according to *Essai Historique*, resided at Jodensavanne through the bonds of marriage. Although there were other Europeans and religious minorities living in Suriname at the time of the construction of Bracha veShalom, including the pietist sect of Labadists whose utopian settlement existed further up on the Suriname River, the various European groups lived apart from one another. In 1684 Jews made up twenty five percent of the total European population of Suriname (13).

For all Jews, the most sacred religious act is that of reading the Pentateuch, or Torah, the first five books of the Bible believed to be given to Moses by God. The Torah, considered in its widest sense, is the Lord's will and deed (14). Objects in which the Torah is stored and the spaces it traverses on its way to being read become sacred. The Torah is kept in the *hekhal* [ark] and read from the *tevah* [reader's platform]. Typical of Spanish-Portuguese synagogues as far back as those of Italy of the early seventeenth century (which are thought to have influenced that of Amsterdam) is a bifocal lay-out with the *hekhal* and *tevah* at opposite ends of the sanctuary. The *hekhal* is always on the side of the sanctuary facing Jerusalem. In the western world this is the eastern wall. The *tevah* is opposite it, at the western end of the sanctuary. Also typical of Spanish-Portuguese synagogues is that half the congregation sits on the north side of the sanctuary and the other half on the south side. Each half of the congregation faces both the *hekhal* and the *tevah*. This split-congregation, bifocal layout not only activates the reading the Torah, as it is walked from one end of the sanctuary to another; from the *hekhal* to the *tevah*, to be read, but it dynamically demonstrates the focus of the faith. This floor plan configuration perfectly describes that of Amsterdam's synagogue (see Fig. 6), and many others.



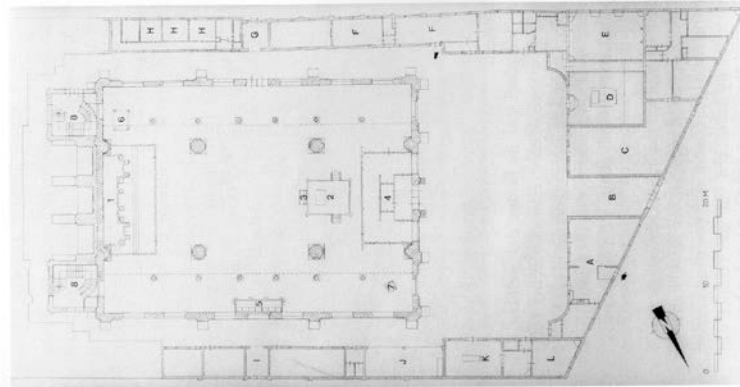
**Fig. 6** Interior view, facing east, of Amsterdam's Esnoga. "Tevah" (reader's platform) in foreground. "Hekhal" (ark) in background. Photograph courtesy of Sephardic Congregation of Amsterdam.

In traditional orthodox Judaism, Jews must learn Hebrew, study Torah, and practice its teachings. However, Jewish law exempts women from required attendance due to domestic obligations. The Torah cannot be publicly or ritually read unless ten men are present. Subsequently, space must be created for keeping the Torah and for gathering to read it. Jewish men are esteemed if they participate in reading the Torah and are scholars of the literature. Jewish women, quite differently, are responsible for executing the domestic laws and teachings of the Torah. During the centuries of the Inquisition, when Jews were forbidden to gather to study Torah, Judaism persisted cryptically, primarily in the privacy of the home. In this period women were often the keepers of the faith, taking over roles formerly held by men. They conducted marriages and performed other rituals of Judaism which had to be performed in secret, usually in the confines of a crypto-Jew's home (15). Synagogues are not, typically, the realm of women. In the Amsterdam synagogue, as in most of the Spanish-Portuguese, women wishing to attend services sat separately in a gallery reserved exclusively for them, elevated, directly above that of the men (16). In other European synagogues, since the fourteenth century, women sat separately from the men, sometimes in an annex elevated above the men and sometimes to the side (17). The women's gallery at Jodensavanne was, as shall be shown, different from that of Amsterdam.

Although it is not clear where converted male Jews may have sat in the Amsterdam synagogue, it is known that they were never appointed to official posts in the Jewish community and the Jewish law stipulating that a convert not be given a post with coercive authority was followed. Furthermore, in 1644, the men of the *Mahamad* (governing body) decreed that "circumcised Negro Jews" were not to be called to the Torah or given any honorary commandments to perform in the synagogue (18). In Suriname, in the eighteenth century, this lack of full privileges among both the male and female Jews of African descent would lead to unprecedented disruptions and acts in the greater Jewish community.

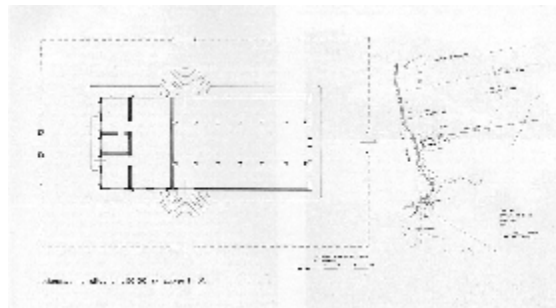
There are additional dissimilarities between the synagogue of Amsterdam and that of Jodensavanne. At Amsterdam, the synagogue plan is a complex of buildings, at the center of which is the sanctuary building (see Fig. 7).





**Fig. 7** Plan of the Amsterdam Esnoga complex. Sanctuary building at center, isolated from surrounding buildings housing auxiliary functions. 1=Hekhal. 2=Tevah. 4=Men's Entrance to Sanctuary. 8=Women's Entrance to Stairs to Gallery. B=Main Entrance to Synagogue Complex. Courtesy of Historical Buildings Department, Amsterdam, from the book *"The Esnoga: a monument to Portuguese-Jewish culture"*

An asymmetrical courtyard surrounds the sanctuary building on three sides. Auxiliary buildings, such as the religious school, the library, and the *mikveh* (ritual bath) surround the courtyard. Although there are several entrances to the courtyard, through the wall of auxiliary buildings, and several to the synagogue, the western entrance dominates the plan. Unlike in Amsterdam's synagogue, at Jodensavanne the synagogue plan, including the sanctuary and auxiliary spaces, are all assembled in one building (see Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8**

Furthermore, the synagogue building existed at the center of a four sided symmetrical courtyard, and instead of being protected by a perimeter buffer of buildings, the synagogue was surrounded only by a wooden gate with identical gate entrances at each of the four sides. Three of the four gates led directly to the three entrances to the synagogue. The west gate led to the entrance hall and auxiliary spaces of the synagogue. The north and south gates led to the symmetrical entrances to the synagogue sanctuary. The two synagogues are further distinguished from one other stylistically. The exterior of the Amsterdam synagogue expresses Classical symmetrical architecture whereas that of Jodensavanne recollected Dutch vernacular (see Fig. 9) and exhibited asymmetry on its north and south facades.



**Fig. 9** View of Jodensavanne with *Bracha veShalom*, the tallest building, on the far right, "Post Gelderland en Jodensavanne" noted in the field by G.W.C. Voorduin, Luitenant ter Zee, 1860/62. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library.

Just outside of Amsterdam, on the Amstel River, at Ouderkerk, is the cemetery of the Sephardic Jews of

Amsterdam. In 1614 the first burial took place. A small gravestone bears the inscription of a Hebrew poem in which the deceased, a child, himself speaks and says that he was the first to be buried in the cemetery. This cemetery is renowned for its illustrative engraved tombstones which some say are in defiance of the second commandment in the Torah (Exod. 20: 4-5) against graven images (a measure against idol worship). The *ohelim* (solid tent or prism) tombstone form found at Ouderkerk resemble the grave markers in Spanish Moslem cemeteries (19). More common at Ouderkerk, and also found in the Sephardic cemeteries in Curacao, Suriname, and other places, are the flat horizontal slabs with imagery depicting episodes of the Biblical name of the deceased. Imagery referring to an individual's life are also common. The sources of the imagery came from the illustrative publications, Bibles especially, of the day (20). According to Joseph Gutmann, "the stones at Ouderkerk [and Curacao] differ entirely from the austere tombstones of their Dutch Protestant neighbors and from their Ashkenazim brethren. Such elaborately sculpted horizontal Jewish tombstones were unknown in Medieval Spain. Devoid of figural ornamentation, the medieval Spanish Jewish tombstones followed the practice found in Muslim cemeteries (21)."

Also at the *Bet Haim* (House of Life, a common term for a Jewish cemetery), at Ouderkerk, is the cleansing house or Rodeamentos House (House of Circlings). The first name refers to the house's function as the place where the ritual washing of the dead body takes place. The second name refers to the seven circular walks which are made around the coffin of the deceased male. The house was built in 1705 and although there is no known information about a cleansing house that existed before 1705, it is thought that one did exist (22).

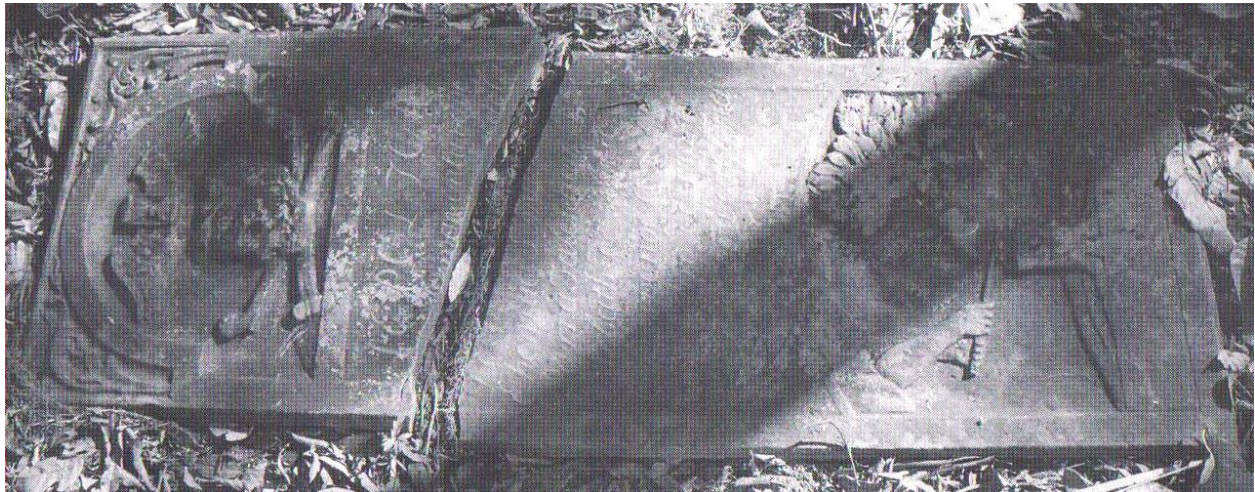
The cemetery and burial practices at Ouderkerk in some ways foretell what will occur at Jodensavanne. Firstly, Ouderkerk replaced an earlier cemetery in Groet which was unsatisfactory for the Jews because of its distant location from Amsterdam, and bodies were, up until 1634, removed from Groet and re-buried at Ouderkerk. Thus, one can conclude that it was permissible, among the Sephardim of Amsterdam, not only to start new cemeteries but also to remove and re-inter the deceased. Secondly, the original parcel of land of the Ouderkerk cemetery was augmented by subsequent purchases hence one can conclude that unlike the Ashkenazim who were prohibited to add to the land of a cemetery, these Sephardim could. Thirdly, adjacent to the cemetery at Ouderkerk is the so-called del Sotto cemetery. This cemetery resulted from a dispute between the Jewish community and the del Sotto family who, in 1670, purchased their own tract of land for their family burials. In 1691 the dispute was resolved and three quarters of the del Sotto family cemetery was merged with that of the community; however, one quarter remained in the hands of the del Sotto family who continued to be buried there (23). Thus, there is a precedent for the separate family cemetery. Fourthly, the deceased were transported to the riverside location of the Ouderkerk cemetery by boat as would have been the case for Jews of Suriname whose plantations and cemeteries and synagogues lined the Suriname River and later, whose town homes were further down river in Paramaribo. Fifthly, although the feet of the deceased usually are placed facing east towards Jerusalem (24), at Ouderkerk, and at Jodensavanne, the graves do not uniformly adhere to this custom. Sixthly, unlike the Ashkenazim, many Jews of Amsterdam, like those before them in Spain, acquired burial places during their lifetime (25). Jews of Amsterdam, Curacao, and Suriname were also known to commission their tombs during their lifetime. Lastly, in 1647, it was decided that a separate section of the cemetery at Ouderkerk would be marked off for the burial of all the "Jewish Negroes and Mulattos" except for those Negroes and Mulattos who had married whites or those who were born of a marriage performed under a bridal canopy with a religious ceremony (26).

Almost as early as the Jews came to Suriname, they buried their dead with expensive imported tombstones much resembling those at Ouderkerk and on the island of Curacao in the Caribbean. The first cemetery of the Jewish settlement, referred to as the Cassipora Cemetery (because of its proximity to the creek so named which flows into the Suriname River), holds about two hundred tombstones which may date back at least to 1669, if not before. The latest grave is thought to be of 1840 (27). Like Ouderkerk, the graves are inscribed with texts in as many as three languages; Hebrew, Portuguese and Dutch. There are a few *ohelim* (see Fig. 10) and some of the more numerous horizontal graves at Cassipora have illustrative graven images.



**Fig. 10** Ohelim (prism shaped) tombstones at Cassipora Cemetery. Tomb of David de Meza, inscribed with Hebrew calendar date of death, 5495 (1735) and Christian calendar date, 1739. One side of stone carved in Hebrew and the other in Portuguese. Photograph by Harrold Sijlbing

The tree being axed down by the angel of death (see Fig. 11), or the hand of God, is an ancient and popular Jewish symbol, especially in sepulchral art. Its antecedent appears as early as in the mosaic floor at the fifteen-hundred-year-old Bet Alpha synagogue in Israel, where Abraham is shown about to sacrifice the life of his son. This image refers usually to a life taken before its time, typically that of a young person.



**Fig. 11** Tomb at Cassipora Cemetery with two graven images. Above are cross bones and a skull, a common image, alluding to the passage of time and the transitory nature of the world or that the deceased was a surgeon. Hand emerging from the unknown, wielding an ax, cutting down a tree refers to a life ended before its time (see Rochelle Weinstein's dissertation, *Sepulchral Monuments of Jews of Amsterdam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, N.Y.U., 1979). Photograph by Rachel Frankel, 1997.

The Cassipora cemetery shares another similarity with that of Ouderkerk. According to the rigorous investigative work done in 1995 by Dr. DeBye and Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Strelick, it appears that the Da Costa family had a separate section of the cemetery and that it was not uncommon for families to group themselves together (28), as at Ouderkerk. However, unlike Ouderkerk, the majority of tombs at the cemetery at Cassipora are oriented similarly but unusually northeast, rather than east.



The question of a separate section of the Cassipora cemetery for Jews of African descent remains unanswered. According to the late Robert Cohen, the 1754 *hascamoth* (rules) continued a trend of earlier bylaws, containing a full section about the relationship between black and white Jews. Cohen quotes the 1754 *hascamoth*, "since experience has taught how prejudicial and improper it would be to admit Mulattos as *Yahidim* [full members], and noting that some of these have concerned themselves in matters of the government of the community [the Jewish community], it is resolved that henceforth they will never be considered or admitted as *Yahidim* and will solely be *Congreganten*, as in other communities (29)." However, based on the reactionary tone of the *hascamoth*, it is likely that in early Suriname, Jews of African descent enjoyed fuller rights than they did in subsequent years and in other places.

In 1682, the Jews of Suriname secured a land grant from Samuel Nassy, a Jewish planter on the Suriname River. This property, a bit down the river, about one mile north, from the Cassipora Cemetery (and, it is said, from the location of the earlier synagogue), according to the *Essai Historique*, existed on fresh ground, on the Savannah (30). This location would become the new town center, *Joods Dorp* (Jews' Village), and the site of the community's second synagogue and cemetery.

In 1684, one year prior to the time of the construction of Bracha veShalom, what would become known as Jodensavanne, contained a population of at least 1,158 people, with Africans outnumbering Jews at least six to one (31). Central to Jodensavanne's culture were its riverside sugar plantations, grand synagogue, and cemeteries, built primarily by African hands. Jodensavanne flourished for a century. In fact, it was profitable enough to have helped to finance the construction of the Congregation Shearith Israel's early synagogue in Manhattan, as remembered twice a year by its present day congregation (32).

Despite the absence of any precedent for New World synagogue architecture and the Jew's inexperience in building design and construction concerning edifices of any significance, Bracha veShalom was built. *Essai Historique* tells that the synagogue existed on high ground, thirty to thirty six feet above the river to which it was adjacent. The synagogue sat in the middle of a spacious rectilinear courtyard, met by four cross streets, with large houses built at its corners. This village square measured 450 feet long by three hundred feet wide. The houses, according to the *Essai Historique*, were "*grandes & commodes, quoique d'une Architecture mediocre qui fent encore l'economie de nos ancetres: il y en a cependant quelques unes passablement belles* [large and commodious, although of a mediocre architecture which as of yet expresses the thrift of our ancestors; however there are some which are passably attractive]." (33); The lithographes of Benoit and Voorduin confirm the synagogue's hilltop location and show it as the tallest building at Jodensavanne's town center.

The choice of site for Bracha veShalom is not unusual. According to Talmudic interpretation, a synagogue should be located on the highest site in a town; also, the synagogue should be taller than other houses in a town. Furthermore, it is convenient to locate a synagogue near water for the ritual bath and other religious observances.

A new cemetery was also established at this time, the community thereby abandoning its first, except for the interment of those members of the old families who wished to be buried near their ancestors (34). This second cemetery is but a few hundred yards east from Bracha veShalom. It contains about five hundred marble and bluestone tombs. The flat stones rest horizontally, have epitaphs in Hebrew, Portuguese, and/or Dutch and illustrative graven images, much like those at Cassipora and Ouderkerk (see Figs. 13 and 14). The inscriptions date from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The arrangement of the graves, like Cassipora and Ouderkerk, is not regular per cardinal direction. It is yet to be determined if bodies were removed from the Cassipora cemetery and re-interred at the later cemetery.





**Fig.13** Tomb at second cemetery of Jewish settlement with image of ruler on throne and poetic Hebrew text, transcribed and translated by the late Manfred Lehmann during his 1959 visit to Jodensavanne, and reproduced in the 'Jerusalem Post', April 7, 1978. The epitaph reads, "the monument of the tomb of a man who was always first in every holy enterprise....who chanted pleasantly the songs of Israel within the congregation name Bracha veShalom in the city of Suriname, the wise and understanding communal leader, the exalted, pious and humble Rabbi David Hezekiah Baruch Louzado, of blessed memory, who in his lifetime also was 'Mohel' [performed circumcisions] and 'Rosh Yeshiva'[Head of Academy] named 'Gemiluth Hasadim'

[Performance of Charitable Deeds], who departed this life at the will of the Lord of heaven and earth on the second day of the new moon of Iyyar 1825. Photograph by Rachel Frankel, 1997.



**Fig. 14** Tomb at second cemetery of Jewish settlement with Portuguese text and image indicating that the deceased was taken before his/her time. Photograph by Harrold Sijlbing

Like the Cassipora cemetery, the second cemetery does not seem to have had a separate section for Jews of African descent. However, it is known that in 1790, the leader of the black Jews, Joseph de David Cohen Nassy was given a marginal grave "in a swamp and only one foot deep (35)". Although the cemetery is not distinguished, it may be that the grave of this Jew is at the second cemetery where its south portion has lower ground compared to that of Cassipora and thus where one might encounter swampy shallow earth.

What remains of the synagogue, originally of brick with flat clay tile roofing, sits in the midst of the no longer apparent village square. The ruin of the synagogue measures 94 feet along its east west axis and 43 feet across its north south width (see Fig.15) (36). According to Teenstra, who visited Jodensavanne in 1828, the synagogue was 33 feet high and had two pointed gables (37). Teenstra's account concurs with that of *Essai Historique*, in that the synagogue had large brown hardwood columns with a properly constructed wooden vault rising above. In this double height space, reserved for the men, existed a large ark of beautiful cedar wood, where the Scrolls of the Law were kept; "it is of a beautiful architecture, and ornamented with very well executed sculptures which reflect much honor (considering the infancy of the colony when it was built) upon the one who fashioned it (38)." Opposite the *heckal*, on a kind of raised platform or second story, beyond the main sanctuary which was the section for the men, was the section for the women, which sat above the synagogue's auxiliary spaces which were separate from the sanctuary. The extant remains and historical descriptions of the main sanctuary suggest that it duplicates the north-south, split congregation, bifocal layout with seating facing both the ark and reader's platform as exists in Amsterdam and is typical in other Sephardic synagogues. However at Bracha veShalom, the women's seating does not conform to that of the men as it does in Amsterdam and other places. At Jodensavanne the women faced the ark and the whole of the sanctuary, as a conventional audience does a stage. Also, the women's gallery was set back from the men's sanctuary, rather than above it.



**Fig. 15:** *Bracha veShalom* remnants from the air in the tropical rain forest. Photograph by Phillip Dikland

At Bracha veShalom, the women's section could have held at least eighty women, about twenty more Jewish females than were inhabitants of Jodensavanne in 1684 (39). Each row could have been made up of four five person benches and there could have been at least four rows of benches, with leftover room in the rear of the gallery where views to the sanctuary would have been more or less obscured and thus seats there would have been deemed unacceptable and undesirable. The men's section had capacity for at least 160 individuals, roughly fifty five more males than the settlement had in 1684. While it is known that in the eighteenth century male Jews of African descent were relegated to the bench of the *Abelim* (mourners) (40), it is unknown if this was the case in the first years of the synagogue. Naturally, in 1685, at the time of constructing the synagogue, the Jews of Jodensavanne would have built a structure that could support a hoped for

expanding population.

*Essai Historique* provides further descriptions of Bracha veShalom: "as its other ornaments [the synagogue had] the crowns of silver with which the Scrolls of the Law are decorated, and other necessary furnishings of the same metal, large candlesticks of yellow copper with several branches, and chandeliers of several kinds which cost the individuals who donated them a considerable sum. Below the women's gallery there is a chamber where the regents hold their meetings, having next to it the archives of the Jewish community kept in very good order. Everything there is so properly built and the synagogue has such an indescribable majesty, that although its size is quite ordinary, it elicits the admiration of those who see it for the first time (41)."

The open town plan of Jodensavanne, defined by four streets meeting at right angles forming an orthogonal gated courtyard with entrances at each of its four cardinal points, with the synagogue at the center, is unprecedented in synagogue architecture and synagogue site planning. Nonetheless it is not unexpected in the context of Jodensavanne, a Jewish haven, where for the first time, Jews had the opportunity to design virgin landscape and construct it according to their needs, beliefs, and hopes. Where their brethren in Europe lived in cramped and, in some instances, walled cities where permission to build a synagogue was difficult to obtain and Jews were rarely given any choice of the site upon which to build their synagogue, the Jews of Jodensavanne found themselves in a place with almost no man-made environment and full liberty to site and build their synagogue on the acreage given them by their own Samuel Nassy in 1682 (42). Thus, the Jews had the unique opportunity to model and build their view of the world and how it should be. Therefore, in accordance with Talmudic interpretation, the synagogue was sited upon a hill and was the tallest building in the town. Additionally, the synagogue was adjacent to a river; convenient for access to flowing water for the purification rituals. More unusual and significant, the siteplan for Jodensavanne permitted approach to the synagogue courtyard from all sides; from north, south, east, and west. Despite the harsh reality of the threat of raids and revolts from slaves, former slaves living independently in their newly established villages in the interior, European powers, and native Americans, the town was laid out as if in a perfect world. In an environment where the river was the medium of transport, the Jews built four roads, in parallel and perpendicular pairs, beside the riverfront. These came together in idealized geometry to form the synagogue square. The courtyard surrounding the synagogue and defining the square had four gates, each at the midpoint of its four sides. Three of the courtyard gates led directly into the synagogue. Two of these, on the north and south sides, led directly into the sanctuary. It is unlikely that this plan evoked anything but the age old Messianic hope of the Jewish people and echoed the Messianic literature and expectations popular in this era.

The unprecedented synagogue and town plan, instead of having buffer auxiliary buildings on its courtyard perimeter as in Amsterdam and elsewhere, had only railings and gated entrances at each of its four sides. It also had a

geometrically idealized village square, which testified to the Jew's hope for the coming of the Messianic age, as anticipated daily by their (and all observant Jew's) recital of the Amidah: *Sound on the great Shofar the summons for our freedom; set up the banner to gather our exiles, and bring us together from the four corners of the earth soon unto our own land. Blessed art Thou, Lord who wilt gather in the dispersed of Thy people Israel.*

The town plan of Jodensavanne, an unprecedented place of full Jewish life, symbolically, and spatially, if not architecturally, refers most certainly to the ideal of an age of peace; an end of war and of oppression, as stated in Isaiah 43: 5-6: *Fear not for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, give up, and to the south, do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.*

Despite that slavery is sanctioned by the Bible, consider the irony of the design intent, with the majority of Jodensavanne's inhabitants held in bondage.

Unfortunately what remains today of Bracha veShalom is not necessarily authentic. There have been two efforts of ruin preservation in this century, both of which have resulted in some misleading effects. The first clean-up of Jodensavanne was in the 1940s. The Dutch colonists used Nazi prisoners from Indonesia to perform the labor of cleaning-up both the cemetery and the ruins of the synagogue of Jodensavanne. About thirty years later another clean-up was performed. As a result, the extant remains cannot be relied upon to be authentic when judging from a non-invasive field investigation. Archival documents, historical descriptions, and comparative studies are critically necessary to reconstruct the architectural history of the synagogue.

For example, the Voorduin sketch of 1860 of Bracha veShalom (see Fig. 16) shows that windows did not exist at the ground level of the synagogue's east wall. Yet the extant remains indicate that there were four windows at what would have approximated ground level inside the raised sanctuary. To further confuse matters, the sketch shows, at the upper height of the sanctuary, the synagogue had three windows. Such asymmetric fenestration, with three windows above and four below, would not have existed on even the most common of buildings, at the time, never mind the synagogue.



**Fig. 16** *Bracha veShalom and Bet Haim sketched from the Cordon Path by Jan Voorduin*

It is, as Voorduin's sketch indicates, quite common to eliminate fenestration on the portion of the east wall where the Torah is kept. The synagogue in Amsterdam exemplifies this. Also in St. Eustatius, a Dutch colony in the Caribbean, the synagogue there, initially built in the early 1730s and then rebuilt in 1772, does not have fenestration on the portion of the east wall where the *hekhal* existed. Rather, the eastern facade (exterior) at St. Eustatius employs faux windows on the portion of wall where, on the interior side, the ark is kept, thereby creating the illusion of a facade of full fenestration.

Perhaps at Bracha veShalom, the fenestration on the eastern facade did something of the same. It is easy to conclude that such design was merely architecturally correct -- wanting to avoid the monotony of portions of blank wall. However, it may express the persistence of the masking, secrecy, and illusion practiced by crypto-Jews in places where the Inquisition existed. For example, some historians believe that the sand on the floor of the sanctuary at the synagogue at Jodensavanne, as well as at those synagogues built later in the capital of Suriname, and on the island of Curacao, is thought, in part, to recollect the need to muffle the sounds of the footsteps of the men who gathered to read the Torah in places where the Inquisition was feared.

Techniques of masking and the making of masks were also common in the rich artistic traditions of the Africans enslaved on the plantations of the Jews. The earth spirits, previously mentioned, were often presented as masks



(whereas the supreme being is never pictured as images in Africa, for they are so distant and so comprehensive in their nature that they are not to be imagined (43). Ironically, this is much in keeping with the Torah's second commandment which was less conservatively adhered to by the Jews of Jodensavanne). Masking is also an important technique for expression among the various secret societies of Africa which form to govern communal life or comprise a particular guild (44).

In Suriname, where Africans no longer were among their own kin or ethnic group, they developed new languages, religious rites, and burial practices, many of which persist to this day as practiced by their descendants. The African techniques of masking, secrecy, and illusion persisted in Suriname not only because they were universally familiar to the diverse population of Africans but because they provided strategies required for survival under the institution of New World slavery.

Bracha veShalom had a typically Dutch style profile. The squared off top parts of the end brick walls served two purposes for building in Holland. They create an architectural detail for chimneys and provide a practical way to finish off masonry; pointed top ends do not typically or practically exist in masonry construction. However, there would have been no need for a chimney at the synagogue in tropical Suriname. Might then the typically Dutch style of the synagogue building express the Jew's patriotism, remembrance of, or deference to The Netherlands, the nation that gave them and their brethren back in Amsterdam religious rights? Or is it the style imposed by a Dutch architect, in absentia, back in Amsterdam where Jews were excluded from the building guilds?



**Fig 17. Jodensavanne Bet Haim** Photograph by Harrold Sijlbing

Regarding the Bet Haim at Jodensavanne (see Fig. 17) three critical questions arise: Did there ever exist a House of Seven Circuits where the ritual washing and circlings occurred? If not, how did the burial rites proceed and how did they come to be? Do the graven images on Jodensavanne's tombstones, which so closely resemble those of contemporaneous Portuguese Jewish cemeteries in Amsterdam and Curacao, suggest an intended uniformity in the sepulchral

art of Portuguese Jews throughout the New World and Europe or was it simply due to the community's lack of sufficiently skilled craftspeople and of adequate stone? Does the irregular layout of the cemetery's tombstones, often in opposition to rabbinical rules on burial placement arrangements, reflect the persistence of individuals who desired unconventional burial adjacencies due to intermarital ties (unusually close amongst the Sephardim of the time) or might it express a Kabbalistic idea that cemeteries be labyrinthine? Or, does it reveal special conditions of burial placement for *Congreganten* Jews of African descent?

The discussion of the African antecedents of the architecture and culture of Jodensavanne is enormously important. African and Jewish cultures were in close contact in Suriname and clearly affected one another. Benoit's drawing documents or perhaps illustrates such proximity: On the right is the workshop of an African-American tailor, complete with his African name (Koffi is a common West African name, particularly among the Eve people of West Africa) prominently displayed. On the left is a shop of clothes and other ready made goods. Its proprietor is a merchant of Sephardic stock, with his ethnic name similarly displayed.

From Zimmerman's map of 1877, another example of Jewish and African-American cultural proximity exists. The map shows an enlargement of a section through the Suriname River at the location of Jodensavanne. The map shows the synagogue, and adjacent to it and specifically noted, a Bombax ceiba tree, the formal embodiment of immortal ancestors in West African worship, and referenced as such on Zimmerman's map. Does this represent Jewish tolerance of African religion or African adoption of ground considered holy by the Jews? Do the Jewish converts and offspring of Jewish fathers and African, non-Jewish mothers -- considered by authoritative Jewish law to be non-Jews -- who were raised, educated and identified as Jews, exemplify the Jews of Jodensavanne's rejection of the usual reluctance of Jews to accept converts (45) or does it simply imply dominance by the ruling minority?



Whichever may be the case, are there parallels to be found in the architecture of the synagogue? In the configuration of the cemeteries? Why at Bracha veShalom is the design of the women's gallery less inclusive as it compares to its predecessor in Amsterdam? Did it reflect less honor given to Jodensavanne's Jewish women, some of whom, as early as 1685, were of African as well as Ashkenazic descent? Does the consolidation of functions within one building at Bracha veShalom, as opposed to the design of Amsterdam's synagogue and subsequent synagogues in Suriname and the Caribbean with their separate auxiliary buildings, simply express economical use of materials (shared walls, foundations, and roofs) or is it evocative of the freedom and optimism felt by these uniquely privileged New World Jews, anticipating, with open arms and architecture, the Messianic Age?

By the mid eighteenth century, Jodensavanne was in decline. Sugar prices had dropped, many planters found themselves in default on their loans, and Bosnegro (enslaved Africans who escaped the plantations and established their own distinctively ethnic communities further into the country's interior) raids on the plantations threatened all. In 1757, John Greenwood, an American artist visiting Jodensavanne, noted in his diary that the place, "is as empty as the church is of Sunday, the Jews being all gone to the plantations, except a few vagabonds who make this place their sanctuary or asylum, when they run from the town for debt or any misdemeanors (46)." At the time of the hundred year anniversary jubilee, in 1785, the synagogue of Bracha veShalom was already a relic of the past, visited and cherished as an historic monument by Jodensavanne's former inhabitants and their descendants. By 1787 meetings of the *Mahamad* were no longer held at Jodensavanne, now replaced by Paramaribo. By the 1830s Jodensavanne was all but abandoned. 1865 was the last time the synagogue was used, and in 1873 the roof of the synagogue caved in and no subsequent repairs were made.

By the early eighteenth century some of the Jews of Jodensavanne had already begun to move to Paramaribo, where they constructed new synagogues and cemeteries and established themselves primarily as merchants, or they had emigrated to other places in the Caribbean and North America or returned to Amsterdam. In Paramaribo, there are two synagogues, both of wooden construction. The first, built in 1716, replaced an earlier synagogue which was converted into a house for the sexton of the Spanish Portuguese synagogue.



**Fig. 18** *Neveh Shalom synagogue*

A new synagogue, *Neveh Shalom* (House of Peace), was completed in 1723 (see Fig. 18). However, this building was completely rebuilt between 1834 and 1842. In 1735 Neveh Shalom was sold to the Ashkenazi Jews, and the Spanish Portuguese Jews built a new synagogue, *Zedeq ve Shalom* (Justice and Peace), that same year (see Fig. 19). This synagogue, although never completely rebuilt, was significantly altered when its roof was raised to provide gallery space for the women. (47) It is unclear where the women sat prior to the gallery addition. Despite the grandeur of these buildings, the Portuguese Jews only considered their building a house of prayer, not a synagogue. In their regulations, the Jews stated that there was only one synagogue, the one at Jodensavanne (48).



**Fig. 19** *Portuguese synagogue, Zedeq ve Shalom*

At the end of the eighteenth century a synagogue of the Jews of African descent existed in Paramaribo. Prior to the establishment of their synagogue, these Jews founded their own society, in 1759, which they called *Darkhei Jesarim* (The ways of the Righteous). Their synagogue was demolished around 1800 (49). Unfortunately, little is known of the architecture of this latest, now lost, synagogue of Paramaribo. However, the earlier two synagogues exist to this day and manage, against great odds, to survive. Although these two synagogues share architectural features with the one at

Jodensavanne and with other Sephardic synagogues, they lack Jodensavanne's unique elements. Absent are the Messianic design intent in the synagogue complex plan, the Dutch-style building profile, attached auxiliary spaces, faux windows (if in fact they did exist at Jodensavanne), the set back and perpendicularly aligned women's gallery, and most apparently, the brick construction.

Within walking distance of the Jewish cemetery at Jodensavanne is the so-called *Creole* (in Suriname, meaning descendant of an African slave) cemetery.



**Fig. 20** *African/Creole cemetery of Jodensavanne*  
Photograph by Critina Iamandi

Those graves still visible date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The heart shape found on some of the graves in this cemetery (see Fig. 20) is most likely a *Sankofa* (go back to fetch it), a symbol for the important proverb of the Akan people of West Africa, from whom many Surinamers descend, "Se wo were fi na wo sankofa a yenkyi" [it is not a taboo to go back and retrieve if you forget]." (50); It may also be an *Akoma* (the heart) symbol of love, patience, goodwill, faithfulness and endurance (51).



**Fig. 21.** *Sankofa symbol, Photograph by Rachel Frankel*

When displayed, the Sankofa symbolizes the wisdom in learning from the past in building for the future. Elsewhere, in Africa and in African-American cemeteries, the Sankofa is found. One example, in particular, is that on the remains of an eighteenth century coffin in the New York African Burial Ground (52). The shape at the tip of the grave marker in Suriname symbolizes the same, although upside down.

The Sankofa symbol, typical of African symbols, is flexible and can be adapted as required (53). Descendants of the African diaspora in Jodensavanne, not unlike the Jews, held respect for the belief that wisdom was passed down by the ancestors to future generations. Surinamer-Africans expressed this belief on their tombs, in particular, through this age old symbol, as did the Jews with their graven images of Biblical episodes, for the edification of posterity. In the nineteenth and twentieth century Sephardic cemetery in Paramaribo, the heart shape Sankofa and Akoma symbols appear, coinciding with the star of David, the Hebrew name of the deceased, and the typical Sephardic flat horizontal tomb. However, gone are the illustrative engraved images. Here, the horizontal stone tombs, European in origin, are joined by sepulchral art of African origin, thereby forming the only uniquely Jewish African style of tomb known in the New World.