



Jeroen DeWulf, *The Pinkster King and the King of Congo: The Forgotten History of America's Dutch-Owned Slaves* (Jackson, Miss.: University of Mississippi Press, 2017, 320 pp., ISBN 978 14 96 80881 3).

Pinkster, according to the conventional understanding, was a Dutch festival adopted by African American slaves in New York. However, as DeWulf argues, this view is only partially correct, because the festival owes much of its heritage and character to a Catholic Afro-Iberian heritage.

DeWulf's argument rests on distant but plausible connections. Briefly stated, in the sixteenth century people in significant regions of Central West Africa (particularly in the Congo) accepted Catholicism and learned to speak Portuguese. Slaves brought from this region to the New World formed foundational charter generations of slave societies, where Portuguese-influenced African traditions were maintained. Chief among these enduring cultural institutions were brotherhoods, essentially mutual aid societies responsible for caring for the sick and dead. These brotherhoods flourished in the Congo and remerged in a variety of locations in the New World, including New Netherland, where, by 1664, a total of at least 467 slaves had arrived largely from Brazil, West Africa, and the Caribbean.

The Dutch in New Netherland, and their slave-owning descendants in New York and New Jersey, were aware of these slave brotherhoods, recognizing them partly as a threat (such as in a 1741 revolt in Manhattan) and partly as a negotiating partner in master-slave relations. DeWulf uses the term 'cooperative resistance' to describe how Pinkster was an event through which African American slaves negotiated their position relative to the slave-owners. According to DeWulf, the brotherhoods kept alive African celebrations and added some Dutch elements in creating their own version of Pinkster, which first appeared in the record in 1786 and remained popular into the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Casting a glance to Pinkster's roots in the Netherlands, Dewulf describes how the holiday thrived as a fifteenth century Roman Catholic Pentecost celebration. Although Pinkster continued to be recognised in the Netherlands in their Protestant-dominated seventeenth century, it flourished in New Netherland and was eventually adopted by slaves as a major holiday in the calendar.

An African American version of Pinkster developed therefore from two sources (Dutch and African traditions), but it became a separate African American holiday celebrated in both rural and urban locations. A key component of the African American Pinkster celebration was the naming

of an ‘African King’ which previous historians have identified as a form of comic reversal of order in society. But DeWulf suggests that the named kings played an actual role as leaders in the brotherhoods. While he recognizes some Dutch elements in African American Pinkster (such as flower decorations), he highlights the festival’s commonalities with other Afro-Iberian king election ceremonies in New England and Latin America.

When New York finally abolished slavery in 1827, after more than two decades of a gradual emancipation programme, Pinkster lost its main purpose as an event to negotiate master-slave relationships. African American leaders, eager to distance themselves from this carnivalesque Catholic holiday stressed ‘Protestant morals based on self-restraint, education, and sobriety’ (173). European immigration in the nineteenth century then altered the social structure in Dutch New York further and contributed to the end of the traditional relationship between Dutch Americans and African Americans. Upon the official ending of slavery, African American mutual aid societies quickly appeared and prospered, a sign, DeWulf believes, that they had been operating below the surface all the while.

If DeWulf is correct, he has found a substrata of common trans-Atlantic culture which persisted but evolved over more than two centuries in a variety of slave societies. The late emergence of a record of African American Pinkster celebrations is a problem for this thesis, especially since evidence of the activities of brotherhoods in eighteenth century New York is not vast. DeWulf has provided evidence of the existence of brotherhoods, but it remains unclear how extensive or powerful they were, and whether they truly evolved from earlier forms in Africa. DeWulf follows the evidence to Albany and Manhattan, but one wonders to what extent the brotherhoods were the impetus for Pinkster celebrations in smaller towns or rural areas.

DeWulf argues that New York’s Dutch slaves might have preserved Catholic practices despite joining Protestant churches. To make his case, he tells the history of African American baptism in the Dutch Reformed Church. In New Netherland, some ministers encouraged slave baptism, but later generations put more restrictions on the practice. The result was that fewer blacks became members of the Dutch Reformed church. This alone, however, is insufficient evidence for the assumption that they maintained Catholic practices or ideas.

The book’s argument bridges large divides of geography and chronology, and is admittedly speculative in places. It is, at the same time, a courageous argument that fellow historians will have to take seriously, and will have trouble disputing, especially since DeWulf has brought together a rare set of language skills in Dutch and Portuguese.

Perhaps DeWulf has found nearly all of the available and relevant evidence on the history of Pinkster, but because this evidence is limited, it allows for multiple interpretations. In the end, I believe this is a good example of the kind of work historians should produce – a well-written book with a

clear thesis, introducing a topic that is relatively unknown, while providing a new interpretation, not just a re-telling of established scholarship. Although six of DeWulf's previously published articles go into forming this new book, these articles were published in a wide variety of journals and are now integrated into a more complete argument.

Most importantly, the book connects Atlantic studies and American history in a broad scope and offers lots of opportunity for reflection about new ways to approach colonial Dutch American history. Scholars like Jaap Jacobs and Wim Klooster have successfully drawn the contours of New Netherland's connections in the Atlantic. Joyce Goodfriend, Shane White, and Andrea Mosterman have explored the roles that African Americans played in New Netherland. Yet, few have considered the development of slave culture in Dutch New York and New Jersey after the British takeover of New Netherlands in 1664. In this, Dewulf has truly broken new ground.

Lastly, I take issue with subtitle of the book. This is not in fact 'The Forgotten History of America's Dutch-Owned Slaves' but an important chapter of that history, which still offers much opportunity for further exploration.

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