

## Book Review: Premigration legacies and immigrant social mobility

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## Book review

Mies van Niekerk, *Premigration Legacies and Immigrant Social Mobility. The Afro-Surinamese and Indo-Surinamese in the Netherlands*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000 (trans. 2002). 308 pp. (inc. index). ISBN 0-7391-0431-4 (hbk) \$75.00

How much truth is there to Dutch ethnic stereotypes of the Indo-Surinamese as diligent, hardworking and socially mobile, and Afro-Surinamese as stagnating and associated with poverty? Van Niekerk begins this comparative anthropological study with these images and suggests that contrary to researchers' proclivity to attribute migrants' social mobility to either structure or culture, social mobility is in reality a mixture of both. The argument is that the historically and geographically-specific employment and education opportunities, social mobility strategies, family structures and gender relations that East-Indians and Creoles employed in Surinam influence their social mobility in the Netherlands. This proposal, that culture matters, inserts the study into the politicized debate about the relevance of culture to poverty, a debate in which post-1960s critiques Oscar Lewis' culture of poverty theory has meant that researchers have tended to focus on structure and opportunity, rather than whether and how groups contribute to their own marginalization.

The employment and educational mobility of lower-class first and second generation Indo-Surinamese and Afro-Surinamese living in two cities in the Netherlands is the topic of the book. The introduction defines the research question, qualifies relevant terms and gives a discussion of methodology (a mixture of survey data as well as interviews with 64 extended families). Chapter 2 compares the education and employment position of these two groups of Surinamese who migrated to the Netherlands in the 1970s and around 1980. Here we learn that, contrary to ethnic stereotypes, the Afro-Surinamese in fact are more educated and as often employed as the Indo-Surinamese. Chapter 3 provides a sketch of Creole and East-Indian social and economic positioning in Surinam and the argument is given that the groups' different educational and employment opportunities in Surinam placed the Afro-Surinamese in a better position to meet the needs of the Dutch labour market. We also learn that the same ethnic stereotypes about these groups were in existence in



Surinam as well. Chapter 4 focuses on the first generation of migrants and their mobility trajectories and shows that the Afro-Surinamese, who had a higher level of education, income and urban experience in Surinam, were able to maintain a certain level of continuity after migration to the Netherlands, as their backgrounds 'fitted' employment needs in the new society at the time. The Indo-Surinamese were less of a 'fit' as they came from an agricultural and entrepreneurial background and experienced both a decline in status as well as occupational mobility in the Netherlands. Chapter 5 introduces gender as a variable and shows that men and women have different rates of employment and advance via different 'trajectories of mobility'; Indo-Surinamese women are formally employed less often than Afro-Surinamese women and Afro-Surinamese men have the lowest employment rate. It is here where the pre-migration legacy comes into play most visibly, as the rate of employment differences is linked to enduring family structures and household compositions cultivated in Surinam; for example the Indo-Surinamese 'male breadwinner' ideal and Afro-Surinamese tradition of matrifocality, career women and financial independence and the marginality of Afro-Surinamese men.

In the remaining three chapters, Van Niekerk discusses the second generation and the somewhat static culture concept becomes more dynamic. These chapters in particular may be of interest to sociology of education researchers and students as they engage the relevance of social background to the educational mobility of children. For example, Van Niekerk argues that while social background is a good predictor in the case of Dutch children, in the case of Indo-Surinamese children it is not, since although they are not highly educated, these parents still transfer high ambition to their children due to their own schooling, labour market position, family structure and gender roles. However, if the discussion of Indo-Surinamese youths' high educational ambition is convincing, the argument that Afro-Surinamese parents do not transfer ambition to their children due to their culture and, in particular, their more individualistic attitude, open community as well as the intrinsic value given to education, is not as persuasive. Van Niekerk chooses to ignore Afro-Surinamese testimonies of discrimination and links some youths' choices of music and sporting careers over higher status careers and employment not to discrimination, but to culture. It is here that the book's aim of linking culture to structure falters a bit, as the discussion of structure is related only to structural shifts in the employment sector and the culture concept utilized lacks influence by the majority (i.e. ethnic 'Dutch') society either in Surinam or the Netherlands. For example, surely the legacy of the racial, gendered and sexual identities constructed through nation-building efforts both in empire, as well as in the colonies, must have affected both how the Dutch and Indo- and Afro-Surinamese distinguished themselves as culturally different from each other in the Netherlands and in Surinam, as well as the structures in both societies.



In the end, we learn that the ethnic stereotypes with which the book begins are both true and false; the Afro-Surinamese are more often employed than the Indo-Surinamese and hence are not stagnating, but the Indo-Surinamese, while not as often employed, have achieved more social mobility and hence are socially mobile. Yet we never learn why such stereotypes have endured or for whose benefit such stereotypes exist. While the book does a fair job of describing the internal structures of migrant cultures and their relation to social mobility, an inclusion of the culture of structures (for example, as is discussed in the literature on structural discrimination), might have allowed for a more multifarious understanding of the relationship between structures to culture and thus, migrant mobility.

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