

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MIES VAN NIEKERK, *Premigration Legacies and Immigrant Social Mobility: The Afro Surinamese and Indo Surinamese in the Netherlands*. Lanham: Lexington Books. 2002. 308 p. (cloth).

The Caribbean, and Caribbean populations abroad, are phenomenal laboratories for the study of migration. No other region has seen such proportions of its population leave, establish ethnic enclaves abroad, maintain intense ties “back home” and send remittances of such importance to the national economies. No wonder social scientists have tried all the tricks of the analytical trade on Caribbean migrants, from adaptation to acculturation to incorporation to segmented assimilation and transnationalism. Van Niekerk’s book on Surinamese immigrants to the Netherlands attempts to build on this rich foundation. It also wants to add a differentiation of migrant groups according to ethnicity rather than geographic origin alone.

Massive numbers of African origin (AS) and Indian origin (IS) migrants left Suriname (the former Dutch Guyana) just before and after the declaration of independence in 1975. How did they fare in the Dutch cities of Amsterdam and The Hague? Did migration break their patterns of stratification and social mobility? Was their cultural baggage more powerful than the neutralizing pressure of the welfare state? The questions are important and a comparative study design is appropriate. The book reports on two distinct empirical studies. The author, a senior researcher at the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES) at the University of Amsterdam, did anthropological field work from 1994 to 1996, mainly on the AS migrants concentrated in Amsterdam and the IS living in The Hague. Using a snowball sampling method, the author covered 64 families and gathered information on 288 individuals. The copious notes from this qualitative work are frequently quoted, sometimes at very great length, throughout the book. A second data source is a quantitative survey of a representative sample of these same groups, carried out in 1994 by the Institute of Sociological and Economic Research (ISEO) at Erasmus University Rotterdam. This survey on “The Social Position and Use of Provisions by Ethnic Minorities” covered close to 2000 individuals in 837 households. Taken together, the two data collections constitute a formidable base that should allow in depth exploration of cases as well as multi variate analysis. As it appears that the ISEO data has only been published in very descriptive and abbreviated form elsewhere, I take it that this book is the place where it is subjected to a more ambitious analysis.

The author presents a rich canvas of data, observations and interpretation dealing with many different topics, from the history of the AS and IS populations since they were constituted in past centuries on the Caribbean coast of South America,

to the pre migration characteristics of emigrant communities, their mobility trajectories, the careers of men and women, the role of education in social mobility, the formation of distinct ethnicities, their family structures, and social networks and much more. The strongest parts of the book are those where this anthropologist explores the variables that are not usually well managed in quantitative research on social mobility (e.g., chapter 7 on family background looks at non SES variables as determinants of educational achievement outcomes). Van Niekerk analyzes level of ambition, pressure to succeed, the value put on diplomas, the nurturing of a business mentality and the value placed on individual responsibility all this in an attempt to explain the amazing progress made by the IS compared to the AS in the Netherlands. The IS (rural descendants of the “coolies” imported after slavery was abolished) started out much lower, on average, than the AS (dominant in education and the civil service) when they crossed the Atlantic, yet by the time of the research they were close to becoming equals in many respects. Their “legacy from the past” is the experience of rapid advancement as newcomers to Suriname. A similar cultural baggage that helped them then may help them again now that they are newcomers to the Netherlands. Each of the non SES variables discussed by Van Niekerk could be the object of a separate study.

The data show that much of the IS “catching up” is quite convincing. The order of presentation is not quite ideal (for example, chapter 7 (on family backgrounds) might be better placed before chapter 6 which uses some of the chapter 7 material). The final chapter (9) is the most important one, as indicated by its bearing the same title as the book. It contains a summary of the main arguments, but in addition, introduces much of the theoretical material (from Weber, Portes, Goodie, Wilson and others) that might have served better had it been presented early on and allowed to inform the research more directly. This latter point is important because the study suffers throughout from theoretical and methodological malnutrition. It wants to be a study of social mobility, as the author states repeatedly, yet is uninformed of practically any theory of social mobility and ignores the accumulated knowledge in this field.

Half a century of research has taught us to carefully separate men’s and women’s career trajectories but with the exception of chapter 5 this is hardly done. Mobility types should be clearly identified (intra and inter generational, vertical and horizontal, structural and exchange, etc.), but while the author realizes the complexities and spends much time on detailed interpretation she muddles mobilities and in the end finds few systematic trends and new insights. Multivariate analysis is an absolute necessity in this field, to control the simultaneous influence of such basic variables as age, sex, education, age at migration, place where highest diploma was earned, and professional experience, if we want to find out how ethnicity affects social mobility. Yet, this author never goes beyond single variable frequency distributions. Ignoring generations of social mobility research and without mastering the statistical tools of the trade, Van Niekerk cannot possibly answer the basic question that drives her research: “to what extent do their [i.e., the AS and IS] culture and history provide an additional explanation for differences in their social mobility” (p. 8)? Another limitation of the book is the absence of any serious concern with migration theories and typologies. Key issues such as migrant selectivity, the interplay of political and economic motives, the role of immigration policies and the

institutional completeness of immigrant groups are all present in the ethnographic material and in the long quotes included in the book, but are never treated systematically. In summary, then, Van Niekerk presents much excellent illustrative material in a study on an original and important research topic. Few studies have focused on what to the immigrants themselves is such an obvious point: that while they may have left the same place they are by no means the same people. Geographic origin and ethnicity are not the same, a lesson to be taken seriously in the research on immigrant groups. Better theoretical and methodological preparation would have made this book into an even more interesting addition to the literature on Caribbean migrations.

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