IDB CULTURAL CENTER August 1998 No. 27

ENCUENTROS

Celebrating the Extraordinary Life of Elisabeth Samson

Lecture by

Cynthia McLeod

IDB CULTURAL CENTER

Director: Ana María Coronel de Rodríguez
Visual Arts: Félix Angel
Concerts and Lectures: Anne Vena
Administrative Assistance: Elba Agusti

The Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank, an international financial organization, was created in May 1992 at the Bank's headquarters in Washington, D.C., as a gallery for exhibitions and a permanent forum from which to showcase outstanding expressions of the artistic and intellectual life of the Bank's member countries in North, Central and South America, the Caribbean region, Western Europe, Israel and Japan. Through the IDB Cultural Center, the Bank contributes to the understanding of cultural expression as an integral element of the economic and social development of its member countries. The IDB Cultural Center program of art exhibitions, concerts and lectures stimulates dialogue and a greater knowledge of the culture of the Americas.

© Inter-American Development Bank and Cynthia McLeod. All rights reserved.

CELEBRATING THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF ELISABETH SAMSON

Cynthia McLeod

The task before me today is challenging because it concerns distilling years of intense research spanning two continents into a forty-five minute discourse.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Director of the Rijksarchief Study Hall in The Hague who granted me liberal access to very old documents that are not available to the public, not because they are secrets, but because they are so delicate that they fall apart. Without the director's assistance, I would not have been able to learn the truth about Elisabeth Samson.

In Holland and Belgium, where audiences have a natural interest in, and some background grasp of, the Dutch colonial past and the cultural context of the seemingly obscure country of Suriname, it is not difficult to interest others in the rich life of a remarkable Black female millionaire who lived in eighteenth century Suriname.

Like the United States, Suriname is located in the Americas, and its history is rooted in tales of struggle, freedom, slavery and indentureship (our term for migrant labor). Our stories, like yours, are slices—albeit each shaded with unique flavors and nuances—from the same pie of human experience where strife and the fight for love, acceptance, understanding, respect, self-dignity, recognition, victory, and achievement rage and beat fiercely in the breast of mankind.

However distant Suriname may seem at this instant in your active historical minds, I would like to introduce you to one Suriname female whose profile on the horizon reflects universal themes that reach from the past into the present: her name is Elisabeth Samson.

Celebrating the Extraordinary Life of Elisabeth Samson was presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C. on August 7, 1998, as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program.

Elisabeth Samson figures prominently in most respected history volumes on Suriname because, in 1764, she was the first female *Negress,* or Black woman, who wanted to officially marry a White man in Suriname. Some of you may note with bewilderment that I have used the word *Negress.* I must ask your indulgence in permitting me the use of such culturally archaic term, but my use of the word is **not** gratuitous or ethnically effacing in any way to the Black race, of which I am a member.

When Elisabeth Samson made her official request to marry in 1764, the Political Council and the governor, who together were the highest authorities in the Dutch West Indian colony, did not grant her permission. The authorities referred to a *plakkaat* (a decree or law) that was made in Suriname in 1685 that prohibited marriage between Blacks and Whites. Elisabeth Samson, however, did not take no for an answer. Through her solicitors in Amsterdam, she requested permission to marry from the Directors of the Society of Suriname, who were the owners of the colony. Her direct appeal to Holland forced the local governor and Political Council to hurriedly send off a letter to Holland copiously explaining why such a marriage was forbidden and should not be permitted. In this detailed explanation, however, they admitted and cited one argument that, in this particular case, favored permitting such a marriage.

Elisabeth Samson was a very wealthy Black woman. I wish to read you the actual words of the governor and Political Council pertaining to the sole favorable argument.

> This would mean that the wealth which the young man will inherit in due time, will come into White people's possession. That would be a good thing, because it is not recommendable that Black people are rich and have possessions and money, for our slaves might get the idea that they also could become rich, and that they could become high and mighty like White people are, while it is obvious to everyone that Whites are from a nobler and better race than Blacks can ever be.

The Directors of the Society of Suriname in Holland were unable to arrive at a decision. They forwarded the letters to the State Generals in The Hague, the highest political authority in the Netherlands at that time. The State General concluded that the 1685 Suriname *plakkaat,* on the basis of which Elisabeth Samson's marriage request was denied, was not a Dutch law. The State General ruled that although Suriname is a Dutch colony, there is no Dutch law that prohibits marriage between Whites and Blacks. This definitive ruling was communicated in writing to the Directors of the Society, who mailed the decision to Suriname. Unfortunately, the entire procedure took three long years, and when the final decision arrived in Suriname, Elisabeth Samson's groom-to-be had already died. Elisabeth, a woman of no meager means, promptly

found herself another White man, this time much younger. Elisabeth and Hermanus Daniel Zobre were married in her house on December 21, 1767.

Before continuing in a chronological fashion, perhaps some more pertinent information on Suriname is in order. Originally, Suriname, which is today the only Dutch speaking country in South America, was a Spanish possession in the New World at the close of the fifteenth century. Spain did nothing with the area and one hundred years later, an Englishman seized it for the King of England. Around 1650, the British Lord Willoughby came from Barbados with some colonists, and together they started sugar plantations.

In those early days, Portuguese Jewish families migrated from Brazil and settled in Suriname. In 1667, during the Second Dutch War between Britain and the Netherlands, the Dutch captured the sugar colony. This led to what history will perhaps always remember as one of the most famous colonial land swaps: Holland traded Manhattan, New York (which was called Amsterdam in those days) to the British in exchange for Suriname. From 1667 to 1975 Suriname remained a Dutch colony.

French Huguenots, Swiss and German farmers, and some Dutch adventurers came to Suriname as colonists. They imported thousands and thousands of Blacks from Africa as slaves to work on the plantations. In the two hundred years of slavery under the Dutch, as many slaves were imported into Suriname as were imported into all the southern states of the U.S.—approximately 300,000. Although by the end of slavery in the U.S., the numbers of American slaves had grown to one million, at the time of abolition in Suriname in 1863, their number had dwindled to 33,000. The Dutch had the worldwide reputation for being the worst slave masters.

To control the large numbers of slaves, the Dutch established severe rules called *plakkaats*. For example, it was forbidden for slaves to become Christians, to be educated, to speak Dutch, to dress in European garments, to wear shoes, or be in the streets after dark. Whenever a slave became free, he had to become a Christian. Nevertheless, thanks to the geographical situation and the indomitable determination of many new slaves who survived the cruel Middle Passage, powerful *maroon* groups sprang up in the countryside. These runaway slaves fled into the interior, often hiding above waterfalls. The "bush Negroes," as they were called then, and as their descendants in Suriname are called to this day, became a severe threat to the colonists. Frequently they attacked plantations for supplies, materials, weapons, food, even women. Sometimes they killed the plantation owner and his family and pillaged the buildings.

For two centuries, the Society of Suriname in the Netherlands sent an army to protect the plantations and fight the maroons. Many of the men died in their cause, while many others stayed on and continued in military service. This army was a mercenary force that consisted of young White adventurers and soldiers from all over Europe, most of whom were

bachelors. Some of them were fugitives from justice hiding from the authorities in their native countries. Whatever their individual circumstances, these men were partially responsible for the formation of a colored, or mixed race in Suriname. By the time of the emancipation in 1863, the largest group of inhabitants in Suriname was the colored people.

In 1850, the Dutch government began importing Chinese, British East Indians, Pakistanis, Javanese, Indonesians, and Portuguese from Madeira to work on the plantations in Suriname which had been deteriorating over time.

In 1916, bauxite was discovered in Suriname, and that really saved the country's economy. Today, Suriname owes eighty percent of its income to bauxite, and especially to aluminum, which is made in the country itself. With a population of fewer than 500,000 people, Suriname today is home to people of practically all races and religions. With this background information, I wish to get back to the story of our heroine, Elisabeth, before she becomes forlorn due to neglect.

Earlier historians have assumed that Elisabeth became rich because she was a slave set free by a White master, that she was his mistress, and that he left her his money when he died. These early conclusions merely reflect the macho thinking that accompanies White supremacist standards. According to this mind set, how could there be any other way for a Black woman to become rich in the eighteenth century?

As a young woman under the sway and studied influence of many history books, I believed that interpretation too. Still, I was quite intrigued by the whole affair: first of all, the simple fact that there had been no action or initiative for the marriage by Elisabeth's fiancé. All the books acknowledge that she was the one who wanted to marry the White man. Thus, for me the question was: Why was she so eager to marry, when it was an accepted practice in eighteenth century Suriname society to find White men living with Black and colored women? (One must keep in mind that the ratio between White men and White women was approximately ten to one.)

Who was this mysterious, fascinating character, Elisabeth Samson? Some historians stated that she was a colored woman. Was she really colored, of mixed racial heritage, or was she a Negress? If she was colored, then the Suriname *plakkaat* of 1685, that prohibited marriage between "Blacks and Whites," also was used to prohibit people of color from marrying Whites, which would mean that there was a very rigid racial divide in the Suriname of that time. But such was not the case.

Eighteenth century Suriname society was not a carbon copy of southern United States society in which there is no distinction made between Black and colored. All color shades and the amount of White blood were clearly delineated and classified with differing names in eighteenth-century Suriname. A person was only considered a Negro or a Black when he or she was one hundred percent Negro. A child

from a Negro and White union was a mulatto, while *karboeger* was the name given to the progeny from a mulatto and a Negro, or from an Indian and a Negro. A child with a mulatto and a White parent or an Indian and a White parent was a *mesties*. A mesties and a White produced a *casties*, and a casties and a White produced a *pusties*. Blacks or Negroes were considered pure and so were Whites. The different shades in between were thought of as colored.

I began in-depth research into Elisabeth Samson ten years ago. To this day, she consumes a portion of my imaginative life, and my work continues. I am sure I will continue it until the end of my life. After five years of intense research, I arrived at the point where it was possible for me to prove irrevocably from the historical record that earlier historians had made many incorrect assumptions about Elisabeth Samson, and indeed about the state of race relations in early eighteenth-century Suriname society. My research and findings have salvaged the remarkable person of Elisabeth out of the sphere of the "helplessly forlorn and pitied Black mistress" who inherits the fortunes of her industrious White master. In fact, the historical records show the very reverse—the tail wagging the dog—that in fact White society inherited wealth from Elisabeth.

Also of significance was the finding that the relationship between Blacks and Whites was much more complicated and complex than a rigid code of race relations suggests. The truth is that the government did everything it could to keep the ethnic groups apart, and there was no *plakkaat* or legal decree in Suriname that was subject to such frequent renewal as the one that stated there should be a strict separation and distinction between groups. The mere fact the *plakkaat* had to be renewed so frequently is the first major clue that led me to deliberately look in the opposite direction. For instance, one never finds a *plakkaat* forbidding a woman to marry a ten-year-old boy. Why not? Well, women did not want to marry ten-year-old boys. (At least not until recently in America, I understand.) The truth is that the government's Black-White code was constantly under siege and constantly being overruled.

My earnest research on Elisabeth Samson was not done in Suriname. It started in the Rijksarchief in The Hague, Holland. Ironically, that is the place to find information about colonial Suriname. Serious researchers and students of history can hardly find anything that predates 1850 in Suriname itself. I spent lots of time in the Rijksarchief; I went to archives in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and also in Germany, specifically Emmerich and Keulen.

At the outset, the enterprise was like looking for a needle in a haystack. As it is, there is a dearth of information about Black people, let alone a Black female in the eighteenth century. All I knew is that I had to make a start somewhere, somehow. My lead turned out to be Elisabeth's letter of request to the Directors. When I read the actual letter, I knew for sure that Elisabeth Samson was one hundred percent Negro.

She states in her letter, "I am a free-born Negress." If she had been a colored person she would never have stated that she was a Negress. The word *free-born* was also important since there was a difference in rights between people set free by manumission and those who were free-born.

Elisabeth's claim to being free-born posed a puzzle that took on greater proportions when I found the original marriage certificate, which was easy to find because I knew it was issued in the year 1767. In the wedding register of the Dutch Reformed Church in Suriname, I found the notice or *banns* of marriage dated the 11th of December 1767 between Elisabeth Samson and Hermanus Daniel Zobre, and the actual wedding took place on the 21st. This document stated that the groom was thirty years old and Elisabeth was fifty-two. That meant that she was born in 1715, quite early in the era of slavery. (Emancipation in the Dutch colonies took place in 1863, thirty years after English emancipation.) Thus, the question these early dates posed was the following: How could Elisabeth Samson—a one hundred percent Negro person—have been born free in 1715 in Suriname?

In order to be born free, a child had to be born to a free woman. Of course, it was possible for colored people to be born free at that time. If a Black woman was pregnant by a White man and the man wanted his child to be born free, he could arrange for the mother to be freed before the child was born. But none of this applied to Elisabeth, who was a Negress; her father was obviously not a White man. The question I posed was: Why was Elisabeth's mother set free? This question remained unanswered for the next four years of my research. As you can well imagine, I did not find information in a neat chronological sequence.

In the interim, however, I found numerous instances of colored women who married Whites, which established beyond a doubt that the authorities had refused Elisabeth Samson's marriage simply on the grounds that she was a Negress.

Ultimately, I was able to unlock the secret of why Elisabeth's mother was set free. Around 1700, a Dutch planter came to live in Suriname by the name of Jan van Susteren. He arrived from St. Kitts bringing with him some male and female slaves. Among them was one female slave, Nanoe, with whom he had two children, Charlo and Maria. Both of the children were mulattos, though they remained his slaves.

In Suriname, Jan van Susteren married, and then he died in 1712. In his will, he instructed his wife to free Nanoe and her two children, Charlo and Maria. (In the meantime, however, Nanoe had had six more children by another or other men, all Negroes.) Thus Nanoe, Charlo, and Maria were freed in 1713. Charlo and Maria took on the family name Jansz, which literally means "the child of Jan." (*Jansz* is derived from *Jan's zoon, zoon* being the Dutch word for *son*.) One year later, the newly freed daughter, Maria, married a wealthy Swiss planter, Pierre Mivela, who owned Plantation Salzhallen.

Nanoe, the children's mother, changed

her name to Mariana when she became free. When she was freed, she also became Christian. In 1715, Nanoe, now Mariana, bore one more child, who was Elisabeth Samson. This is how Elisabeth Samson was born free.

Elisabeth and Maria, the daughter of Nanoe and Jan van Susteren, were half-sisters. Maria had no children. When Maria's husband, Mivela, died, she married Frederick Coenraad Bossche. Elisabeth was raised in the home of Maria and Frederick.

Maria's brother, Charlo, became a carpenter and built houses and churches and repaired church pews. He bought all of Nanoe's children from his father's widow, making his brothers and sisters his slaves. He then worked the rest of his life to set them free. In 1727, he made his will and proudly stated that he had lived long enough to free his blood relations. By 1732, the entire family was free.

Elisabeth must have been a very intelligent girl. She could read and write at a young age, which was exceptional for a Black girl at the time. At the age of ten she was baptized, and on her baptismal certificate, one actually reads that the church council was astonished by her knowledge of the Bible.

Maria's husband, Frederick Coenraad Bossche, was a captain in the Society's army. He was also a businessman and imported liquor and materials. I think that at a rather early age, Elisabeth was trained to help him in the business, and she probably engaged in some business of her own. I found a list published in Suriname in 1734 of people with possessions where Elisabeth's name appears—she was nineteen years old at the time.

Her early life was not all happiness. Elisabeth got into serious problems with the government and Political Council. Let me relate the tale to you:

In 1736, Governor Raye came to Suriname. As you know, governors are powerful men, and typically they grant favors. Well, one Mrs. Pelzer, the wife of a colonist, asked the governor for a favor. He promised to grant her the favor but did not do it immediately. Mrs. Pelzer grew impatient and reminded the governor of his promise during a reception. This was displeasing to him and he told her angrily that he would fulfil the favor, but that it was not a high priority. Both Mr. and Mrs. Pelzer were quite livid and said nasty things about the governor. Elisabeth Samson happened to be present in the Pelzers' home when the nasty remarks were made, and later she told the governor about the Pelzers' accusations. He was so furious on hearing the report that he sent military personnel to arrest the Pelzers and take them to the fortress. The Pelzers denied the accusations, saying they never uttered such words.

The governor did not stop there. At the weekly session with the Political Council, he demanded that the council conduct an investigation to get to the bottom of the matter. The judicial councilman, one Van Meel, carried out the investigation of the scandal. Several of the witnesses he sent for pleaded ignorance, just like the accused. They denied even

having been present when the remarks were alleged to have been made. Those who acknowledged having been present said they were otherwise distracted and did not hear properly.

The bottom line was that the judicial councilman concluded that the Pelzers never said anything and were not guilty of any wrongdoing. The guilty party in the entire affair was the free Negress, Elisabeth, the rumor monger, and Van Meel recommended she be prosecuted. He openly stated that one could never believe a Negro, and asked of what value was the word of a woman who was a public whore against the word of decent White people.

This is when the tide of events swung against Elisabeth. She was formally charged with spreading rumors that endangered peoples' lives. Van Meel accused her of attempted manslaughter on the grounds that if she had been believed, the judge could have sentenced the Pelzers to death, the maximum sentence for vicious remarks against the governor. Van Meel recommended that Elisabeth receive one hundred lashes in public and banishment from Suriname forever. The verdict was banishment from Suriname forever.

After judgment was passed, Elisabeth's brother-in-law, Frederick Bossche, took her to the solicitor and bailed her out. She was sent to Holland where she immediately appealed the verdict. This had to be done at the State General's chambers in The Hague. The appeal took two years since all the documents had to be sent from Suriname, where the process was purposely delayed. Thus, Elisabeth lived in The Hague for two years, while her lawyer wrote frantic letters for action to speed up the process. Finally, the appeal verdict was handed down. Elisabeth was found not guilty and was allowed to return to Suriname without fear of harm.

Having read all these documents and papers, I have concluded that the governor had always believed Elisabeth, but he could not deal with the Political Council, especially Van Meel. After the court hearing and process in Suriname, the governor wrote a sharp, critical letter to the Directors of the Society in Amsterdam complaining about several affairs which were not to his satisfaction. In the same letter he asked to resign his post. However, he died before receiving a response from the Society. In 1739, a victorious Elisabeth Samson set foot on the soil of Suriname once again.

Three years later, in 1742, Mauricius was appointed governor of the colony, and during his tenure, Suriname prospered. The number of plantations increased, and everyone who had money and the know-how to run a plantation was able to acquire land from the government. Elisabeth owned two small coffee plantations that did rather well, Toevlught and Welgemoed.

It must have been during these days that Elisabeth started to co-habit with Carl Otto Creutz, however, the exact dates are somewhat vague. Creutz was a German from the district of Cleve who came to Suriname in 1733 as an eighteen-year-old officer in the Society Army. He resided in the house of a fellow German also from Cleve, Frederick Coenraad Bossche, Elisa-

beth's brother-in-law. Thus, Carl Otto Creutz lived in the same house as Elisabeth when they were both eighteen years old. It is quite possible that their romance dates from this time.

Carl Otto Creutz never married. He became a close friend of Governor Mauricius, who had severe problems with the majority of the planters and colonists. As an army captain, Creutz received confidential orders from the governor to make peace with the bush Negroes, the maroons. Following his successful campaigns and negotiations, Creutz received a grant in 1749 of one thousand acres for a plantation strategically located next to one of the governor's plantations.

If this were a drama, at this point one would read: "Enter Elisabeth Samson, stage right." Creutz had the land. His lover and business partner, Elisabeth, came in with both the capital and labor, about two hundred slaves. In 1750, their plantation was registered as Plantation Clevia. In 1751, Elisabeth Samson and Carl Otto Creutz went to the solicitor and made a legal document of joint ownership of Plantation Clevia, the farm La Solitude and two houses in the city. All properties were held jointly with one exception–the slaves. As a customary business practice of the time, slaves were part of the inventory of the plantations. In this case, however, Elisabeth stated that her slaves never belonged to the plantation, they were part of her private possessions.

The couple had no children. Elisabeth was the businessperson, and she controlled the plantations and the households. She wrote the letters and did the negotiating. In fact, Carl Otto was very often in the jungle where he was in command of capturing and quelling the maroons. As a result of spending so much time in the jungle, he was repeatedly sick with malaria. In 1753, for instance, he was so sick that he could hardly walk for almost a year. That year he believed that he was dying and he wrote his brother a letter to that effect.

In 1753, perhaps on account of his illness and the thought of his imminent death, the directors of the Society nominated Creutz to the Political Council. Creutz surprised them all by living until November 1762, by which time he was the oldest member of the Political Council.

Carl Otto and Elisabeth lived in great luxury in Paramaribo. They owned a beautiful house and had forty-four slaves at their disposal. They possessed everything that money could buy at that time. The inventory of their possessions at home was recorded in thirty-one folios. In their closets they had an abundance of luxurious materials—lace and velvet, golden buttons and silver shoe buckles. The living rooms had crystal chandeliers, ornate mahogany furniture, silver, and china, including nineteen dozen Japanese porcelain teacups. The cellar housed hundreds of bottles of wine, beer, liqueur, and seltzer water.

At that time, most houses in Paramaribo had a long yard where the slave houses were located. This was not the case for Elisabeth's home. Her slave houses were located on a separate property next door to and across the street from her home. The stables were located at the front

of this property and the slave houses were in the rear. Above the stables was a four-room apartment where the organist of the Dutch Reformed Church lived. He was a tenant of Elisabeth's and, as fate would have it, he was the first man Elisabeth Samson would ask to marry.

Carl Otto Creutz died in 1762. In his will, it was stated that Elisabeth Samson could use his half of their mutually held estate until her death, although the ultimate heirs would be his brothers in Emmerich, Germany. Elisabeth wrote to them with a request to buy Creutz's portion of Clevia. In my opinion this was unnecessary, because she could have taken possession of it all until her own death, especially since they had no children. But still, she wanted to acquire her partner's portion through a legal purchase from his heirs. She wrote the letter in 1764, just two months after she had made the request to marry her tenant, the church organist whose name was Christopher Polycarpus Braband.

Nevertheless, upon receipt of Elisabeth's letter of purchase, Carl Otto Creutz's brothers in Germany agreed to sell their share of the farm and plantation. At the time, Clevia was worth 200,000 guilders and La Solitude, 100,010. To close the deal, Elisabeth had to pay 155,000 guilders with 55,000 in cash and 70,000 in securities, and she promised to pay the remainder within a few months, which she did. Thus, Elisabeth Samson became the sole owner of both Clevia and La Solitude. Along with the other two plantations that she already owned, she controlled four plantations in all. In addition she owned the mansion in Wagenwegstraat and five other properties in Paramaribo.

This brings us to 1767, just a few months before Elisabeth received permission to marry. In the meantime one of her sisters had died, leaving Elisabeth and Nanette, the other remaining sister, to run the plantations. Together they had inherited from their sister, Catherine, two more plantations, Vlaardingen and Catherinasburg. They had also pooled their resources to purchase Belwaarde Plantation, which had belonged to the former Governor Mauricius, conveniently situated right next to Plantation Clevia.

Shortly thereafter, Elisabeth commissioned, through her deputy in Amsterdam, a frigate to be built in Holland for herself and her sister. The ship was to be used in the overseas trading of goods produced on their plantations. That same year, 1767, the ship arrived in Suriname bearing the appropriate name, *Miss Nanette and Miss Elisabeth*. Since Miss Nanette could not write, she signed documents with a cross. It was Elisabeth who wrote all the correspondence in her well-crafted handwriting and signed with her full name. I found bills of lading from their shipments. The coffee bags carried a large stamp, either with the initials of ESB (Elisabeth Samson Belwaarde) or ESC (Elisabeth Samson Clevia). Unfortunately, the frigate *Miss Nanette and Miss Elisabeth* was shipwrecked off the coast of North Carolina just two years after being commissioned into service.

In August 1767, the much awaited letter arrived in Suriname. The Directors

of the Society of Suriname were informed in writing that the State Generals had ruled and decided that there was no Dutch law prohibiting marriage between Blacks and Whites.

What is curious is that out of the blue—with Creutz and Braband dead—a new groom suddenly appeared at Elisabeth's door. Exactly how Elisabeth reached an agreement with Hermanus Daniel Zobre is unclear, but they were married in 1767. While I have no proof, I am confident that she was the one who proposed.

Of course, one shall ever wonder why Elisabeth did not marry Carl Otto Creutz with whom she lived so many years. This is pure conjecture, but let us not forget that Creutz was in the government. He must have thought that a marriage would have been forbidden by law. The diary of Governor Mauricius, who was a close friend of Creutz', may shed some light on the predicament. In his diary entry of December 24, 1764, the governor noted that everything was fine in the colony; business was prosperous and all matters were in order. However, he continued, there was one exceptional matter that disturbed him—the fact that so many White men were living with those black and red heathens. His exact and instructive words read, "Even the members of the Political Council, who should know the law, are guilty of this."

I can picture Elisabeth saying to her Carl Otto, "Let's get married dear." And Carl Otto replying as often as Elisabeth asked, "Darling, you know how much I want to marry you, but we can't. The law doesn't permit it." After some time she accepted the fact, but the moment he died, she tried again.

Did she love Zobre who was twenty-two years her junior? I do not think so. I am convinced that she wanted to marry because this was the only thing that she did not have. She had never enjoyed the status of a married woman and I am sure this was a bitter pill she constantly had to swallow. No doubt, the White women in the colony never permitted her to forget this fact. Although she was tremendously rich and could out-shine and out-maneuver them in almost everything, still, without marriage, her female rivals could point at her and taunt her with, "prostitute, whore." I imagine in those old societies, they would openly say that her life was sinful; she was living with a man outside of wedlock. Thus, at the end of her life's journey, Elisabeth Samson wanted to demonstrate that she could also have a marital status. In a deep sense, I think perhaps it was worth everything she possessed.

In July of the following year, 1768, Elisabeth and her husband, Zobre, went to the solicitor and made up their wills. Their marriage did not last long, because three and a half years later, on the 21st of April, 1771, Elisabeth Samson died. She left money amounting to 23,000 guilders to her relatives, while all the rest of her wealth was bequeathed to her husband, Hermanus Daniel Zobre, the rightful heir of her estate. Her possessions were worth more than a million guilders.

Some people ask if Zobre was grateful.

He certainly did not show it because he never even bothered to erect a tombstone to his benefactress and wife *in memoriam*. One thing was certain, he had it made at age thirty-three, and he became an important man in the colony.

Since Elisabeth and her sister, Nanette, both owned Belwaarde, Vlaardingen, Catherinasburg and half of Salzhallen, Zobre now had to deal with Nanette after her sister's demise, and he became her business deputy. But in the years immediately following, business declined in the entire colony. In 1772, there was a crop failure and the following year a major bank crash occurred in Amsterdam. Zobre subsequently took a mortgage of 200,000 guilders on Plantation Belwaarde which was to be paid back before the end of 1775. In 1776, having received nothing from him, the bank wrote the owners. Nanette, Elisabeth's sole surviving sister, protested through one of her niece's husbands. It appears that she was thoroughly unaware of the mortgage Zobre had taken. Nanette dismissed Zobre as deputy and took her niece's husband as her new deputy. She graciously took over Zobre's debt and likewise the ownership of Belwaarde. But now she had to take out a mortgage on the property on account of the difficult times. One financial woe led to another and debts piled up, until in 1778, she was bankrupt.

The records have revealed that Zobre became a well known millionaire. He went to Holland for a few months, where he fired Elisabeth's former deputy before proceeding to take out an 800,000 guilders mortgage from the wealthy merchants, Jan and Theo Marselis. Zobre never paid anything back and when he died in 1784, his brother, who was heir to his estate, refused the inheritance.

All of Elisabeth Samson's plantations and houses fell into the hands of Jan and Theo Marselis, the owners of a large merchant house in Amsterdam, Holland. The prediction of the governor and Political Council had indeed now come true—Elisabeth Samson's wealth and riches had fallen into the wide open arms of White people.

My friends, this is the story of the outstanding and remarkable free Negress Elisabeth Samson. When I commenced this project ten years ago, I had merely wanted to write and create a work of the imagination based on some historical strands. After I uncovered and continued stumbling over so much well documented and annotated information, I realized that I owed it to posterity and future generations to disclose the entire web of these amazing findings in a thoroughly researched scientific document. I thought it was more important that people read exactly what I found and not just be satisfied with Cynthia McLeod's fantasy.

Some friends with whom I discussed these findings advised me early on to pursue a doctorate with the information. For me what mattered was the appreciation of the scientific work of research and discovery. This was how I submitted my findings to the University of Utrecht. I was especially touched by the enthusiastic response by the head of the university's anthropological department. These find-

ings, he admitted, constituted a new vista and on social life in eighteenth century Suriname. Subsequently, the University of Utrecht published the entire scientific document of Elisabeth Samson which, unfortunately for many of you here, is in Dutch.

There were many things that I learned during my research. The most important is the fact that every nation should have ready access to the sources of its own history. Without access to such sources, people run the risk of forming self-images that are erroneous, based purely on stereotypes. This is exactly what occurred in Suriname simply because all the records are in Holland.

Another important fact is that while Black and White codes in Suriname were quite severe on paper during the time of slavery, they were far more relaxed in people's everyday life. Clearly the free Blacks were able to do things, although of course not every free Black woman was an Elisabeth Samson.

I also learned that race relations were much more complex than one would ordinarily imagine. I think that their complexity was illustrated in the *plakkaat* issued in 1782, just eleven years after Elisabeth Samson's death. The entire social structure had become so complex that the government had to simplify their system of racial classification. This decree stated that, from that date forward, the government acknowledged only three ethnic groups among Blacks and coloreds: first, Negroes and *karboeger*; second, mulattos; and third *mesties*. All other groups were considered to be White, including *mesties* born in wedlock.

I am thrilled that Elisabeth Samson has become somewhat of a popular and loved figure, almost a folk figure, as a result of this seminal study. But let me warn you that not everyone loves her. She is as controversial as she is admired, but this is not a problem for me. The trouble begins when people blur Cynthia McLeod with Elisabeth Samson and begin to direct their displeasure with Elisabeth towards me.

Sometimes I am confronted with questions such as: Why didn't Elisabeth do something for other Black people, especially Black women, in her time? While I cannot speak conclusively for Elisabeth, in my mind, after having examined the records minutely, I think she did do something for females and especially Black females. I think Elisabeth Samson demonstrated through her actions and her highly energetic life that you do not have to sit back and wait for people to come and do something for you. If you want to achieve something, you must take the initiative and do it yourself.

In closing, let me say how extremely heartening it is to see so many wonderful faces, especially so many new and totally unknown ones here in Washington. I sincerely hope that this is the first of many tributes in celebrating a truly remarkable unsung Black heroine of the New World. Isn't it true that the twenty-first century needs many more Elisabeth Samsons, not just the one who really lived over two hundred years ago?

Cynthia McLeod-Ferrier (Paramaribo, Suriname, 1936) is the fourth child of Dr. Johan Ferrier, the last governor and first president of Suriname. She spent her childhood in Suriname, and was educated in Holland. She taught Dutch language and literature in Paramaribo until 1978, when her husband became Ambassador to Venezuela, and subsequently to Belgium and the United States. During this period she started writing, and in 1987 published her first novel, *Hoe duur was de suiker (The High Price of Sugar)*, which dealt with the eighteenth-century Jewish colonists in Suriname, and is still the best selling book in the country. In 1992 her second historical novel was published, *Farewell Merodia*, and in 1996, *Ma Rochelle passee, welkom El Dorado,* about French Huguenot families in Suriname. Ms. McLeod divides the year between Antwerp, Belgium, and Paramaribo, where she was recently decorated for her literary contributions by the President of Suriname, as a Knight in the Honorary Order of the Golden Palm.

Other publications available in the *Encuentros* series:

- *Houses, Voices and Language in Latin America*
  Dialogue with José Donoso, Chilean novelist.
  No. 1, March 1993.

- *How the History of America Began*
  Lecture by Germán Arciniegas, Colombian historian.
  No. 2, April 1993.

- *The International Year of Indigenous Peoples*
  Lecture by Rigoberta Menchú, Guatemalan indigenous leader and 1992 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. No. 3, October 1993.

- *Contemporary Paraguayan Narrative: Two Currents*
  Lecture by Renée Ferrer, Paraguayan novelist and poet.
  No. 4, March 1994.

- *Paraguay and Its Plastic Arts*
  Lecture by Annick Sanjurjo Casciero, Paraguayan historian.
  No. 5, March 1994.

- *The Future of Drama*
  Lecture by Alfonso Sastre, Spanish playwright.
  No. 6, April 1994.

- *Dance: from Folk to Classical*
  Lecture by Edward Villella, North American dancer and Artistic Director of the Miami City Ballet. No. 7, August 1994.

- *Belize: A Literary Perspective*
  Lecture by Zee Edgell, Belizean novelist and author of *Beka Lamb*.
  No. 8, September 1994.

- *The Development of Sculpture in the Quito School*
  Lecture by Magdalena Gallegos de Donoso, Ecuadorian anthropologist.
  No. 9, October 1994.

- *Art in Context: Aesthetics, Environment, and Function in the Arts of Japan*
  Lecture by Ann Yonemura, North American curator of Japanese Art at the Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian Institution. No. 10, March 1995.

- *Approaching the End of the Millennium*
  Lecture by Homero Aridjis, Mexican poet and winner of the United Nations Global 500 Award. No. 11, September 1995.

- *Haiti: A Bi-Cultural Experience*
  Lecture by Edwidge Danticat,Haitian novelist and author of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. No. 12, December 1995.

- *The Meanings of the Millennium*
  Lecture by Bernard McGinn, North American theologian from the University of Chicago's Divinity School. No. 13, January 1996.

- *Andean Millenarian Movements: Their Origins, Originality and Achievements (16th-18th centuries).* Lecture by Manuel Burga, Peruvian sociologist from the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos. No. 14, February 1996.

- *Apocalypse in the Andes:Contact Zones and the Struggle for Interpretive Power*
  Lecture by Mary Louise Pratt, Canadian linguist from Stanford University. No. 15, March 1996.

- *When Strangers Come to Town: Millennial Discourse, Comparison, and the Return of Quetzalcoatl.* Lecture by David Carrasco, North American historian from Princeton University. No. 16, June 1996.

- *Understanding Messianism in Brazil: Notes from a Social Anthropologist*
  Lecture by Roberto Da Matta, Brazilian anthropologist from Notre Dame University. No. 17, September 1996.

- *The People's Millennium: The Legacy of Juan and Eva Perón*
  Lecture by Juan E. Corradi, Argentine sociologist from New York University. No. 18, November 1996.

- *Brief Notes on Ecuadorian and U.S. Literature*
  Lecture by the Ecuadorian poet, Raúl Pérez Torres. No. 19, March 1997.

- *Society and Poetry: Those Who Come Wrapped in a Blanket*
  Lecture by the Honduran poet, Roberto Sosa. No. 20, May 1997.

- *Architecture as a Living Process*
  Lecture by Douglas Cardinal, Canadian architect whose projects include Washington, D.C.'s National Museum of the American Indian. No. 21, July, 1997.

- ○ *Composing Opera: A Backstage Visit to the Composer's Workshop*
  Lecture by Daniel Catán, Mexican composer whose operas include *Florencia en el Amazonas*. No. 22, August 1997.

- *Welcoming Each Other: Cultural Transformation of the Caribbean in the 21st Century.* Lecture by Earl Lovelace, Trinidadian novelist and winner of the 1997 Commonwealth Prize. No. 23, January 1998.

- *De vuelta del silencio*
  Conferencia de Albalucía Angel, novelista colombiana y pionera del posmodernismo latinoamericano. No. 24, abril de 1998.

- *How Latino Immigration is Transforming America*
  Lecture by Roberto Suro, North American reporter for *The Washington Post,* and former Bureau Chief for *The New York Times*. No. 25, May, 1998.

- *The Iconography of Painted Ceramics from the Northern Andes.*
  Lecture by Felipe Cárdenas-Arroyo, Colombian archaeologist from the University of Los Andes in Bogota. No. 26, July, 1998.

- *Celebrating the Extraordinary Life of Elisabeth Samson*
  Lecture by Cynthia McLeod, Surinamese novelist and author of *The High Price of Sugar*. No. 27, August, 1998.

- *Un país, una década*
  Conferencia de Salvador Garmendia, escritor venezolano y ganador del Premio Juan Rulfo y del Premio Nacional de Literatura. No. 28, setiembre de 1998.

- *Aspectos de creación en la novela centroamericana*
  Conferencia de Gloria Guardia, escritora panameña, miembro de la Academia Panameña de la Lengua y correspondiente de la Real Academia Española. No. 29, setiembre de 1998.

- *Made in Guyana*
  Lecture by Fred D'Aguiar, Guyanese novelist and winner of the Whitbread First Novel Award, and the Guyana Prize for Fiction, and Poetry. No. 30, November, 1998.

○ Spanish and English versions available.

The *Encuentros* series is distributed free of charge to university and municipal libraries throughout the IDB member countries. Interested institutions may obtain the series by contacting the IDB Cultural Center at the address listed on the back cover.

Inter-American Development Bank

IDB CULTURAL CENTER

1300 New York Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20577
U.S.A.

Tel: (202) 623-3774
Fax: (202) 623-3192
IDBCC@iadb.org