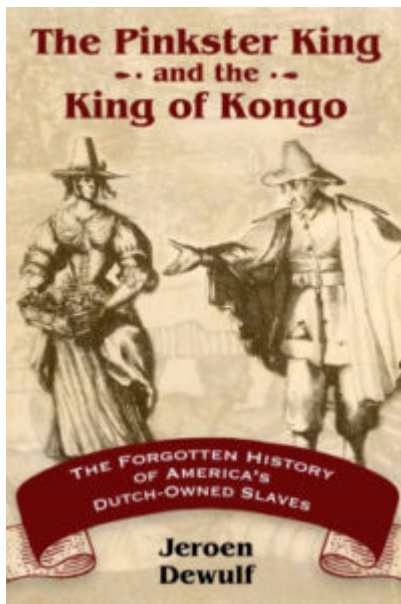
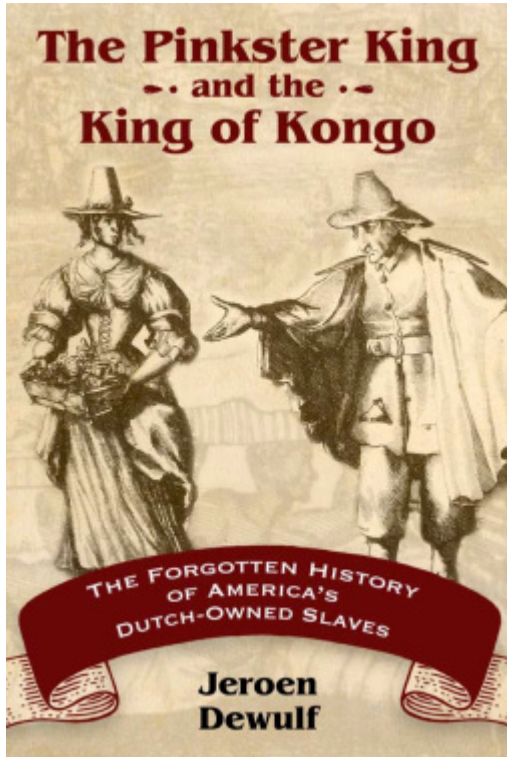


The Origins of Pinkster: An African American Celebration in North America's Dutch Communities



Jeroen Dewulf, *The Pinkster King and the King of Kongo: The Forgotten History of America's Dutch-Owned Slaves*. Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2017. 320 pp., \$65.

Each year, enslaved men, women, and children across New York and New Jersey's

Dutch communities would receive time off to celebrate Pinkster—the Dutch version of Pentecost or Whitsuntide. Pinkster had been a predominantly Dutch church and folk celebration that Dutch settlers and their descendants brought to the Dutch colony of New Netherland, and which they continued to celebrate after the English took control of the region. Initially, their enslaved laborers participated in this Dutch tradition, but by the early nineteenth century, Pinkster had become a predominantly African American festival, usually with an African king in charge of the celebration. In Albany, where New York's most famous Pinkster celebration took place, this king was known as King Charles, who served as “master of ceremonies, whose whole authority is absolute, and whose will is law during the whole of the Pinkster holidays” (60). He would parade through the streets of Albany, collect revenue, and only after he arrived on the Pinkster Hill, now the location of New York's state capitol, the festivities could commence. For days, participants would make music, dance, drink, and play various games.

Pinkster has attracted the attention of several scholars, including Natalie Zemon Davis, Peter Burke, and Shane White, yet much remains unknown about the festival's events or origins. Why, for example, were enslaved laborers allowed to gather in large groups during Pinkster, while on any other day they were prohibited from meeting with more than three fellow bondsmen or women? Why were they allowed to consume alcohol, even in excess, when they were not allowed to purchase alcoholic beverages on any other day of the year? And what were the origins of this celebration? Was it Dutch, African, or something new altogether?

Jeroen Dewulf's *The Pinkster King and the King of Kongo* addresses these questions, and in doing so he provides a welcome addition to the scholarship on this festival. It combines most known sources on Pinkster, and it incorporates analysis of primary sources in multiple languages. The book is well-written and highlights an important part of American history that has not yet received the attention it deserves. One of this work's greatest contributions lies in its comparisons between Pinkster in New York and similar celebrations elsewhere in the Atlantic.

The book argues that Pinkster originated in West Central Africa, not in the Dutch Republic, as most scholars have claimed. In particular, Dewulf suggests that the origins of Pinkster could be found in the “mutual-aid associations in the tradition of Afro-Iberian brotherhoods established by the charter generation” (10). Dewulf contends that the practice had been brought to North America by its first generation of enslaved Africans who were predominantly of West Central African descent. He argues that subsequent generations of Africans adapted to the already existing practices introduced by this West Central African charter generation. In order to prove his argument, Dewulf investigates Pinkster traditions and similar celebrations in the Netherlands, West Central Africa, and the larger Atlantic world.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter examines Pinkster

celebrations in the Dutch Republic. It shows that the Dutch folk festival of Pinkster had various elements in common with the American Pinkster celebrations. Chapter two discusses slavery in New York and New Jersey, and examines how the African American community celebrated Pinkster. Chapter three explores the origins of Pinkster. It argues that the Dutch folk festival of Pinkster could not have survived in North America, and instead connects the North American celebration to Catholic, Luso-Kongolese traditions. The fourth chapter argues that the origins of Pinkster can be traced to the confraternities of the Afro-Iberian Atlantic and West Central Africa in particular. The fifth chapter links New Amsterdam's West Central African charter generation to the later Pinkster celebrations. It argues that the social foundations of Pinkster in the early nineteenth century can be traced back to this seventeenth-century African community. Finally, chapter six examines the "demise and legacy" of the North American Pinkster celebration. Not only does this chapter explore how Pinkster came to an end, it also examines how the festival influenced North American culture in venues ranging from music to literature.

Dewulf is right to address the important West Central African influences on North American celebrations such as Pinkster. West Central Africans played an important role in many American slave communities, as several scholars have shown in recent years. Even the West Central African influence in New Netherland has been highlighted by a number of scholars, including Linda Heywood, John Thornton, Russell Hodges, Willem Frijhoff, and myself. Although the West Central African influence in the region's culture is undeniable, the book's argument that the Pinkster celebration is rooted *exclusively* in the cultural ways of the charter generation's West Central Africans is not entirely convincing. After reading the book, the question remains how a relatively small African population in Manhattan laid the foundation of an elaborate festival that took place in Dutch communities all over New York and New Jersey. Especially so, because no persuasive evidence links these early nineteenth-century communities to New Amsterdam's West Central African population, or shows a satisfying progression of the celebration over the course of the eighteenth century.

Although this book is an interesting and worthwhile read, the reader should be aware of its limitations. The book relies predominantly on printed sources, many of which have already been used by other scholars, and in some places the book relies heavily on primary source quotations from other secondary sources without consulting the original sources. The author does not appear to have done much archival research; such research could potentially have uncovered new information. More importantly, on some occasions evidence is missing, making it impossible for a reader to verify certain claims. For example, Dewulf asserts that when the Pinkster Ode, an early nineteenth-century published poem about Albany's Pinkster festival, mentioned the burial of Dinah, it likely referred to the enslaved girl named Dean who was executed for the Albany fire and who according to Dewulf was "buried in the African cemetery near the place where the African American Pinkster celebrations occurred" (162). But he does not

provide any evidence for either of these claims. The book also misrepresents the historiography on several occasions. In chapter six, for instance, Dewulf claims that Bradford Verter, in his article "Interracial Festivity and Power in Antebellum New York: The Case of Pinkster," has suggested that an author known only by the initials of A.B. "possibly refers to Aaron Burr, who habitually signed his correspondence with this abbreviation" (165), when Verter actually wrote the following: "The likelihood that Burr was himself the author of the article on Pinkster is rather remote." Such inaccuracies or missing evidence undercut what is otherwise a worthwhile read.

Although the book presents an interesting approach to studying Pinkster, it does not convince the reader that it is more likely that the early nineteenth-century Pinkster festivals originated in the traditions of a relatively small African American community in New Amsterdam than in Dutch medieval Pinkster celebrations. Although Pinkster has many elements similar to West Central African traditions, it also resembles festivals elsewhere in Africa and Europe. While the book does not provide any conclusive answers to the outstanding questions, it does bring needed attention to this part of early American and Atlantic history.

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