

SURINAME: DRILLING FOR OIL AND GAS AMONG ITS NATURE AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The present text has a personal vision of the author who work in Suriname for a drilling company in the search of oil & gas. It also accounts his point of view of the country and incorporates in it his culture and knowledge yet his view of the world of the time he wrote the text, the time that he lived and worked in the Surinamese country few years ago. The text brings historical, geographical, ethnic, and cultural aspects of Suriname with a foresight of a Brazilian and, in a way, brings the insights that he shares with his country as many characteristics that are also present in developing country in Latin America, but with a completely different aspects such as the Dutch colonization that is so very much different from the Latin way, predominant in the rest of South America. Ethnic, social, and political diversity, but also the configuration of its complex society, is surprising, being for the author a kind of alter ego of his own country, achievable mainly by empirical observation of how the Surinamese people deal with race, face coexistence with sparse resources, live among deep differences and struggle to survive with democracy.

KEY WORDS

Drilling; Suriname; Bush Negroes; Crioulo; Javanese; Hindustani; Paramaribo; Jews

INTRODUCTION

Few years ago, I was assigned by a Canadian mineral exploration company that was subcontracted by the state petroleum company of Suriname to work as an administrator and manager of logistics, materials, and human resources. I worked mostly with Surinamese and Canadians, the first workers and helpers, and the other mechanics, welders and well drilling technicians. Our place of work was in the marshes of the country's coastline, in a delimited area in a field, not far from the capital. Our mission was to drill holes in the marshy soil and test the wells for the potential of oil and gas existence. So, for most of the year, as a Brazilian, I worked and lived in the neighboring country of Suriname, the former Dutch Guyana. Located in the northern portion of South America, Suriname is 5 degrees above the equator line, facing the Caribbean Sea where the wet and marshy tropical coastline forms an isolated, inhospitable, and wild Amazon type.

WHERE ABOUT AND WHO

We rented a large, two-store, ten-room house, made entirely of wood, as are most residences in that country, and which served almost all the work crew. It was not far from the working place. The house is located on the outskirts of a small town called Groningen, forty kilometers west of Paramaribo, in the province of Saramacca. The place of work was in a marshy area called Tamburedjo in the district of Sara Maria, on the

banks of the Saramacca River. The name Tamburedjo originates in a Javanese vocabulary, since the country received, in the century XIX, a considerable number of immigrants from this island of Indonesia. The settlers of Java Island were responsible for an important contribution in the transformation of the country, at the beginning tireless workers who went into rice cultivation. Its culture has become, over the years, quite urban, less rural and devoted to services. They are famous for their restaurants or small roadside tents, where they serve 'Warung'; which means more than one type of food, it is a way of eating, which has typical Javanese cuisine, a kind of tradition that adds to culture but also community reunion. The Javanese language is widely diffused among families of this origin, as well as an extensive Arabic vocabulary, acquired through the prayers of the Qur'an, as families teach the Javanese language and the prayers of the sacred book, from which, as a child, members of the community recite by heart.

The district of Sara Maria would be the name of a Portuguese woman, very influential and important in the region, who lived there for many years during most of the nineteenth century. The region is located between the marshy coast and the Saramacca River estuary. Its bed runs surrounded by a low area, protected only by a wide and robust ravine where there is a dense tallgrass forest, of both sides of the margin. Nowadays farmers of Indian origin, who prefer to be called 'Hindustanis', are the largest and most powerful owners, many local landowners. The main product is the rice that grows with great quality and productivity in the flood and fertile plains not far from the coast.

To build a house, or even to form a farm, in that region of Suriname, it is necessary to land the swamp and create channels for water flow. The sand is brought from the interior and poured into the flooded area forming plateaus, which makes possible any agricultural activity, roads, and any fixed structure.

Suriname's main road cuts across the country from east to west, from the border with French Guiana to Nickiery on the border with Guyana and runs parallel to the marshy coastline. It is located about 80 kilometers into the continent, where the marshy environment gives rise to a greater concentration of natural sandbanks, probably formed by the thousands of years of flow and reflux of Amazonian waters flowing there towards the Caribbean Sea. Roads near the country's coast are usually built on ancestral sandbars. A geologist, an oil and gas specialist, with whom I spoke, told me that millions of years ago, the waters of the Amazon River flowed there, that is, on the north coast of South America of the country, a vast region, still today swampy, and helped the formation of several sandbanks, parallel to the coast. The geologist told me that in the Devonian eras, the Amazon River forced the passage, breaking the coast of Brazil, forming the Island of Marajó, but before that, the mighty Amazon River, flowed through the Guianas. The Guianas are the place of the purest waters of the planet. In the native Tupi language it simply means 'waters'.

Like said above, before the mighty Amazon River flowed eastward through the territory of Brazil, it flowed into the coast of the Guianas and went through thousands and thousands of years of fluxes and ebbs forming such sandbanks so necessary for life in modern Surinam. The Amazon, which descended from its bed to the south looking for the Caribbean Sea, already in the northern hemisphere, in ice ages, was retreating and leaving an area soaked in mud that until today prevents the entry of the sea inland.

From the coast of the Guianas to the northern State of Amapá in Brazil, marshes soaked with tall bush vegetation and sand banks arranged along parallel lines to the coastline characterize this part of the Caribbean, which in no way reminds one of the paradisiacal beaches associated with the name 'Caribbean Sea'. These sandbanks stretch for over a hundred miles inland shore. In fact, the useful part of the coast, so to speak, of Suriname, was built under these sandbanks. There are no beaches of any kind on the coast except on an island very visited by tourists. The place where the sea meets the continent is characterized by muddy waters that suddenly end in mud that is the base of bushes and tallgrass where the scorching sun prevails, birds of prey, alligators (Cayman species) and wildlife. The swamp of the coast of Suriname was portrayed in the film 'Papillon' when the central character of the plot flees from the island of St. Helena on an impromptu raft and, after escaping from the sea and fierce sharks, enters the marshy hell, which takes weeks to cross until reach Paramaribo.

At the edges of these sandbars, the broadest of which are no more than two or three meters wide, are the dark, unadorned looking and odorless waters. There are also several wells and small lakes at the roadside that are dug in these sandbars. At these roadsides, throughout the country (east-west axis) is practiced the number one sport, and national passion of Suriname: fishing. Cruising by car you can see whole families, even

solitary people in large numbers, with their small fishing rods. Such a sport is in tune with the state of mind of the Surinamese. The people are quiet, patient, friendly and do not understand any attempt to live under stress. Along the country's main road, mentioned above, which links When away from the cities, they enjoy their solitary or group fisheries even more. The most popular fish is a small, dark-colored species. It is a black 'horseradish' with a mane that looms when out of the water.

THE JOB

To carry out the drilling job in the costal marches, it was necessary to develop our own technology. The State Oil Company of Suriname in partnership with my Canadian drilling company designed a rig specially to drill holes up to 600 meters in the swamps. The probe is mounted on a giant vehicle that moves on tracks like a tank. It was built large as the marshy soil absorbs half a kilo per square centimeter, so the mats must be more than 2 meters wide. By comparison, the average person has about 4 kilos per square centimeter.

The entire drill assembly is 12 meters long by three and a half meters wide vehicle. The Rig was designed to be fitted to the vehicle that has a 400-horsepower engine that moves from one location to another in the poodle with its weight of 5 tons and still tows more than 270 thousand kilos carriers built over pontoons. The drilling equipment is designed with its pipeline mechanism and mud system attached. It can carry a flat deck mounted on pontoons for storing pipe, cables, equipment, and slurries, but can also have a small radio control shack. Before drilling can start, a wide conductor pipe of about 4 centimeters is driven into the muck about 6 to 12 meters. The dirt then is drilled out and a smaller pipe is placed inside and drilled about 45 meters and cemented in. Through that pipe, then, drilling pipe is dug as deep as 600 meters. In 2020 the State Oil Company has discovered vast quantities of oil offshore with a whole different approach of the one we describe here, as the country seeks international partnership to exploit it including neighboring Brazilian Petrobras known for its deep waters' knowhow.

THE ETHNIC SURINAME

The capital of the country, Paramaribo, was colonized in the second half of the seventeenth century, from a fortification originally erected by the English, then, from 1667, occupied by Dutch by virtue of a historical pact that included a negotiation involving the Island of Manhattan in New York and the expulsion of the Dutch from the Northeast of Brazil.

Self-identification "Portuguese" is not contingent, as I will try to show in the following pages. Most of the country's Jews descended from an elite of Portuguese slaveowners, who settled in the interior of Suriname in the seventeenth century, after being expelled from Recife by the Portuguese. The territory granted by the English crown (Suriname was then British colony) where the Jews settled became known as Jodensavanne (literally, "Jewish savannah"), and has the highest importance in the way the Jews understand the past and its relationship with the ancestors. The place began to be occupied at the end of the 17th century and was being gradually abandoned, for diverse reasons, from the end of the 18th century until in the middle of the 19th century only its cemetery remains intact. The image that the Jews make of themselves is that of remnants of a colonial elite. Although there are Sephardic families (Jews from Portugal and Spain) and Ashkenazi. (from Central and Eastern Europe), the Portuguese heritage is generally highlighted as being more prestigious. There is a long history of conflict between the Portuguese Sephardic community and the Ashkenazic High Germanic community. (LOUREIRO, 2014)

The landmark of Paramaribo located in the heart of the city was built in 1661. It is the Fort Willoughby, erected by English settlers and military. Later, with the arrival of the Dutch, the fort was enlarged and renamed with to Fort Zeeland. The structure that is located opposite the Suriname River. For Luso-Brazilian standards it is a small fortification, and in no way resembles the Portuguese fortresses erected in Lusitanian America. The Suriname River runs through almost the entire length of the city of Paramaribo and will flow about 10 kilometers north of there, in the Caribbean Sea.

The city of Paramaribo was conquered from the swamp over 300 years of history. Its constructions, sidewalks and streets occupy a relatively small space next to the immensity of the swamp that surrounds him. The main avenues are above narrow sand banks that draw the urban plan of the city that is surrounded, on the

one hand by the river and on the other by the immense marsh that stretches from the coast to an average of 50 kilometers, at that point, continent to inside. Paramaribo, the capital, concentrates almost two-thirds of the population of the approximately 550,000 inhabitants of Suriname.



Photo 1: Rush hour in Paramaribo. (the building in the background in the center - telephone Company, is an award-winning project of a Dutch architect of construction in tropical environment)

It is important but also fundamental to point out that, along with other ethnic groups mentioned here, the political class and ruling elite of Suriname is composed by the so-called Creole classes. The ethnic group corresponds to the greater part of the middle classes of the country, or 33% of the population. They are people of hybrid origin, or *mestiza*, whose past goes back to blacks and former urban slaves who were mixed by blood ties to Jewish settlers and Dutch and English immigrants. This class of people, or ethnicity is known by Creoles, and they form most of the members of the government, the ministries, the parliament, and the armed forces of Suriname.

Undoubtedly, it should be emphasized the recognized capacity of leadership that the Creoles have over other ethnicities, but also their ability and touch for political articulation on national level. In the interior of the country the soil is generally poor, formed by savannahs permeated with fine white sand, but, closer to the coast, the sand becomes granular, yellow, and coarse. Two continental Indian tribes were there when the divided Columbus squad in 1498 departed from Santo Domingo to discover new lands in South and Central America. The Arawak's and the Carib's are two of the tribes that inhabit Suriname before European discovery but also present on the coast and in the forests of the Brazilian Amazon. Located in the Northern Hemisphere, the climate is hot and humid all year round. With two well defined seasons: one rainy and one dry or less rainy. The heat splits rigorously into twelve hours during the day and twelve at night. When it rains it is always very intense, and the temperature drops a bit.



Photo 2: Aspect of the marsh environment around Paramaribo, Suriname.

Suriname Culture

In Suriname there is no running water, and every house or building has its own rainwater collection system. The size of Acre or Amapá, (Brazilian) states, Suriname is the most ethnically diverse country in South America, with very little miscegenation among the ethnic groups there.

Despite several unsuccessful attempts to bring Europeans to colonize the country, the Dutch eventually recognized that to live in those tropics it would be necessary to bring Indians and Javanese from their eastern colonies.



Photo 3: Javanese (of Islamist origin) woman in the public market of Paramaribo.

Shortly after the abolition of slavery, in 1865, ships crowded with Indian *dalits* and families of poor peasants from Java Island, Indonesia, arrived in Suriname. Subsequently, they were joined by smaller groups of Syrians and Lebanese, called Syrians, by Europeans, especially Dutch, called *burus*. The Dutch were the most vulnerable to tropical diseases such as malaria and yellow fever and decimated large numbers of these settlers. Today the descendants of Dutch, or *burus*, correspond to less than two percent of the population of the country, although them.



Photo 4: The author with a man of Hindustani origin (Groningen, Suriname)

Social prestige and wealth influence far more than their percentage in the population. In the early twentieth century, joined the ethnic cauldron group of Chinese who now make up about four percent of the population.

The history of ethnic diversity in Suriname begins with its two indigenous and traditional groups of the American continent. The Caribe's are present on the coast of South America and much of the Caribbean Islands. The Arawak's also populate large parts of South America, in a huge territory that goes from Argentina to the Caribbean Sea. Still as a sort of inheritance of the Dutch colonial period, the national Indianist policy of Suriname gives these peoples a certain dignity by distributing land in both urban and inland reserves. It is interesting to note that an alliance between Indians and blacks who have fled into the interior of the country is historic. The natives met the blacks who escaped from the colonizers' large farms in the 17th century and to this day live in an atmosphere of harmony and respect within Suriname.

The Indians taught the bush negroes how to survive in that new environment, recognizing and planting no venous cassava, but in return, learning with the descendants of Africans to plant and eat their yams, as they watched the gigantic sacred Baobab tree grow, solemn and majestic in the forests and savannahs from seeds the captives brought in their pockets from Africa. To this day, the King of the Woods, as the centenary Baobabs of Suriname are called, is in abundance throughout the country. Near these trees, it is the place where the Maroons worship their ancestors, delivering the dead bodies of their loved ones to the soil near the great tree.



Arawak's, Carib's, and Bush Negroes¹, transfer knowledge like how to plant and prepare mandioc in exchange of culture and, art made from nature's materials like the maroon drums 'apinti' along the 19th Century.

In the eighties of the twentieth century, when one uprising of the Maroons took place, the natives were their only allies and almost seized power in Suriname. A large national reconciliation agreement, which guaranteed lands to the Indians and Bush Negroes, drove these populations back to their territories in the interior, abandoning the armed struggle that was already approaching the capital. The history of Suriname also has its links with the events occurred in the northeast of Brazil in the 17th Century. Dutch Jews, expelled from Portugal and after a brief passage through Pernambuco, soon after the Luso-Brazilian reconquest the Sugar Cane rich Northeast Brazil, flocked to Suriname. There they founded Synagogues in the capital and even built a city, near Paramaribo, known as Jungensavanah. The village included in the country's best-known tourist routes, still preserves some wooden houses from the late 17th century, suggesting that it was a kind of agrarian community of Jewish settlers there.

There is a ruined building on the site, which is reported to be one of the first Synagogues of the Americas. Some of these prominent Jewish farmers, all with Portuguese surnames, still have their tombstones preserved in granite in the middle of a small lawn, in the shadow of a huge hundred-year-old tree forty meters high in the center of Paramaribo.



Photo 5: Tomb of a Jewish child, (buried in the eighteenth century). Written in Hebrew and Portuguese. Paramaribo.

I have noticed that some tombstones are full of kabbalistic signs with half-Portuguese inscriptions, half in Hebrew, and are as old as the years 1655 and 1715. There is a cemetery that today occupies a small and prized area of the city of Paramaribo, from the start of the busy Kwataweg road, right in the center of the city. The descendants of these Jews still boast their Portuguese surnames, such as the Fernandes family.

They are known to be the owners of the vast Surinamese business group, involved in the manufacture, representation, and distribution throughout the Caribbean of beverages, soft drinks, backed breads and ice

¹ Those are general names given by Europeans to one of the subdivisions of a given ethnic Amazon group.

cream trade. It is common to find, however, currently Portuguese surnames in the mestizo population, typically urban, middle class, among the Crioule group. The Creoles are mostly dark skin urban mestizos, mainly from Paramaribo and Nickiery and constitute the intellectual and political elite of the country. The Crioulos' have developed throughout the history of the country the so-called free language. The *Saranang Tonga*, also known as Taki-Taki. Saranang means uprising and Tonga comes from Tongue in English. Taki-taki is a mixture of African, English, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch languages. Some researchers consider Taki-Taki an idiom of resistance to colonialism and one of the most authentic institutions that confer legitimacy and unity despite the ethnic diversity that characterizes Suriname.

The Bush Negroes are still today divided into three large ethnic groups: the Maroons, the Saramaccas and the Sapinies, each still preserving their cultural identity and its characteristics such as language, art and culture. The former occupies the Savannahs of the western part of the country, bordering Guyana (English). The Saramaccas, in turn, occupy the center of Suriname until the Tumucumaque Range, bordering Brazil. The last group, the Sapinies, are located on the eastern border with French Guiana. It is interesting to note the Portuguese influence in the free language now spoken by the Saramaccas. His most blunt words as an example: knife, blood, foot, stick, are in Portuguese, often denouncing the terrible repression exercised by the famous Portuguese slave handlers and their so called 'captains of the bush'. Many of these blacks were brought to Suriname directly from Africa in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In Suriname its main task was to reproduce to supply the slave market of the Caribbean, in frank expansion with the plantations, but also of Brazil after the prohibition of the transatlantic slave traffic. With the British edition of the Bill Aberdeen of 1845, Suriname became a kind of saddle for exporting labor, especially to Haiti and Jamaica, where large estates dominated the economic model exploited by European colonial powers.

The road through the South is believed to have occurred on a large scale as well, in view of the prohibition of slave traffic in Brazil through the Euzébio Queiroz Act of 1855, which explains the presence of Portuguese expressions in the Saramacca language, since Brazilians and Portuguese at this time were known as the largest and cruelest slave smugglers and traders. The expansion of the Haitian revolutionary ideals eventually influenced the great slave uprising of 1865 in Suriname, which culminated with the abolition of slavery in the country. The end of the uprising was negotiated on the one hand by the English admiral, whose fleet intervened to prevent the massacre of the resident white minority. The black majority finally obtained authorization to occupy the interior of the country in a freeway.

The origin of the blacks of Suriname is diverse, it is known only that they were brought from different regions of Africa. Those, most recent in the 19th century, who came from the farms of Haiti and Jamaica were protagonists of rebellions and mass escapes to the interior. Scholars from around the world still consider Surinamese Maroons as the purest source for the study of habits, culture, and language spoken by blacks in the diaspora. The isolation for decades preserved cultural traces, mainly those identified as being part of the Congo or Bantu culture. Today, these communities are the owners of an immense region and lands in the interior of the country.

In the early 1980s, some of these "Black Bush" groups organized themselves into armed militias, incited by the creole politician from the urban strata of Paramaribo, Derci Bouterse, and along with the Arauk and Carib Indians, after a negotiated armistice peace plan has achieved certain autonomy from the central power in the context of the pacification process.

The 'Hindustanis', in turn, are the most prosperous traders and farmers in the country. They make up about 25% of the population and have their own political party with great influence and national prestige. They are also the owners of the largest rice farms, mainly along the coast and the largest commercial houses in Paramaribo and Nickiery. The ethnicity is very religious oriented and extremely attached to their large families. Its varieties of temples, dedicated to various divinities and millennial traditions of the Indian subcontinent, dot diverse places in the interior and cities of the country. Another striking feature, which denounces the Hindustani presence throughout Suriname, is the small yellow and red flags, nailed to high bamboo sticks in the courtyards of the Surinamese houses. Some already faded and torn by the time, others very new and newly hauled. They represent, depending on the color, the memory of the funerals of loved

ones, but also the residence where Hindustani families live. These flags are raised each time the family gathers in honor of one deceased dear.

After embarking for the indentured era, the authors highlight "three major trends", taken as "ideal types", of the "process of social change" that "focused" on the Indians (: 324). Firstly, "conservationism" resulting from the "retention" of certain "customs" brought from India, such as language, "local and caste rituals," pantheistic beliefs, "recognition of the validity" although "prescriptions associated with it were not fulfilled" and the "attempt to preserve", "as much as possible", "some of the life of the villages of India" (: 324-325). However, the Indians did not fail to "adopt" to some extent the values of "other Guyanese" in their "evaluation" of their "own culture" (MELLO, 2014)

Most of the Brazilians living in Suriname come from the northern and northeastern states especially Maranhão and Pará States. Most are illegal miners serving the Black Bushmen. There are an estimated 20 to 30.000 people working in the jungle, trying to find precious metals to service the Maroons, who hold land rights still rich in gold in the virgin forests of the country. The Brazilian community concentrated in a corner of downtown Paramaribo, in a area called Little Belém (capital of Pará State) is a fast-growing neighborhood with shops and supermarkets selling Brazilian products, and a strong base for implements to the 'garimpeiros' in the field. Brazilian ladies, many of them victims of people trafficking felony can also be found among Colombians and Domenicans, in the redlight district of town, to the delight of the Surinamese male population oppressed with the strict conservative manners of a machoism multicultural balanced ethnicity backgrounds whose moral standers do not allow exposure to prostitution in the mist of its women.

FINAL WORDS

What is surprising in Suriname is the diversity of its culture. To begin with there are several ethnicities that, without mixing with each other, respectfully share the same territory. Then what is fascinating is the absence of extreme misery. I have seen no large slams and everyone, I mean, all Surinamese students, speak at least three languages. Dutch, Spanish and English are known to most of the middle-level students in the country. In addition, the language Taki-Taki is spoken by all and still the Javanese language or Hindustani are spoken in the houses.

During my stay in Suriname, I learned to say a few phrases in Taki-Taki, such as: I do not speak Taki-Taki, which is said so. "Me num sabi Taki-Taki bum". Or for example. "My go woroko tumaraw." That is: I'm going to work tomorrow.

I notice that the descendants of the respective ethnic groups still speak their ancestor's ancient origin language (Hindustani, Javanese, or Bush Negroes, also called djucas). In addition, Spanish is highly widespread in the country so is Dutch and English. Another factor that I consider important and perhaps answers why the acceptable cultural level of the country is the fact that there is full-time public-school service. The schools are not very far apart, moreover they are located every two kilometers in any direction from each other, that is, it can be accessed on foot from anywhere in the coastal Suriname.

Maybe that the Dutch colonial heritage has brought this reality. Still, in this sense, I highlight the fact that without the statal intervention, perhaps due to the good education level of the population, there is a widespread awareness of birth control. The average number of children per couple is very low and I do not remember seeing any homeless miserable family, humble as it is, the homes of the poor are generally low income as it looks but they still look decent. (Compared to the slums of Brazil)

Finally, it has been proved that oil and gas is not feasible onshore but offshore as for last year an international joint-venture between Suriname and Guiana start to explore a big reservoir just offshore these two countries. A very promising endeavor with a prospect of millions of barrels and lots of natural gas is foreseen and in good times the resources are to improve both countries' economies.

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