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ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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Article

It's a Mirage. The Dutch Fortress of the Approuague River, French Guiana, 1660-1677.

MARTIJN M. VAN DEN BEL, JEANNE BRANCIER, ALEXANDRE COULAUD, LOLITA ROUSSEAU, JEAN SOULAT

Abstract

Many French maps from the eighteenth century show a ruined Dutch fortress situated on the right bank of the Lower Approuague River in modern French Guiana. These maps inspired the present author to pinpoint this fortress and perhaps dig a few test pits. The origins of this fortress are related to Balthazar Gerbier, a flamboyant person from Zeeland, who wanted to exploit an alleged silver mine at Commaribo, a mountain situated between the mouth of the Approuague and Oyapock River. The silver mine however was never found but a Dutch colony survived at the banks of the Approuague River managed by the Nieuwe Guiaensche Compagnie (NGC) or New Guiana Company from Amsterdam. In 1677, the French chased the last colonists from the Approuague River, and the latter only occupied the banks of that same river about 50 years later. They believed the Dutch had fortified the place, but our investigations show that this French tale is probably provoked by the presence of a large ring-ditch (2.5 hectares) that enclosed of the Dutch colony. However, this circular-shaped ditch but was not dug by the Dutch but by the Amerindians of the Approuague River about 1500 years before the arrival of the Dutch.

KEYWORDS: French Guiana, Seventeenth Century, West India Company, Colonial Archaeology, Pre-Columbian Archaeology, Atlantic History

Many French maps from the eighteenth century show a former Dutch fortress situated on the right bank of the Lower Approuague River in modern French Guiana. These maps inspired the present author to visit this river in 2012 in order to locate this fortress. Together with Dutch historian Lodewijk Hulsman and the aid of local guides we pinned down the location of this Dutch stronghold as we found much Dutch construction material and earthenware. This material convinced us to continue our survey in its surroundings and perhaps to dig a few test pits.

The origins of this Dutch implantation at the Approuague River are related to Balthazar Gerbier, a flamboyant person from Zeeland, who wanted to dig an alleged silver mine at Commaribo, a mountain situated between the mouth of the Approuague and Oyapock River. The silver was never found but the colony remained at the banks of the Approuague River managed by the Nieuwe Guiaensche Compagnie (NGC) or New Guiana Company from Amsterdam. In 1677, the French chased the last colonists from the Approuague River, and the latter only occupied the banks of that same river about 50 years later. Our archaeological investigations show that this French tale is probably provoked by the presence of an immense ring-ditch that encloses part of the colony. However, this

It's a Mirage. The Dutch Fortress of the Approuague River, French Guiana, 1660-1677.

circular-shaped ditch but was not dug by the Dutch but by the Amerindians of the Approuague River about 1500 years before the arrival of the Dutch (Figure 1).

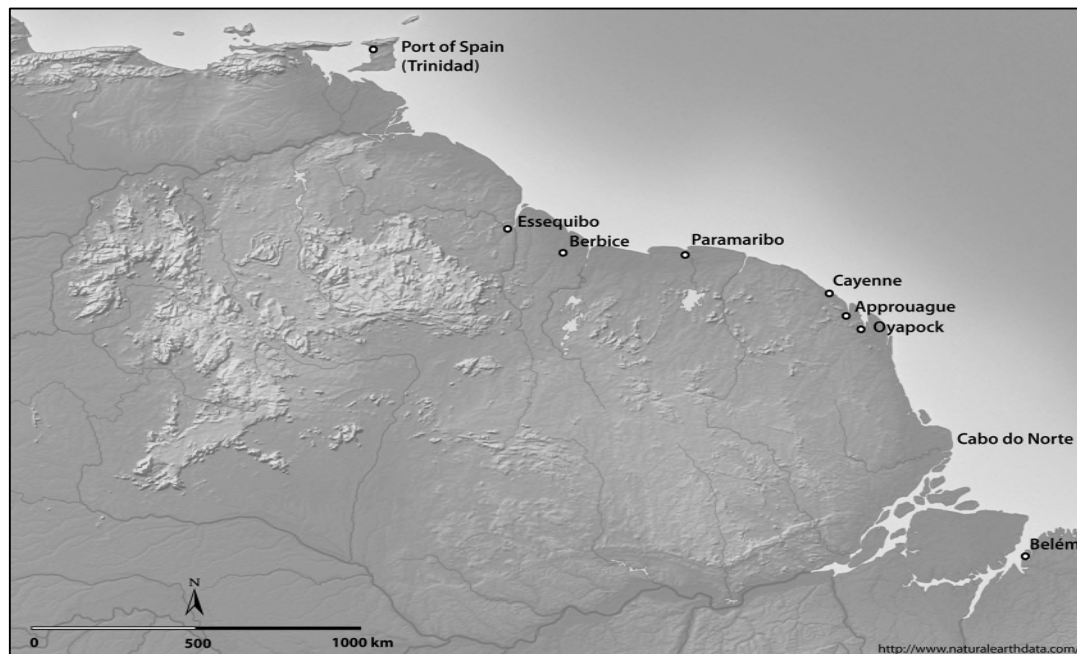


Figure 1. Map of the Guianas.

The link between this Dutch colony, the pre-Columbian site and French folklore is presented in this paper. First, we will first discuss the person of Balthazar Gerbier and the New Guiana Company. Then we will present the French documentation about the Dutch occupation followed by the archaeological data to unravel the mysteries about the Dutch fortress.

Balthazar Gerbier

The history of this Dutch fortress upon the Approuague River started in the second half of the 1650s when Balthazar Gerbier received a patent to start a colony in the Guianas or the Wild Coast.¹ The history of the Gerbier family is strongly related to the birth of the Dutch Republic as his father Antoine Gerbier, a protestant merchant, fled from northern France towards the Lowlands after the siege of Antwerp in 1581. He probably went to Middelburg with his family because his grandfather (also called Antoine) had commercial bonds with this Zeeland town where his daughter had married Pierre de Moucheron, an important merchant who traded in the Atlantic, notably in West Africa.²

When Antoine Gerbier arrived in Middelburg he found the network his family had maintained. The 12 March 1592, his son was born and given the name of his uncle, Balthazar who was witness of his baptism in the Walloon church of Middelburg. At the age of six, the large debts of his father disturb the relationship with De Moucheron's and his older brother takes him to Bordeaux. In 1615, he is back in the Lowlands and works for the Prince Maurice of Nassau. He has great writing and engraving

¹ See De Boer 1903a-b for the detailed history of this family. See also Van den Bel and Hulsman 2019, Chapter 4.

² For the De Moucheron family, see for example Stoppelaar 1901.

It's a Mirage. The Dutch Fortress of the Approuague River, French Guiana, 1660-1677.

talents and master's the art of defense. Two years later, he went to London as many Dutch Protestants did.³ He served a number of important people such as George de Villiers (Duke of Buckingham) and King Charles I as well as Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens. In 1631, he is finally ordained to represent Charles I at the court of Infanta Isabella in Brussels (Figure 2). He leads the life of a diplomat but must abandon his post due to complots and intrigues surrounding the court of Brussels and returns to France in 1643.



Figure 2. Engraving of Balthasar Gerbier painted by Antonij van Dyck (pinxit).

When he was in Brussels as a diplomat, he had made a journey to Spain where he obtained "writings" from a Spaniard concerning a gold mine in the eastern Guianas. With all possible means,

³ See Moens 1848.

It's a Mirage. The Dutch Fortress of the Approuague River, French Guiana, 1660-1677.

he tried to board the vessels of Charles Poncet de Brétigny bound for Cayenne in August 1643.⁴ Despite the fact that Gerbier gains much interest from Mazarin, Louis II de Bourbon, and the Duke of Longueville, the Dutch investors do not follow him up as rumors pop up saying that this children are Catholics and he must abandon his project to go to the Guianas. He goes back to London and takes part in various economic projects.⁵ In 1652, at the beginning of the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654), Cromwell asked him to leave for the Lowlands with a secret mission in order to search for a peaceful solution with regard to the war between both countries. However, according to Dutch historian De Boer, this voyage turns him into a true patriot, and he actually reveals the “supposed” plans of the English to wage war upon the Dutch. He is now banned from England.⁶

He tries to collaborate with Johan de Witt, *raadspensionaris* or councilor at the Court of Holland, but the latter is rather reluctant to cooperate with such a problematic individual. Gerbier draws back on his mining project and eventually finds funding for it back in his native Zeeland. Next to his mining project, he also wishes to find an agrarian colony because the earth of Guiana is “miraculously ‘fertile to grow cotton, sugar cane, and tobacco. He also wants to trade with the local Amerindians, as they “were tractable people who wanted to give the Christians a helping hand”.⁷

Getting Started



Figure 3. Map of eastern French Guiana.

⁴ For this infamous expedition, see for example Boyer 1654.

⁵ Dutch historian Kees Zandvliet suggested that Gerbier was on a contra-espionage mission because he had copied a few WIC maps featuring a silver mine in Céara, Brazil, in order to sell them to the English, Zandvliet 2000, p. 196-197.

⁶ Gerbier 1653. He wrote a pamphlet entitled “*les effect pernicious des méchants favoris et grands ministers d'état*” which was forbidden in England.

⁷ Gerbier 1659, p. 4-5.

The 23 November 1655, the vessel *De Liefde*, commanded by Hendrik Harman and having 24 canons and 60 men on board, departed the Guianas for the first time (Figure 3).

In May 1656, *De Liefde* returned to Rammekens with 100 tons of minerals. Unfortunately, the results of the analysis of the minerals, realized by different experts, were disappointing. Gerbier concluded that the captain did not sample the right place but his partners want to break the contract. He reaches out to the Court of Holland for help stating that he was not aware that *De Liefde* had left and demands for a second voyage of the same vessel, being an expedition commanded by himself in order to direct the mining activities. The verdict of the Court of Holland is in favor of Gerbier and he expresses his satisfaction in a brochure entitled "*Waerachtige verklaringe nopende de Goude en Silvere Mynen, waervan den ridder Balthasar Gerbier, Douvily gecontracteert heft met eenige geassocieerden in Zeeland*".⁸

The verdict coincides with the loss of Dutch Brazil in early 1654 and two Dutch colonies are founded at Cayenne by the WIC. After the dreadful French expedition of Royville in 1652, the Cayenne colony was abandoned by the French in December 1653, leaving the place available for the WIC who was in need of new territories. In 1655, a first patent was given to Jan Claesz Langendijck who settled in the vicinity of the former French fortress called Cépérou and now baptized fort Nassau. Another patent was given to David Nassy in 1659 but Langendijck did not allow him and his associates to install themselves near the fortress and they eventually opted for the Anse de Rémire where they founded their sugar plantations.

On 26 September 1658, Balthazar Gerbier had received his commission from the Lords xix to start a colony upon the mainland of South America between Cap Orange and the Wia River (today Mahury).⁹ A few months later, the 25 November 1658, Gerbier received his patent from the States General conceding him a patroonship of a Guiana colony.¹⁰ Amsterdam-based notary Emmanuel Lavello concluded the deed, which was also signed by captains Coenrad Helt and Otto Keije as witnesses. In 1659, Gerbier published another pamphlet in order to recruit more participants as the WIC wants to see quick results within four years.¹¹ He is also in need of supplementary funding so he approaches the New Guiana Company and signs a contract with them in April 1659.¹² This contract permitted the investors of the NGC to draw claims upon the patent: on the one hand, Gerbier had to invest 12,000 florins and work without pay for a period of three years whereas the NGC would invest 6000 florins in cash. Finally, if Gerbier would die, the NGC would pay the funeral and obtain the patent (Figure 4).

⁸ Gerbier 1657, "True statement concerning the gold and silver mines for which knight Balthasar Gerbier, Douvily, had contracted a few associates in Zeeland". Where Gerbier got his titles from remains unclear.

⁹ Gerbier 1653. He wrote a pamphlet entitled "*les effect pernicious des méchants favoris et grands ministers d'état*" which was forbidden in England.

¹⁰ Gerbier 1653. He wrote a pamphlet entitled "*les effect pernicious des méchants favoris et grands ministers d'état*" which was forbidden in England.

¹¹ Gerbier 1659.

¹² The origins of the NGC are unclear but this apparent new company may well be the product of one of the many merchant companies that were founded in the first half of the seventeenth century in Amsterdam, see Hulsman 2010.

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 Notaris v. v. te presentie van Capiteyn Otto
 Leye. ende Capiteyn Benraed Heer als getuyghly
 hier toe verfocht ende gebid.

Balthazar Gerbier Douuily
 Keije
 Johan Bull
 Anout Hellenans Hoff.
 Abraham Becker
 Pieter Blitters
 Stoffen van Schoonvoet
 Gerard Temmer
 Philips van Had. l. m.
 Quella Notaris

Figure 4. Last page of the contract between Gerbier and the Nieuwe Guiaansche Compagnie, NL-SAA 5075 2-989, p. 112.

The above-mentioned Keije, a former captain of the WIC forces in Dutch Brazil, would be the main enemy of Gerbier during the expedition. Keije is most certainly in favor of the project as he has written a famous prospectus entitled "Het waere onderscheit tusschen koude en warme landen" (Figure 5). In this short book, he compares the advantage of a colony such as Surinam (warm land) with the inconveniences of a colony such as Nieuw-Nederland (cold land). He also discusses the advantages to work African slaves instead of contract laborers¹³. The success of this publication permits Gerbier to recruit miners from Brunswick (Lower Saxon) and a chemist called Johannes Rhenanus. The latter, Keije and Rynier van Buren are members of the council of the future colony

¹³ Keije 1659. See also Den Heijer 2005.

authorized by the WIC. In August 1659 everybody is ready to depart for Guiana.¹⁴ In November 1659, Becker and Demmer, the directors of the NGC signed a contract with the Amsterdam Chamber of the WIC to buy 100 African slaves, or as many slaves as the WIC can transport to Cayenne, for the sum of $\frac{1}{3}$ of the total shipping price of the slaves. They have to pay in Amsterdam 150 florins per slave, being a higher sum than mentioned in the contract signed with Nassy in September 1659. The NGC guarantees the WIC they will use the slaves at their own colony, and they promise not to sell them somewhere else.¹⁵

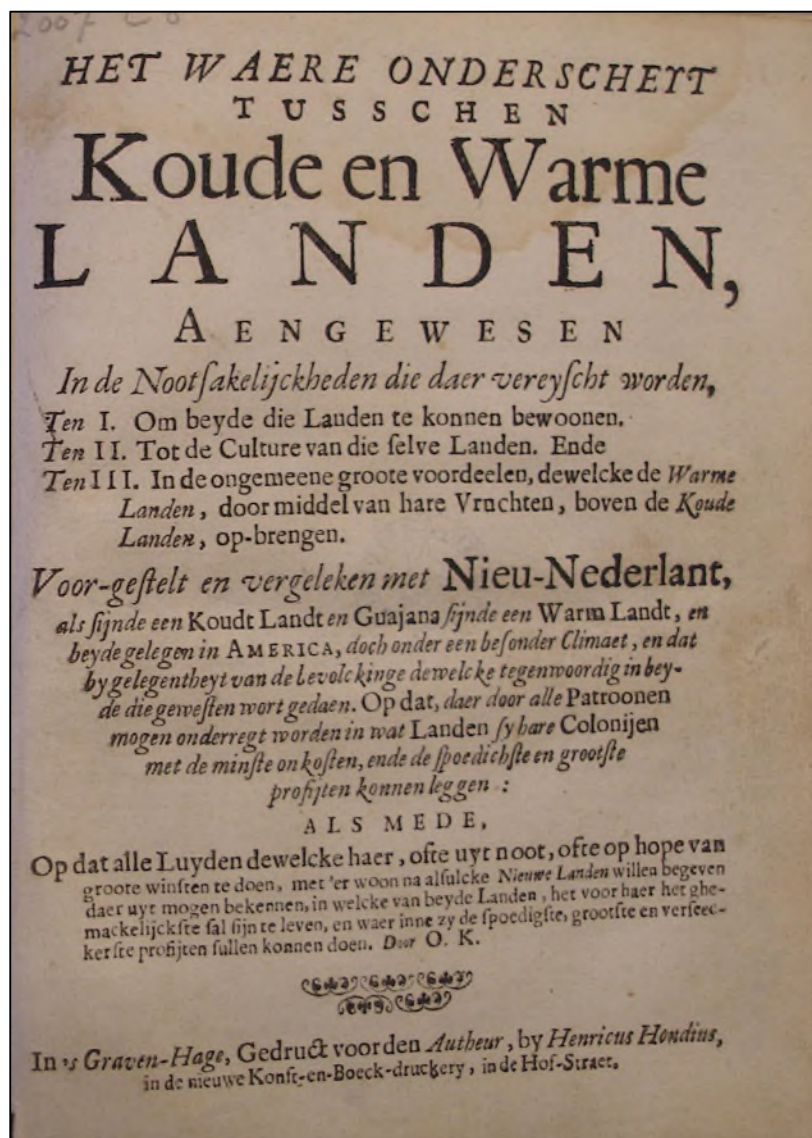


Figure 5. Title page of the booklet written by Otto Keye (1659).

¹⁴ Interestingly, in September the NGC signed a contract with the Jews Cohen and Luis of the Nassy colony to transport colonists to Cayenne on the vessel *Abrahams Offerande*; however, the deed does not mention the Gerbier colony nor the mine, see NL-SAA 5075 2207, f. 503-505 (16590922).

¹⁵ NL-SAA 5075 1309, f. 46-48 (16591110). This contract is probably the first official document stating the arrival of African slaves at Cayenne.

Things go awry

The Atlantic crossing was at least tumultuous with many conflicts about the objective of the expedition: whereas a group of colonists (led by Keije, Rhenanus and Van Buren) wants to start a plantation colony, Gerbier is eager to launch the mining of minerals instead. Apparently, the cohesion of the expedition was already lost at sea and Gerbier is quickly on his own as the plantation colonists form a majority in the council. In January 1660, the colonists disembark on the Approuague River at the foot of hillock, which is in need of some deforestation in order to start the agrarian colony. The hard labor provokes another scission, as a part of the colonists wants to leave and harbor themselves at Cayenne. When they arrived at Cayenne, they damaged the sugar cane fields of Jan Claesz Langendijck who thought that the Jews were responsible for the damage.¹⁶ Quarrels between Keije and Gerbier continue but Gerbier is still convinced to find the silver mine at mound *Commaribo*, better known today in French Guiana as Montagne d'Argent, and situated between the mouth of the Oyapock and Approuague River.

The arrival of the vessel *Eendracht* on 17 February 1660 provoked new complications for the expedition because new miners arrive for Gerbier. The captain brought the newcomers straightaway to Commaribo to start mining.¹⁷ Then, the captain waters his ship at Commaribo and takes his sloop to go to Cayenne but quickly visits Gerbier's camp upon the Approuague River. Keije and his henchmen now hold Gerbier in custody. The miners continue their work, but this is nearly impossible because of the incessant rains and despite the help of an Amerindian captain who shows them the potential deposits. Eventually, the miners give up and go to Cayenne leaving the colony in a dramatic state. Once back in Amsterdam, the miners tell the NGC directors that the captain of the *Eendracht* told them to dig at Commaribo and when Gerbier arrived three weeks later, he used his compass to indicate the miners where to dig. After one hour and some drinks in honor of the NGC directors, Gerbier left Commaribo and told Rhenanus to stay with them but left five days later. The miners declared that they had only found some iron ore, but no gold and silver. Later, Gerbier concluded (again) that they had not dug the right mountain.¹⁸ Once back in the Lowlands, Gerbier published a pamphlet with another version of the events also based on declarations of the miners. The latter stated that the council had prohibited Gerbier to direct the works and that the place they dug was rather shallow compared to the German mines. They also stated that Rhenanus, who proclaimed to be a specialist in mining, was not able to use his *slagroede*,¹⁹ which he abandoned at the Commaribo when he left, saying that he would give them 100 florins if they would find something.²⁰

Gerbier managed to escape from the claws of Keije on the Approuague River, went with his family to Cayenne, and hid in the house of Langendijck situated at the foot of the fortified hillock. The latter goes to the Approuague to find a resolution between the two parties but Keije, Rhenanus and a few others had followed Gerbier to Cayenne. They attacked the house of Langendijck where Catharina,

¹⁶ NL-SAA 5075 2889, f. 344-345 (16600510). Declaration by captain Cornelis Fransen of the vessel *Abrahams Offerande* upon his return in Amsterdam.

¹⁷ NL-SAA 5075 1714, f. 131 (16600217).

¹⁸ NL-SAA 5075 1714A, f. 131-132 (16600810).

¹⁹ A (forked) stick to "see" if there is water or minerals in the ground aka dowsing.

²⁰ Gerbier 1660. The complete interrogation can be found in the archives of notary Hector Friesma from Amsterdam, NL-SAA 5075 3068, f. 43-73 (16600903).

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the wife of Gerbier, was killed and two of his daughters were badly wounded during the skirmish (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Engraving by Gerbier (1660, p. 5) of the attack on his family in the house of governor Langendijck.

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When Langendijck was back in Cayenne, he apprehended Keije and sent him to the Netherlands. Gerbier also went back despite the fact he had sufficient victuals and trinkets for trade to sustain the colony at the Approuague.

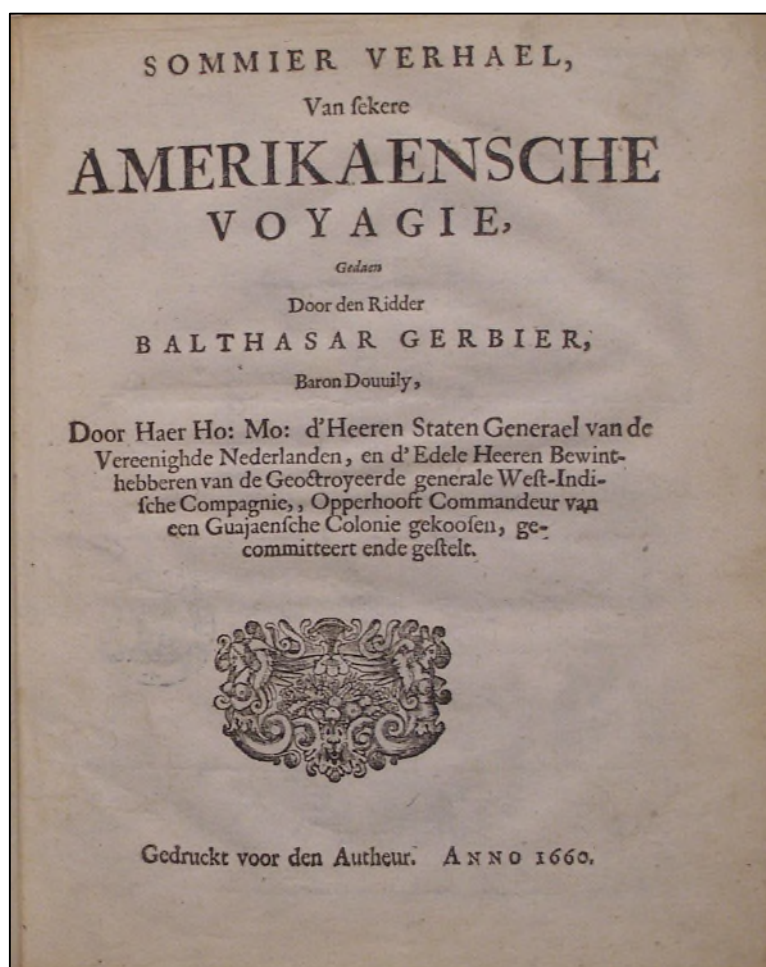


Figure 7. Title page of the booklet written by Gerbier (1660).

In August 1660, Gerbier faced in Amsterdam a delegation of NGC directors composed of Van Capelle, Hulft and Castelein. They accuse him of failing in his mission as the minerals he had brought with him were of no value as he was supposed to deliver according to the 1659 contract. However, Gerbier stated he was not responsible for this failure as the council held him prisoner and that he is willing to make an arrangement outside the court. Despite this offer, he finally transfers his rights of the patent and commissions to the NGC but also collaborates with the Court of Holland to transfer his patroonship.²¹ Gerbier also compiled a dossier with complaints against Keije called “Sommier verhael”, which he published in 1660 (Figure 7).²² At the end of this publication he suggests continuing the agrarian colony and does not mention any mining as the price for this gold fever was

²¹ NL-SAA 5075 2990, f. 289 (16600823). There is no information about the 6000 florins

²² Gerbier 1660. The complete interrogation can be found in the archives of notary Hector Friesma from Amsterdam, NL-SAA 5075 3068, f. 43-73 (16600903).

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too high, losing his wife in Cayenne. This booklet is of great importance as it probably features the first vivid image of the hamlet of Cayenne.

The Colony of the NGC



Figure 8. Detail of a map by M. Mel of Cayenne, Approuague and Oyapock Rivers, FR-BnF DCP GE SH 18 PF 163 DIV 2P 9 (1665). This map was drawn after the arrival of Lefebvre de la Barre à Cayenne in May 1664. The French settlement at Comaribo is a projection and never existed. One clearly sees the plantation of the Dutch (*Flamens*) on a small plateau on the right bank of the *Aproüaque* River. Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

The NGC sent more colonists to the Approuague River in October 1660. They gave a procuration to Cornelis Pijl and in case of absence or death to Mattheus Schouten and/ or Gouwe Cornelisz. Pijl has to take charge of five boys delivered by Pieter Cottel in Cayenne.²³ Nicolaes van Beeck, a merchant from Amsterdam, provides further information about the colony. He stated that Jacob Jansz Huijs, captain of the vessel *Vos*, as well as Antonij Casteleijn, director of the NGC, had signed a contract to transport 30 colonists to Cayenne in 1663. The NGC had to pay 30 florins for each passenger, which was the same price requested by the WIC.²⁴ In May 1664, the French boldly took over Cayenne despite the 1662 treaty and the upcoming war with the English.²⁵ Antoine Lefebvre, Sieur de la Barre, became the new governor of Cayenne when Colbert launched the French West Indian Company to control

²³ NL-SAA 5075 3145, f. 176-177 (16601027). The names of the boys were Isaack Jansz de Jager, Steven Matthijsz van Haland, Jan Jansz van Haerlem, Geert Gerritsz van Amsterdam and Henrick Roelofsz van Westvrieslant. The boys were probably taken from an orphanage. Cornelis Pijl witnessed for Gerbier during the interrogation, see NL-SAA 5075 3068, f. 43r (16600903).

²⁴ NL-SAA 5075 2885, f. 397B (16640820).

²⁵ Elzinga 1927; Van den Bel 2021.

commerce in the West Indies.²⁶ De la Barre acknowledged the presence of the Dutch colony upon the Approuague River.

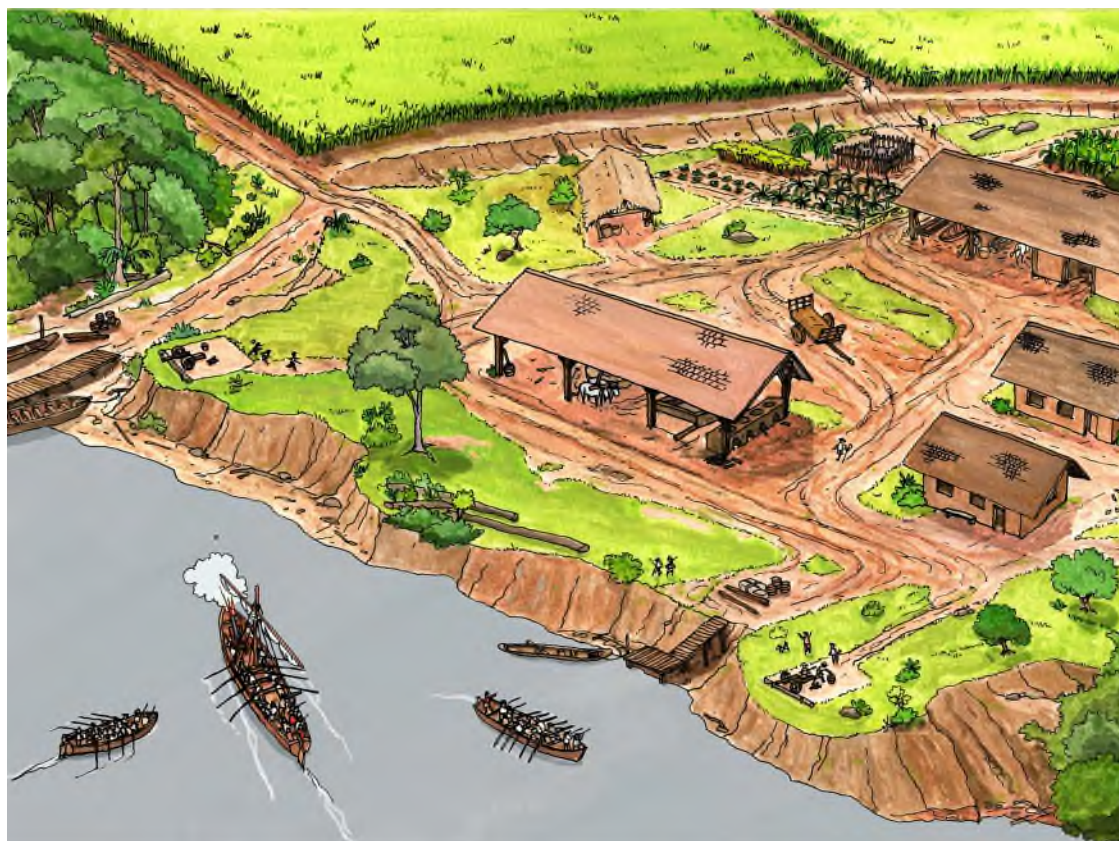


Figure 9. Artist impression of the English attack in 1665 on the colony of Parwon.

The NGC colony thrives next to the French colony in Cayenne and other Dutch vessels reach the colony.²⁷ The declaration made by Van Mildert and Janserius shows that captain Simon Pietersz Vlaer of the vessel *Wapen van Hoorn*, transported a cargo towards the colony of the Approuague in June 1665 (Figure 9)²⁸. The NGC clearly wants to maintain de colony of Approuague after the loss of Cayenne; they appoint Isaack van Mildert as director of the colony being responsible for all the slaves,

²⁶ See Mims 1912.

²⁷ "Nous n'avons encore jetté aucune Colonie dans Aprouaque: à l'arrivée des premiers renforts d'Hommes, nous ne manquerons de le faire; & je ne doute point que les Holandois, qui se voyent abandonnez de la Compagnie d'Oüestindes, ne quittent entierement cette Riviere, lors que les François iront. Il faut monter sept lieuës au dessus de la colonie Holandoise, pour choisir de bonnes Terres, & qui soient saines...", Lefebvre 1666, p. 42.

²⁸ NL-SAA 5075 2896A, f. 657-658 (16650818); Zwartz 1927, p. 528. These documents show that French historian Jean-François Artur is wrong by stating that the Dutch colony upon the Approuague River was abandoned, see Artur in Polderman 2002, p. 194-195. We may also point out that the NGC also invested in the trade with the Lesser Antilles as can be deduced from a contract signed by the NGC and Pieter Bartolomeusz Hases, captain of the vessel *De Hoop* for Claude Blot of Amsterdam, bound for Terra firma and West Indies, see HCA 30 1052, Document 1.1 (16641228).

goods, victuals and minerals. Van Mildert has to pay his own voyage towards the Approuague and present his contract to one Gerard Gorris. The property of both men is now added to those of the NGC in order to invest in the production of sugar, tobacco, cotton, annatto, and indigo. The contract is valid for 12 years and eventually Goris becomes director and Van Mildert vice-director.²⁹

In 1665, the second Anglo-Dutch war ignites between the Dutch Republic and England and transforms the West Indies in a battleground. William Byam, the governor of Surinam, sends a war fleet under command of John Scott to attack and pillage the Dutch colonies along the Wild Coast such as Berbice, Pomeroun and Essequibo.³⁰ Although Cayenne was not attacked, the English under command of William Cowell attacked the newly made French bastion at Sinnamary River, whereas captain Peter Wroth attacked the Dutch colony at the Approuague River which was producing sugar by means of slave labor:

In the month of March, I impowered & ordered Captain Peter Wroth with a small party of men and vessels to attacque ye Dutch Colony at Apperawacka; which was effectually done, their Armes, Slaves, Copper &c brought hither, & that small Colony destroyed.³¹

The colonists try to maintain their colony after the pillage by the English, but the blow appears to be fatal. In 1668, John or Johan Tressry reported that Van Mildert, commander of the Approuague colony, had abandoned the latter colony and had settled in Suriname together with 7 or 8 men.³² Apparently, Van Mildert had taken over the direction of the colony, possibly after the leave or death of Gorris during the English attack. Supposedly, Van Mildert had to wait for a while in the destroyed colony as the English and Dutch were battling over Suriname. After the Treaty of Breda in 1667, the Dutch obtain the Surinam colony now directed by the States of Zeeland under command of Abraham Crijnssen and John Tressry as a secretary. The latter asked the governor to prepare the grand sloop in order to visit the Amazon River to catch manatees and to trade with the Amerindians of that area. When returning to Paramaribo, the sloop will make a stopover at the "Abruake" River in order to transport people who want to leave.³³

Whether the colony was abandoned is unknown, but many historians generally refer to a patent given to the Count Friedrich Casimir from Hanau by the States General to found a colony upon the

²⁹ NL-SAA 5075 2896A, f. 657-658 (16650818). The captain declared at the demand of Abraham Drago, planter in Rémire, that he was carrying two letters for David Nassy in his ship.

³⁰ Harlow 1925, p. 200 and 203.

³¹ Harlow 1925, p. 200. Another anonymous document, attributed to John Scott, stated that the attack upon the Dutch colonies started in March 1665: "In the month of March 1665, Lieutenant General Byam in pursuance of an order from Francis Lord Willoughby Commissionated one Capt. Peeter Wrath (a Kentish Gentleman) with a party of men and Vessells to Attaque the Dutch Colony of Aprowaco, which was prosecuted with Successe. In August following, Capt. William Cowell from Suranam tooke the French Collonie of Sinnamare, sacked the Place and brought them away Prisoners", see Harlow 1925, p. 145-146. According to French sources, the Sinnamary fortification guarded by M. Noel is attacked in September 1665, see FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 1, f. 99-104 (16650908). See also Clodoré 1671, Chapter 24 for the Dutch presence upon the Approuague River and the French stronghold at Sinnamary River.

³² NL-ZAM 2.1 2035.1, Document 22, p. 1-7 (16680600). Isaac van Mildert became an important planter and settled upon the Commewijne River, Commewije River, see Wetering 2009, p. 19-20; Zijlstra 2015, p. 1-2 and 142. See also the map entitled "*Caerte ofte vertooning van de Rivieren van Suriname en Commewijne*" from 1673 to be found in the Leupe collection of the National Archives, NL-HaNA 4.VEL 1666.

³³ NL-ZAM 2.1 2035.1, Document 124, p. 5 (16690318).

Wild Coast; the project however failed to succeed.³⁴ This patent is in fact the patent given to Gerbier, and transferred to the NGC and finally sold to Lebecker, procurator of the German count in Holland. The negotiations between the NGC and Count Friedrich started in 1668. The investors of the NGC give a procuration to Harman Claesz, Philippe Dorville and Jan van Pelt to sell the patent of the Approuague colony with all its belongings.³⁵ The next negotiations débouché in the approbation of the transfer of the patent by the WIC of Amsterdam.³⁶ The States General execute the actual transfer on 24 July 1669. Jan Pelt and Jan Bastista Lieffrinck made the final agreement in November 1669 during a meeting held in Le Place Royale in the Kalverstraat, Amsterdam. It becomes clear that the States General, who already had control of the colony, had forced the NGC investors to sign the contract even before the concession was sold to them. The count of Hanau was fooled.³⁷

The colony had been abandoned apparently as we have no information for the next six years. In 1672, war breaks out between France and the Dutch Republic, and the latter evacuates the majority of its colonies in the Guianas. However, the former governor of Cayenne, Quirijn Spranger (who replaced Langendijck in 1663), proposed a project to the States General in March 1675 to colonize the Approuague or Oyapock Rivers instead of another colony on the island of Tobago. This project suggests that the Dutch had abandoned the Approuague colony in 1675.³⁸ In April 1676, Gilles de Bont and Johannes Mazuer signed a contract in Amsterdam to start a colony at the Approuague or Oyapock River aided by 25 Amerindians or Africans³⁹. Trade with the Amerindians, as specified in the contract, has to be made by exchanging metal tools and glass beads for annatto and gums.⁴⁰ There is no further information on the success of De Bont's expedition but it is evident that the French, commanded by Chevalier de Lézy, attacked and conquered the colony upon the Approuague and Oyapock River.⁴¹ According to the officer Desgranges his lieutenant came back from the Approuague River with 4 inhabitants as well as 10 to 12 Dutch men. He was sent there to take the fortress called *Guillaume* [Willem III of Orange-Nassau] but in fact it was only a plantation with 32 men and 5 women

³⁴ Goslinga 1971, p. 227; Den Heijer 2005, p. 86.

³⁵ NL-SAA 5075 1729, f. 539 (16680609).

³⁶ *Gründlicher Bericht* 1669; NL-HaNA 1.05.01.01 18A (16690619).

³⁷ Another German project in French Guiana also met with trouble and was never executed. There is for example the project of Johann Philipp van Schönborn and Ferdinand Marie von Witteslbach, palatin electors of Mainz and Bavaria respectively, to start a colony in Cayenne according to Dufresne their representative, see FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 1, f. 195-210 (1665).

³⁸ NL-HaNA 1.01.02 5769, f. 10-24 (16750920); NL-HaNA 1.11.03.69, Documents 10-26 (dossier Ten Hove). Interestingly, the Jesuit fathers Jean Grillet and François Bechamel who visited the interior of Guiana in do not mention Dutchmen or Europeans at the lower reaches of the Approuague when they passed by in 1674, Grillet and Bechamel dans *Voyage au tour du monde*, 1716, Vol. 2, p. 201-246. See also P. Grenand 2006.

³⁹ Johannes Mazuer used to work at the island of Saint Christopher as an agent for Abraham Six and Arnoudt van der Beecke, see NL-HaNA 2.22.24 HCA30 1055, Documents 9.5 and 9.6 (16641210).

⁴⁰ NL-SAA 5075 2849, f. 869-870 (16760415). One Matijs Draver was authorized to replace De Bont in case of his death.

⁴¹ *"J'ai appris par les Indiens depuis peu de jours qu'il avait 6 navires hollandais dans la rivière d'Wyapoque, 15 lieues au vent de cette île, chargés de familles pour y faire un établissement. Mais s'il vous plaît Monseigneur nous envoyer un secours considérable on fera les efforts pour le détruire, ne pouvant pas présentement rien entreprendre avec 60 soldats dont plusieurs sont malades et 80 habitants tant bons que méchants. Si l'établissement qu'ils avaient fait à Aprouague n'avait été ruiné, ils auraient habité cette rivière,"* FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 1, f. 121r (16770306).

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who had died during the attack except for the son of the governor who jumped into the river⁴². Apricius founded the latter colony in January 1677 as the Dutch had conquered Cayenne in May 1676 under command of Jacob Benckes. The French however had with general D'Estrées in December 1676 to take Cayenne back. Apricius was already on his way to the Oyapock when the D'Estrées took Cayenne, but the colonists had heard from the Amerindians that the French had taken Cayenne and Approuague.⁴³

The Site Location

Several European mapmakers have identified the Dutch colony at the Approuague River on their maps made by Johannes Vingboons (1663), the geographer M. Mel in the book of Antoine Lefebvre (1666) and Pierre du Val (1677) (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Three details of maps featuring the Dutch colony upon the Approuague River.

Maps clearly show that this colony is a habitation or plantation site and not a fortress.⁴⁴ The colony is situated at the right bank of the Lower Approuague River and upstream of an affluent, which should be the modern-day Kourouaï River (Figures 11 et 12). Despite the many documents relating to this

⁴² FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 2, f. 92 (16770219): “son lieutenant a esté renvoyé avec 4 habitans et 10 a 12 flamands en revenant dans une pirogue de Proüage ou il avoit esté envoyé par M. de Lezy pour prendre le fort Guillaume. Ce fort n'est qu'une habitation de 32 hommes et 5 femmes qui ont pery aussy excepté le filz du gouverneur qui s'est sauvé a la nage. Ce malheur est arrivé parce que son lieutenant aura embarqué les meilleures armes des coffres de traitte et tout ce quil y avoit de bon”. This folio was found in the second register considering the eighteenth century.

⁴³ De Myst 1678; Apricius 1676; Muller 2001.

⁴⁴ NL-HaNA 1.01.02 5769, f. 10-24 (16750920); NL-HaNA 1.11.03.69, Documents 10-26 (dossier Ten Hove). Interestingly, the Jesuit fathers Jean Grillet and François Bechamel who visited the interior of Guiana in do not mention Dutchmen or Europeans at the lower reaches of the Approuague when they passed by in 1674, Grillet and Bechamel dans *Voyage au tour du monde*, 1716, Vol. 2, p. 201-246. See also P. Grenand 2006.

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colony, there is not a proper name for it and the colony is generally referred to as the colony on the *Apperwak* or other ways of writing its name. However, a Spanish memoir written in 1674 by the Marquis de Varinas proposes the name *Parboin* for the Dutch colony upon the Approuague River:

*y llega hasta el Rio Caprebaca 20 leguas à sotavento del mencionado Rio. Aqui tienen otra cuidad los Olandeses que llaman Parboin en donde cojen los mismos frutos que en la antecedente; es tierra rica, y fertil una y otra, y de grande comercio; aqui, no tienen Castillo ninguno.*⁴⁵



Figure 11. Three details of maps featuring the Dutch colony or fortress upon the Approuague River (Figure 11a).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ E-BRM Ms 2583, Vol. 2, f. 314v.

⁴⁶ NL-HaNA 1.01.02 5769, f. 10-24 (16750920); NL-HaNA 1.11.03.69, Documents 10-26 (dossier Ten Hove). Interestingly, the Jesuit fathers Jean Grillet and François Bechamel who visited the interior of Guiana in do not mention Dutchmen or Europeans at the lower reaches of the Approuague when they passed by in 1674, Grillet and Bechamel dans *Voyage au tour du monde*, 1716, Vol. 2, p. 201-246. See also P. Grenand 2006.

Interestingly, this name corresponds to *Parwony*, the name written next to a sort of enclosure on the map drawn by Arent Roggeveen (1675) and by Claes Jansz Vooght (1685). The latter probably copied his Guiana maps from Roggeveen. We consider *Parwony* as the most plausible name for this colony and location.

Under command of Governor Claude d'Orvilliers, the Approuague and Oyapock Rivers were colonized in the early eighteenth century in order to expand the French colony. In 1716, captain Gabaret de Lerondière made a reconnaissance upon the latter rivers as the French had not frequented this area (officially) since the chasing of the Dutch settlers in 1677 (see above). In his report, Gabaret makes an excellent description of the Dutch fort, clearly describing a natural ditch around the hillock:

Lendroit ou estoit le fort de prouac est une Roche qui forme un Islet assez escarpé ou la Nature a fait une Espece de fossé aux deux Tiers dutour de cet Islet, et puis il y a un fonds qui finit le tour dudit Islet ou l'hiver il y doit avoir 3 a 4 pieds d'Eau l'on pourra faire passer l'Eau au tour du bourg et du fort, il nest pas beaucoup Grand, il y a assez de terre pour faire un Jolly fort et y comprendre le Bourg avec.

Il commande la Riviere par sa hauteur il n y a qu'une portée de boucanier d'une terre a l'autre je laye prouvé. Il y a la pointe du Ouest a une demy portée de Canon un petit banc de sable tout a terre ou il n y a que 2 brasse et ½ de mer haute ledit banc en hors de la Rade est le moindre fonds de toute la Rade.⁴⁷

He further stated that M. Courant, an important planter at Cayenne, had frequently visited this area and assured the reader "*que le Roi y tireroit un avantage considérable des etablissemens qu'on pouroit faire dans ces rivieres dont l'entrée est aisée a fortifier suivant ces plans et que le terrain est bien meilleur que celui des environs de Cayenne*".⁴⁸ Gabaret also heard "*que la Riviere d'Aprouague avoit été coneedée il y a longtemps a M. Houel*" and one had to demand permission to the King in order to dispose of this fertile land as "*on peut etablir plus de 150 sucreries sur celui de la riviere d'aprouage*". Finally, Gabaret had counted 166 individuals dwelling upon these rivers when he arrived. D'Orvilliers decided to start an outpost with officers, soldiers and black slaves but financial means were lacking, and the project was abandoned in 1719.⁴⁹ A map drawn by one "HDMC" in 1724 does not show any plantations upon the Approuague River except for the Flemish fort (Figure 12a).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 9, f. 293v (17161231).

⁴⁸ FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 10, f. 33 (17170608).

⁴⁹ The 1709 census of the entire French colony did not feature inhabitants on the Approuague River, FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 6, f. 93v-100.

⁵⁰FR-BnF DCP GE SH 18 PF 163 DIV 4 P 10.

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Figure 12. Three details of maps featuring the Dutch fortress upon the Approuague River.

The inhabitants of these rivers encountered by Gabaret were probably mainly adventurers, former soldiers, outlaws, and slave traders called *traiteurs*. They, often living together with an Amerindian woman and sometimes one or two slaves, had small plantations growing victuals, tobacco, annatto, indigo, and later also cacao and coffee.⁵¹ In 1731, governor Lamirande wanted to construct a military

⁵¹ Hurault 1972, Chapters 5-6.

outpost upon the Approuague River because the Jesuit father Aimé Lombard aspired to found a mission upon this river too as they had done previously upon the Oyapock River⁵². Lombard was highly interested because the Approuague River harbored many Aruã, Amerindians who had fled the mouth of the Amazon and apparently had a different language and mores with regard to the Galibis⁵³. Lombard stated furthermore:

La seule chose que je souhaiterois est que je fus autoriser de la Cour pour former cet etablissement a Arouak en y rassemblant tous les indiens chrestiens qui nous viennent des missions portugaises lesquels me semblent venir sur les terres de France que pour apostasier et quitter nostre saine religion dont ils ne font plus aucun exercice des quils ont mis les pieds dans le Pays.⁵⁴

However, the new governor D'Albon was weary of such a project, as he believed the environment to be too harsh to sustain such mission. Lombard did not agree but the Jesuits started to clear the forest around the fortress Saint Louis of the Oyapock in 1735 to found their mission, thus abandoning the Approuague River.⁵⁵

The 1737 census of the Approuague River counts seven small plantations (table 1). These plantations can be found at the map made by François Duvillard (1738) following the instructions of M. Régis, commander at fort Saint-Louis of the Oyapock River.⁵⁶ This report also stressed the importance to found a fortress upon the Approuague River, referring to the old Dutch fort being so strategically situated:

A deux lieues dans la riviere il y a un illet qui a environ une lieue de longueur et quatre vints a cent pas de largeur ou on pouroit placer un fort pour defendre aux navires l'entrée de la riviere. Le chenel est aupres de cette islet et les batiments sont exposés au feu du canon, a 3 quart de lieues de cet islet il y en a un autre qui est presque de la meme grandeur. Le chenel n'est pas si pres <que> du 1^r mais le canon peut porter facilement sur les navires qui passeroient il y en a un autre qui est vis-à-vis « le fort des flamands », les hollandois avoient ainsi nomé le fort quils avoient fait sur cette riviere et le chenel est entre l'islet et le fort et par consequent un navire seroit entre deux feux, l'emplacement du fort des flamands est a 4 lieues dans la riviere au milieu dune grande anse dont le terrain domine sur les autres cironvoisins et l'islet qui est vis-à-vis les hollandois y faisoient carenner leurs navires.⁵⁷

⁵² Polderman 2004, p. 359.

⁵³ Verwimp 2011, p. 286; FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 13, f. 13-15r (17331115). See also Lombard's letter from 11 April 1733 published by Vissière and Vissière 1993, p. 324-328.

⁵⁴ FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 13, f. 261-262 (17340903).

⁵⁵ Verwimp 2011, p. 278. En 1725 le gouverneur avait fait une demande d'y construire une chapelle et le père Fauque s'y jette dessus et y va en 1727. N'oublions pas qu'en 1715 il a été décidé de construire un fort sur l'Oyapock qui verra le jour que dix ans plus tard en 1726 suite aux manques de fonds financiers (*ibid.*, p. 275).

⁵⁶ FR-BnF DCP GE SH 18 PF 164 DIV 7 P 4-1 D 738.

⁵⁷ FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 17, f. 383.

Table 1. Extract of the 1737 census of Guyane concerning the Rivière de Prouac quarters.

Plantation	Patronyme	First name	Birth place	Color	Age	State
Les Trois mornes	Burgaud	Jean		Mulâtre	52	Marié
	épouse. Victoire	Jeanne		Blanc	41	Mariée
		François		Métis		
Cap St Pierre	Bossou / Bousson	Pierre		Nègre	55	Marié
	Ep. Marie		Guyane	Indienne	25	Mariée
	Garçon		Guyane	Sacatra	7	
	Garçon		Guyane	Sacatra	5	
Cap St Jean	Marzac / Marzard	Jean	Guyane	Métis unid.	40	Marié
	Ep. Agathe Rosalie		Guyane	Indienne	40	Mariée
	Garçon			Métis	14	
	Garçon			Métis	9	
	Fille			Métisse	12	
	Fille			Métisse	6	
St Paul	Seigneur dit Décampe	Paul	Paris	Blanc	40	Marié
	Ep. Bosson	Marie-Gertrude		Mulâtre	22	Mariée
	Garçon		Guyane	Métis	4 mois	
Paracarou	Pierre		Guyane	Indien	40	
St Pierre	Burgos	Pierre		Blanc ?	49	
Ste Marguerite	Auvergne dit Saint-Brie, veuve, née Devillions	Marie	Artois	Blanc	48	Veuve
	Fille	Fanchette	Guyane	Unid.	14	
	Fille	Marie	Guyane	Unid.	11	

Previously, Duvillard (1727), traiteur and storekeeper of Saint-Louis, noted on another map that the Dutch fort was “erased”.⁵⁸ Royal geographer D’Anville (1729)⁵⁹ could have picked up this kind of information as he stated that the Flemish fortress was in ruins and inhabited by one Caparou (Figure 11b).⁶⁰ The latter is probably an Amerindian from the Lower Amazon River as many had fled this

⁵⁸ FR-BnF DCP GE SH 18 PF 164 DIV 7 P 4-1 D 738.

⁵⁹ FR-BnF DCP GE DD-2987 (9568). It states: *fort des Flamans ruiné et le carbet de Caparou*

⁶⁰ An anonymous journal without date but probably from the beginning of the eighteenth century, stated that the author had spent one night with an Amerindians nation *dwelling* upriver of the Dutch fort during his voyage

area to avoid attacks by above-mentioned French *traiteurs* and Portuguese slave traders called *bandeirantes*. The Jesuits (1741)⁶¹, who had founded multiple missions upon the Oyapock River and beyond, produced a map of their missions in the area between the Maroni and Parou Rivers, with a fortress-symbol placed between the “Aprouaque” and “Ikoroy” Rivers and referring to the “fort des Flamans”. The legacy of the Dutch colony was by now firmly anchored on local and national levels. We could describe more maps with similar information, but this seems redundant. There is however one map that needs further discussion here as it represents a drawing of the Dutch fort at site level.

After the implantation of the French on the Oyapock River, the eastern part of the colony grows slowly but steadily and Guyane is nothing more than another colonial backwater of the entire French empire despite all its possible treasures and resources. However, the Seven Years War (1756–1763) put the colony in the national spotlight, marking without doubt its history. According to governor Gilbert Guillouet d’Orvilliers in a letter written 3 August 1762 to Étienne-François de Choiseul, chef of the government of Louis XV, the governor stated that Guyane was nothing more than “*une poignée d’habitants qui par leur petit nombre peuvent à peine porter le nom de peuplade*”.⁶² France ceded many colonies in the Americas and Choiseul handpicked Guyane to be the next prosperous colony. Inspired by planter Jean-Antoine Brûletout, chevalier de Préfontaine, and the Turgot brothers an agrarian plan is mounted to install 12 000 white colonists in the western plains of Guyane. This mission, better known as the Kourou Mission, was a total failure for the King and Guyane.⁶³

For this mission, 15 April 1762, lieutenant colonel of the dragons Jean-Pierre de Béhague was sent to Guyane, to take charge of the troops in Cayenne and reconnoiter the country.⁶⁴ He wrote a *Prospectus pour établir la Guianne* containing a detailed description of the Approuague River, which, he believed, should be the center of a future colony. He identified the “platform where the Dutch had started” as the ideal place to build the warehouses of the King.⁶⁵ Then governor Étienne-François Turgot sent lieutenant-colonel Louis-Thomas Jacau de Fiedmont towards the Apparouague River to start the construction of the warehouses “*sur le terrain du plateau appelé vulgairement le fort (l’endroit choisi par les hollandois lorsqu’ils tenterent de s’établir sur la riviere) et au confluent de mataruine*”.⁶⁶ Despite these efforts, the project was abandoned.

upon the Approuague River: “*jay visité plusieurs habitations que j’ay [trouvé des] tres belles et les terrains parfaitement bons, jay [...] ce jour la couchés chez une nation indienne qui est plassée audessus du fort des flamants quo’on nomme marceonnes*”, FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 91, Document 67, f. 4v.

⁶¹ FR-BnF DCP GE SH 18 PF 164 DIV 7 P 4-1 D 738.

⁶² FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 25, f. 53 (17620803).

⁶³ The publication by Préfontaine entitled simply *Maison rustique* (1763) is a handbook how to live perfectly in the Neotropics of Guyane. Today we would probably say “Guyane for dummies”.

⁶⁴ Michel 1989, p. 15. Voir aussi Froidevaux 1892.

⁶⁵ FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 26, f. 122v (1763). Here, the Mataruine is probably the actual Mataroni River where they would construct another building. Interestingly, this document also mentions the possibility to dig a canal between the Oyapock and Approuague Rivers twenty years before the digging of the canal between the Approuague and Kaw.

⁶⁶ FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 27, f. 85 (1764).



Figure 13. Detail of a map drawn by J.-C. Dessingy (1763) of the Lower Approuague River, FR-ANOM 14 DFC 99A. Courtesy Archives outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence.

After the Kourou disaster, De Béhague governed the colony and asked Julien-Antoine Dubuc du Ferret, deputy of Martinique, to make an economic study of Guyane.⁶⁷ The latter visits the Oyapock and Approuague Rivers to see “what profits can be taken there”. He himself would like to install himself at the Approuague River for this matter.⁶⁸ The 1763 census of the Kaw and Approuague quarters counted only 32 whites and 227 enslaved men and women.⁶⁹

The beautiful map of the Approuague River drawn by Joseph-Charles Dessingy in 1763 shows numerous plantations upriver where the higher grounds begin (Figure 12c and 13).⁷⁰ We also see a large plateau with a fortress-symbol outlined at its extremity and saying that this “Place is suitable for the establishment of a fortress”. De Béhague also made a nautical map of the Lower Approuague featuring an alignment along the border of the plateau, suggesting possibly the presence of a rampart or parapet or other types of defensive works.⁷¹ He also made a detailed plan of the plateau when he

⁶⁷ According to the French historians Bernadette and Philippe Rossignol 2016, p. 15, this person is Sieur Dubuc Dufferret, deputy of Martinique who is inclined to have his nobility enlisted at the Superior Council of Guyane. He is member of a noble family from Martinique. He has a brother, called Jean-Baptiste, who is also deputy.

⁶⁸ FR-ANOM C¹⁴ 37, f. 248 (1768). After his visit in the western parts of Guyane, De Béhague continues his journey in the east and even visits Surinam, see FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 39, f. 240 (17690123).

⁶⁹ FR-ANOM COL C¹⁴ 45, f. 398 (1763).

⁷⁰ FR-ANOM 14 DFC 99A.

⁷¹ FR-ANOM 14 DFC 112A.

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visited the place with the before mentioned Dubuc in order to find a suitable place for the construction of a stronghold (Figure 14).⁷²



Figure 14. Map of Dutch fortress where the French government wanted to build a military post.

At the extremity of the plateau where Dessingy indicated the fortress, we see the projection of regularly distributed square plots as well as, in a slightly different orientation, a few rows of rectangular shaped plots. The legend of the map gives fortunately further explanation: Les quarrés jaunes indiquent la disposition déterminée par Mr de Behague pour l'alignement des maisons qui est marqué par des piquets enterrés qui doivent [être laissés]. Les alignements ponctués représentent les bâtiments provisionnels qu'il y a fait élever, et dont l'établissement a la teste duquel Mr Dubuc est, [s'estimer] aujourd'hui en possessions. Interestingly, we also see a high cross drawn on an isolated part of the plateau which probably indicates a cemetery, but it is unclear to which plantation this cemetery belongs. It could be the cemetery for the surrounding inhabitants.

We must point out the large, annular feature that partially surrounds and excludes this extreme part of the plateau. According to our knowledge, this is probably the first representation of a pre-Columbian ring-ditched site, better known in French Guiana as *montagnes couronnées*. This archaeological feature, dug nearly 2000 years ago, probably made the inhabitants of the Approuague believe that the Dutch had built a fortification and that this ditch were the remnants of it. About 10 years later, the Approuague quarter would get the attention it deserved with the foundation of the

⁷² FR-BnF DCP GE SH 18 PF 164 DIV 7 P 6-1 (1764) and FR-ANOM 14 DFC 148A (1765).

Approuague Company in 1776. The aim of this company was to develop the colony by draining the swampy areas of the Lower Approuague River with the help of African slaves.⁷³ The arrival of the Swiss engineer Samuel Guisan speeded up the economic development of the swamplands in Guyane. The latter had spent many years in Surinam to learn from the Dutch how to exploit the lowlands and make polders. Guisan started his works in 1782 with the construction of the major plantation *Le Collège* and founded the village of Guisambourg as the center of this new part of Guyane at the confluence of the Kourouaï and Approuague Rivers.⁷⁴

Further description of the anthology of the Lower Approuague River is not needed here for the sake of this paper knowing that the fortress was not mentioned anymore on nineteenth century maps (Figure 15).⁷⁵ Of final interest however is the introduction of Watt steam machines on Approuague plantations of which one is destined to the plantation called *La Jamaïque* owned by M. Lagrange, Favard and Mathy.⁷⁶ The latter plantation is situated between Guisambourg and the fort. We top off this historical part with a final description by the geographer Jacques-Nicolas Bellin who provided an interesting description of the site we excavated in 2016 what initially made us leave for the Approuague River in 2012 to locate this site (Figure 16).



Figure 15. Map showing the royal road from Cayenne to Oyapock and the river crossing.

⁷³ FR-ANOM COL A 15, f. 409 and FR-ANOM COL F² A 11. However, there is little material to determine the faith of this company. The planter M. Macaye made actually the first polder tentative in French Guiana, see Le Roux 1994, Vol. 2, p. 290.

⁷⁴ Guisan 2012.

⁷⁵ FR-ANOM 14 DFC 984bisB.

⁷⁶ Cazelles 2012; Hanriot 2013.



Figure 16. Map by S. Bellin (1763, p. 170) of the Lower Approuague River.

A deux lieues de la Riviere de Cousarie, du même côté, on voit sur les bords de l'Aprouack les vestiges du Fort que les Hollandois y avoient bâti lorsqu'ils tenterent de s'établir sur cette Rivière: c'est un terrain élevé de quarante à cinquante pieds, entouré d'un fossé avec un puits; le reste est entierement ruiné: on y voit encore quantité de Citronniers & d'Orangers qu'ils avoient plantés aux environs. Les vaisseaux remontent jusques-là avec facilité, & mouillent par quatre & cinq brasses d'eau bon fond de sable & de vase, assez près du rivage pour s'amarrer à terre. Au-dessus de cet endroit la Riviere commence à n'avoir plus tant de largeur ni de profondeur: elle reçoit à droite & à gauche un grand nombre de Criques ou de petites Rivieres qui arrosent le terrain & le rendent tres fertile. La pêche du Lamentin & de la Tortue y est très abondante.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Bellin 1763, p. 170-171.

The 2016 excavations

Today, the Dutch fort is unknown to the local population. The place is not inhabited but known as *Le cimetière de la Jamaïque* and served as the cemetery for the people living on the afore-mentioned plantation (Figure 17).

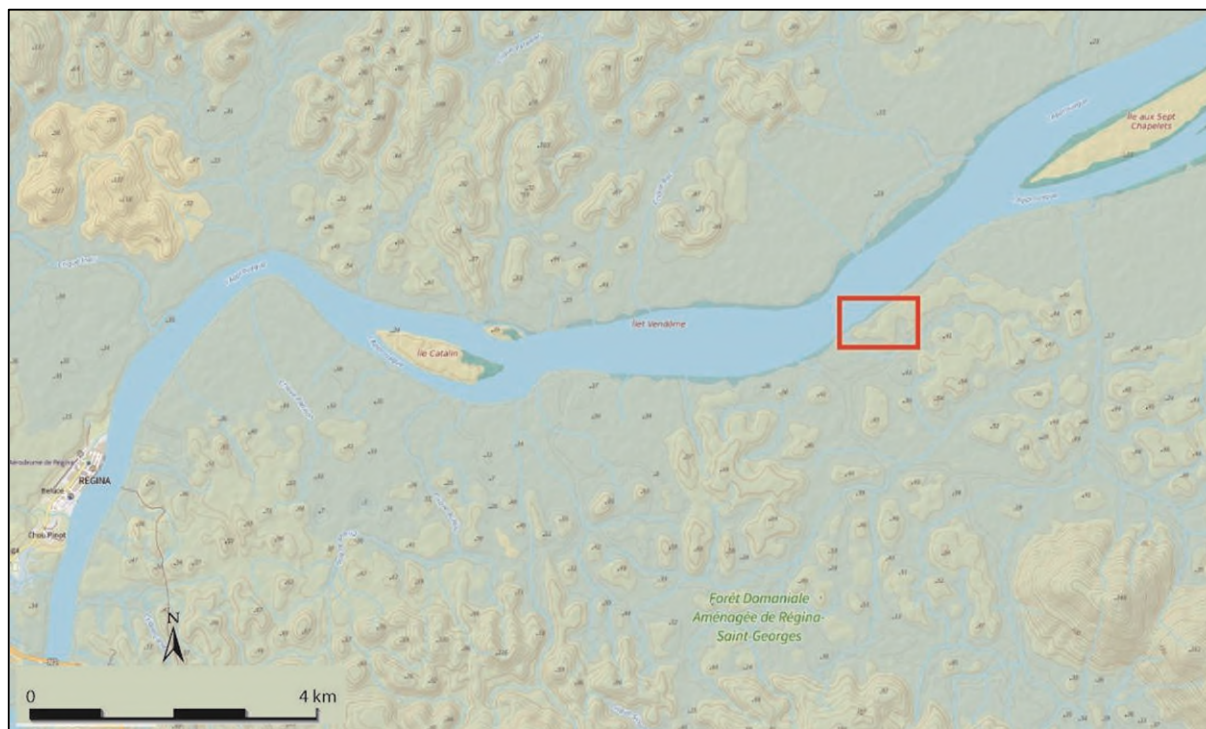


Figure 17. A modern map of the Lower Approuague River featuring the village of Régina and the plateau of the Dutch fortress.

The cemetery served the regional population of the Approuague River once the plantation called *La Jamaïque* had been abandoned after the abolition of slavery in 1848, notably for the villagers from Guisanbourg. According to the villagers of Régina, situated at 45 minutes by motorboat from the Dutch fort, the last funeral was held here in 1989 and the wooden Calvary of the cemetery has succumbed only recently.⁷⁸

With the aid of local guides and the director of the local museum, we retained this site as the possible location of the Dutch fort. Many fragments of so-called Flemish tiles and yellow bricks called *Ijsselsteentjes* we found at this place along the riverbanks and on the plateau supported this hypothesis (Figure 18). In addition, this was also the most strategical place of the Lower Approuague and corresponded roughly with the majority of the maps. The plateau is the highest point along the

⁷⁸ For preliminary archaeological reports, see van den Bel et al. 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022a-b; van den Bel & Leveque 2019. These reports are on file at the Archaeological Service of Guyane, Cayenne.



Figure 18. Images of Bricks and Tiles.

lower Approuague River. It elevates about 10 m above mean river level and only the most southern part of the plateau falls into the river revealing a dented escarpment; this natural aspect alone makes up for good defense. We dug four archaeological trenches (TR 1-2 and 10-11) of 1 m wide having various lengths perpendicular to the escarpment in order to see if there were any remnants of linear earthworks, but none were identified except for in TR 10. This low-elevated feature ran towards the river and measured 3 m in width and 40 in thickness consisting mainly of dark earth; this feature is interpreted for the moment as an agrarian bed and not a demolished part of the rampart. Nonetheless, we found a Jew-harp and a fragment of a Bergen op Zoom glazed frying pan in TR 1 and a fragment of a polearm in TR 10. All items can be attributed to the seventeenth century (Figure 20). Eventually, the results were meager considering the Dutch fort but what you expect of an occupation of less than 20 years.

It's a Mirage. The Dutch Fortress of the Approuague River, French Guiana, 1660-1677.

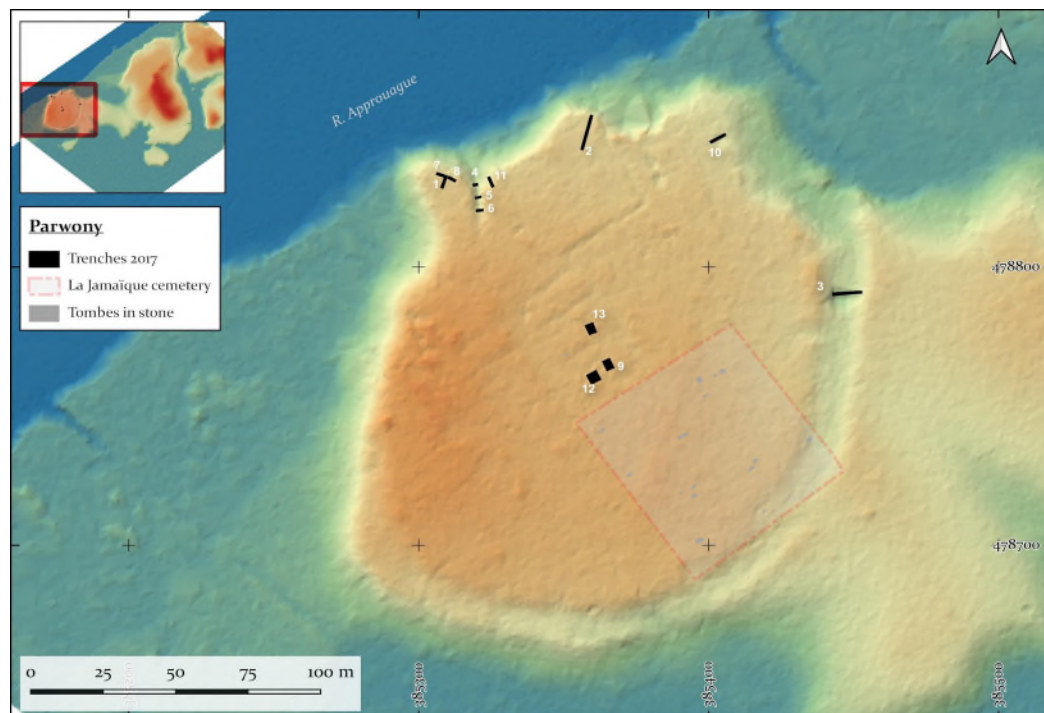


Figure 19. LiDAR image of western tip of the plateau showing pits excavated in 2017.

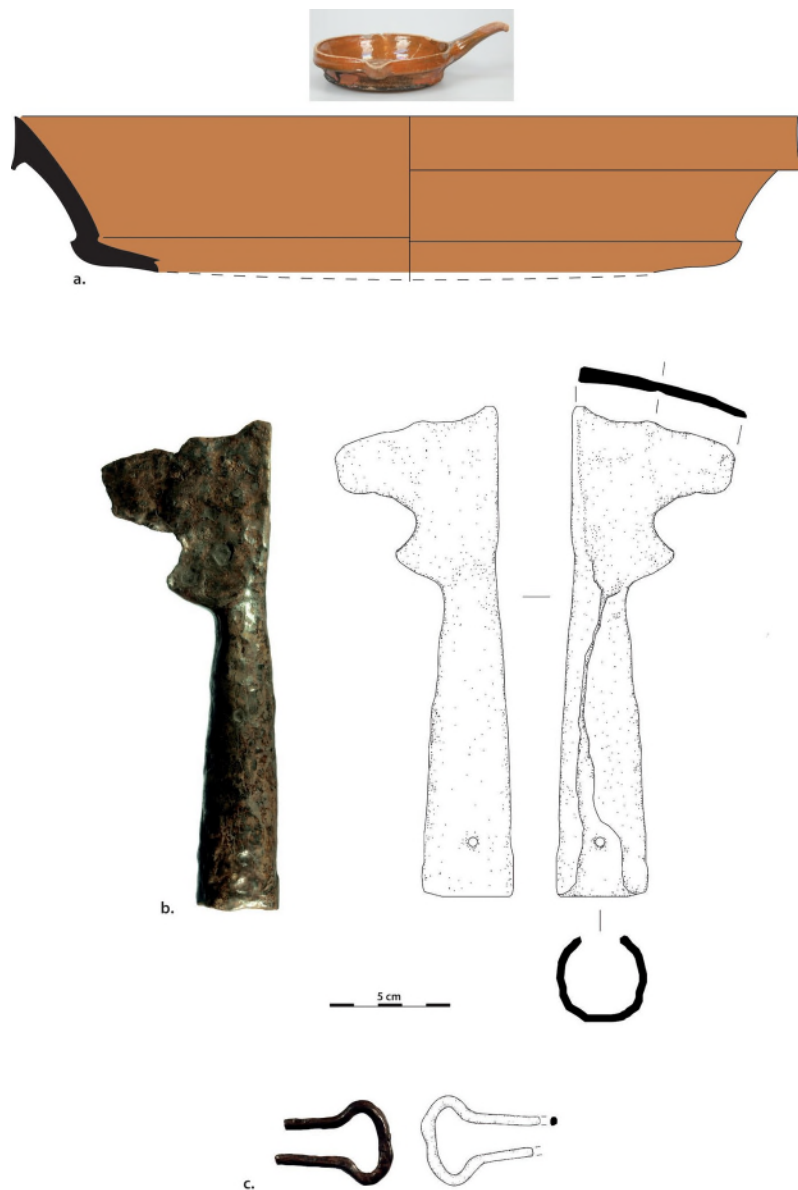


Figure 20. a. Yellow-brownish glazed frying pan from Bergen op Zoom; b. Metal fragment of a polearm.

Despite the absence of earthworks, the mission was still of great importance as we had also discovered a great quantity of Amerindian ceramics and lithic debris of which we found large concentrations in a dark layer better known in Amazonia as Terra Preta or dark earth in TR 10 (figure 21 and table 2). We also dug a trench (TR 3) that circumferences the tip of plateau as seen on the map. It appeared to be a man-made ditch but we found no archaeological material from the colonial period, only Amerindian ceramics (Figure 22). When digging deeper we identified a second ditch next to and below the one we excavated, suggesting a foundation trench or previous ditch. The older ditch is pointed whereas the later ditch is less deep and has a flat, large bottom. Radiocarbon dated

It's a Mirage. The Dutch Fortress of the Approuague River, French Guiana, 1660-1677.

revealed that the oldest date goes back to the beginning of the Christian era and was clearly not dug by the Dutch who might certainly have appreciated these impressive works (Figure 22)!

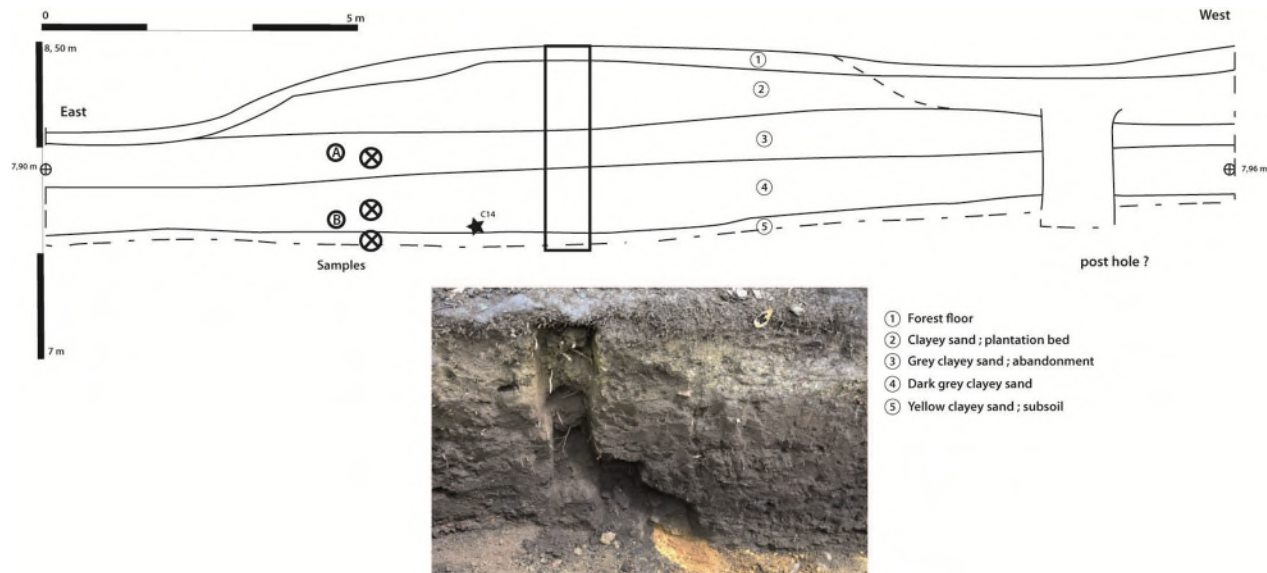


Figure 21. Southern profile drawing and photo of trench TR 10 showing the black layer and samples taken for analysis by Jeanne Brancier (AgroParisTech).

Table 2. Overview of artefacts found during the 2016 campaign.

	Amerindian pottery	European ware	clay pipes	Glass	Lithics	Metal
NMI	8419	24	4	779	329	130
KG	49.092	0.625	0.006	0.409	9.371	5.215

It's a Mirage. The Dutch Fortress of the Approuague River, French Guiana, 1660-1677.

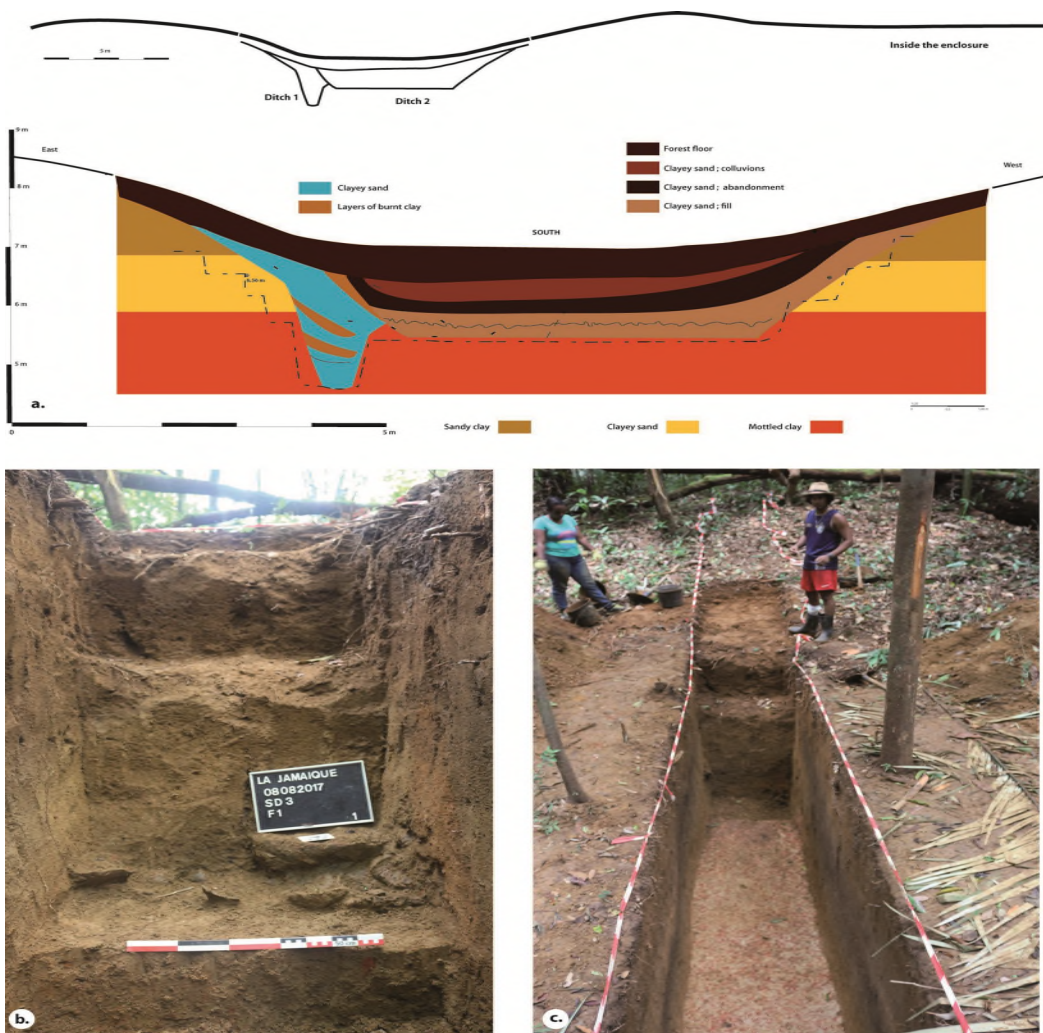


Figure 22. Southern profile drawing and photo of trench TR 3.

According to the radiocarbon dates, the ditch functions during two moments in the first millennium (Figure 23). These old dates were also found on the plateau, notably in TR 10, revealing that the pre-Columbian occupation and terra preta of this site goes back at least 2000 years. This is confirmed by the so-called *Ouanary encoché* ceramics (Early Ceramic Age) we found in this trench TR 10 and the ring ditch (Figure 24).

These ceramics are attributed to the first half of the first millennium in eastern French Guiana.⁷⁹ At the moment little is known about the origins and function of these ring-ditched earthworks but in general these old ceramics can be associated with large ring-ditched sites sitting on the edge of large plateaus.⁸⁰ Other, most often smaller ring-ditched pits; in the latter case the ring-ditch represents the limits of the cemetery or separates the world of the living and the dead. In fact, we also found

⁷⁹ Van den Bel 2018.

⁸⁰ See for other ring-ditch sites with *Ouanary encoché*, the site of Blondin on the Oyapock River excavated by Mickaël Mestre (2012). The latter is at the moment writing a dissertation on such sites in French Guiana.

fragments of LCA ceramics such as *Koriabo* and *Aristé*, suggesting another occupation on site which has not been detected by the radiocarbon dates yet (Figure 24).

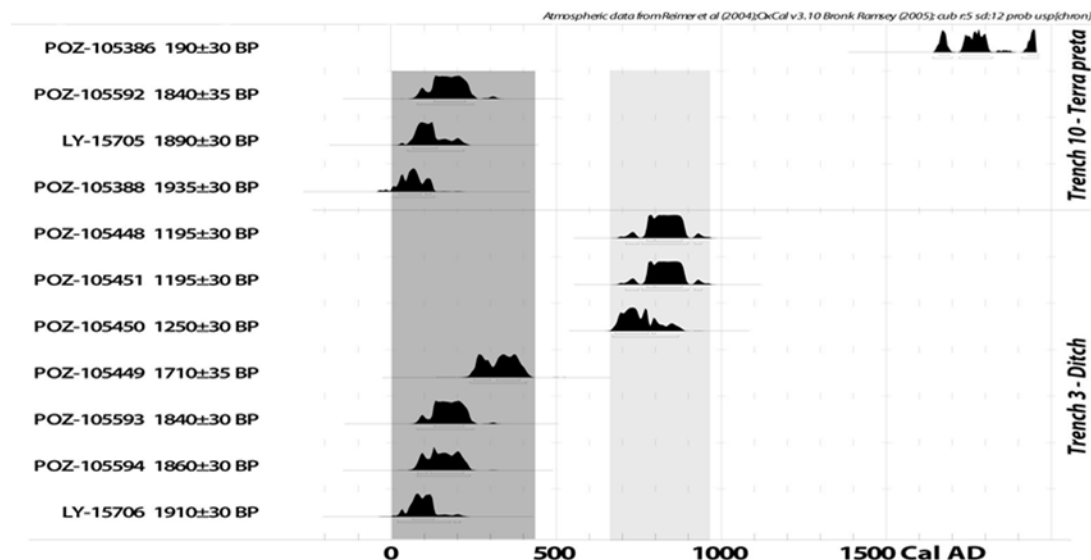


Figure 23. Plot of the results of the radiocarbon datings taken from TR 3 and TR 1.

The presence of such ceramics at a monumental site might reveal the presence of burial pits and shafts as shown by sites such as Calçoene and Pont de l'Oyapock.⁸¹ Trenches 9 and 12-13, approximately situated in the “middle” of the ring-ditch did not yield any pre-Columbian burials but further research is needed as the surface of the enclosure measures about 2.1 hectares. Eventually, seven axes and fragments were identified pertaining to different geological sources stressing daily activities on site (Figure 25).

Next to the pre-Columbian site we also identified two brick ovens dug into the escarpment of the plateau, a system of canals (about 80 cm wide) forming rectangular plots and a ruined Calvary. The map by De Béhague from 1765 reveals the rectangular plots which, according to the LiDAR, orientated in the same way. We also found a few wooden crosses on the isolated part of the plateau as indicated on the said map. This eighteenth century cemetery probably extended towards the ditch during the nineteenth century as we also found many wooden crosses (the majority made of *wacapou* or *Vouacapoua Americana* in that particular area as well as stone tombs with black and white tiles which date back to the 1920s. As we may conclude, the Dutch fort became eventually a cemetery and not a French fort or plantation during the eighteenth century. This is perhaps due to the possibility that the Dutch also buried their dead near the pre-Columbian ditch creating in this manner a funeral zone, again resonating with the Amerindian past of this place as a burial ground.

⁸¹ Van den Bel et al. 2021; Saldanha 2016.

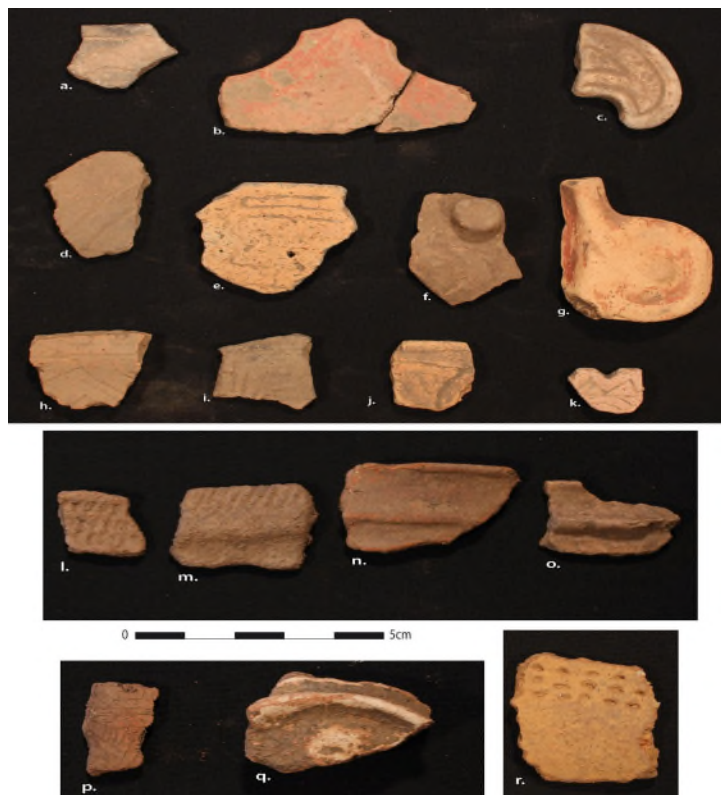


Figure 24. Pre-Columbian ceramic materials from TR10.



Figure 25. Stone Axes and fragments of axes found at Parwony (n=7).

Conclusion

After having presented the historic, cartographic and archaeological evidence, we may now conclude that the Dutch fort mentioned on numerous eighteenth-century French maps does not exist

and that the idea of a fortress is based on local folklore. The Dutch constructed plantations at a place they probably called Parwony but never constructed a fort on the Approuague River. This Parwony colony was a private colony and only indirectly depending on the WIC. The investors would rather spend their money on merchandise and transportation than on the construction of fortifications and military forces. The French settlers from the early eighteenth century, arriving a few decades after the Dutch left the Approuague River, linked the presence of a large pre-Columbian ring-ditch to the conclusion that the place must have been fortified.

The tales about the Dutch fort are thus related to pre-Columbian ring-ditched sites which play a role in Guiana lore. For example, among the Saramaka of Surinam the ring-ditched sites are called “crowned mountains” in their language or “*montagnes couronnées*” in French.⁸² In fact, their oral tradition tells that their ancestors fled the plantations and went into the forest where they founded their village upon a pre-Columbian ring-ditched mountain which they called Kumako.⁸³ Furthermore, it is known that the Kalana, a historic Amerindian group who resided on the banks of the Oyapock River, considered these sites to be the works of their ancestors.⁸⁴

In search for the Dutch fort upon the Lower Approuague River we also came across nearly 2000 years of history. It shows that this particular site was of great interest for different populations despite the fact that they totally abandoned the Lower Approuague and Kourouaï Rivers after various colonial enterprises and the late nineteenth century gold rush. Nearly all people now live in the small village of Régina, situated at 45 minutes by motorboat from the Dutch fort.

Acknowledgements

Archaeological Service of Guyane and *Association Aimara*, the *New Holland Foundation* (Hans Westing), *Cacao d'Amazonie* (Oliver Dummett), *Écomusée* de Régina for support. The students of the University of Anton de Kom (Sushmeeta Ganesh, Jövan Samson, Santosh Singh and Preciosa Labad), Université de Guyane, Université de Nantes (Maxime Grall), Université de Paris 1 (Lilia Mezhoud and Eva), Universidade de São Paulo, Leiden University and many volunteers (Jehan Turpin, Lucie Jantot, Nicolas, Arnaud, Atenso, Kees and Piet). We started another campaign in August 2023.

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De Nieuwe Grootte Lichtende Zee-fackel. Behelsende 't Eerste, 't Tweede 't Darde, 't Vierde, Vijfde of 't Laetste Deel. Alwaer klaer volkomen in vertoont wort, alle bekende Zee-Kusten van de geheele Noord Oceaen, En deszelfs inboesemen, Met een partenente Beschryvinge, van alle bekende Haavens, Bayen, Reden, Drooghten, Streckingen van Kourssen, en op-doeninge van Landen alles op haare Waare Pools-hooghte geleyt, Uyt ondervindinge van veele ervaaren Stuurlieden, Lootsen, en Liefhebbers der Zeevaart. Vergaedert met groote kosten, en op het Nieuw in beter onder gestelt als voor dese, en verrijckt met het Vijfde, of laetste Deel, dat noyt voor dese in 't licht is geweest. Te samen gebracht, door Jan van Loon, en Claes Jansz Vooght, Geometra, Leermeester der Wis-konst. Johannes van Keulen, Amsterdam, 1685

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Article

Canoe-enabled Mobility in a Warrau Village

ROBERT HOLTZMAN

Abstract

Dugout canoes, once ubiquitous among most of Guyana's Indigenous people, have decreased in importance with the proliferation of roads, air travel, and power boats. This ethnographic case study examines the continued, pervasive use dugout canoes in the Warrau village of Imbotero in Region 1. It describes how the canoe provides essential mobility in the village and enables the economic exploitation of the surrounding swamp. The canoe's role in the creation of a cultural landscape is considered, along with its importance as a living heritage.

KEYWORDS: Warrau, dugout canoes, mobility, swamps, cultural heritage, cultural landscape

Introduction

Although dugout canoes are common in many Indigenous communities in Guyana, their use has been little studied from an anthropological perspective. Whilst the canoe's affordance of mobility has obvious implications for Indigenous culture, the specifics of that role have not been much interrogated. To what uses is canoe-enabled mobility applied, and how does the canoe influence those activities? What are the logistics of canoe use? How do canoe and canoe-enabled mobility influence individual users, society, and the cultural landscape?

These and other questions are particularly pertinent to the Warrau, an Indigenous people who live mainly in the swamps of the Orinoco Delta in Venezuela, with smaller numbers in adjacent northwest Guyana. The name *Warrau* (also rendered as *Warao*, *Warau*, *Warrow*, and *Guarao*) seems to mean "canoe owners" or "boat people" (Heinen, 1975:25; Wilbert, 1977a:303), although other etymologies have been proposed (Wishart, 2018; Heinen and Henley, 1998:32). During the colonial period, the Warrau's lifeways and economy were observed to be highly dependent upon canoes (Brett, 1881:105; Williams, 1928:209), and they were renowned as British Guiana's premier canoe builders and paddlers (e.g., Bernau, 1847:34; im Thurn, 1883:168, 292; Raleigh, 1848:52; Schomburgk, 1922:111, 1842:182). But because their canoe usage has been largely ignored by anthropology, its current status and significance within the context of increasing Westernization/globalization are largely unexamined.

This case study of the Warrau village of Imbotero, in Guyana's Barima-Waini Region (Region 1) documents its canoe use in the present and describes its cultural significance within a society at the cusp of traditional and modern/Western lifeways. By comparing present usage to historical descriptions, it shows a broad pattern of continuity, but also reveals changes in usage patterns that show the Warrau canoe to be a living heritage that adapts traditional behaviours to present conditions.

Previous Ethnographic Studies

Modern studies of canoe use by Guyana's Warrau people are nonexistent, although relevant data can be found in scholarship concerning other aspects of Warrau culture. Early in the 19th century, Hilhouse (1834) briefly described the centrality of canoes in Warrau culture, the importance of itabbos (natural canals connecting river systems) as canoe routes, and the use of canoes for hunting and trade, and published what appears to be the period's only careful illustration of Warrau canoes in British Guiana (see Figure 1). Half a century later, Crevaux described and illustrated Warrau canoes on the Orinoco Delta (Crevaux, 1883:595–617).

Although Walter Roth described Warrau taboos and funerary practices involving canoes in British Guiana (Roth, 1924:619, 640, 652), he paid little attention to everyday canoe usage *per se*.



Figure 1. A Warrau house and canoes observed in the early 19th century in British Guiana. Some key aspects of material culture are little changed today. (image: Hilhouse, W., 1834, following p. 321)

The most important work relevant to the present study is that of Johannes Wilbert, who studied the Warrau in the Orinoco Delta in the 1950s and 1960s. His study of Warrau canoe construction as a pathway to male enculturation (Wilbert, 1977a) describes construction practices in detail, including construction techniques, the organisation of labor, and the elaborate system of spiritual beliefs and practices connected to canoe building. He shows how canoe ownership and the acquisition of construction skills were central to Warrau social identity in the Orinoco, and how canoe construction influenced social relations between male kin and between men and women within family groups. His 1977 paper presented at Dumbarton Oaks (Wilbert, 1977b) covers much the same ground, but also describes canoe-borne trade voyages to Trinidad from earlier in the century, including their economic significance, implications for social status, and spiritual components.

More recent, and centered on Guyanese Warrau, is the work of Terry Roopnaraine, who briefly describes the canoes, their construction, their use in hunting and trade (Roopnaraine, 1998), and their use in the commercial enterprise of gathering and distributing hearts of palm (*Euterpe oleracea*) (Roopnaraine, 2001). Back on the Orinoco, Christian Sørhaug describes Venezuelan Warrau uses of engine-equipped canoes in modern engagements with the globalised economy (Sørhaug, 2014, 2012:133–159).

No scholarship approaches Wilbert's for its ethnographic attention to social aspects of the Warrau canoe, but his fieldwork was conducted 50–70 years ago, and he never addressed the Guyanese Warrau, whose history, citizenship, and residence create social, economic, and political conditions that differ from their Venezuelan cousins'. Additionally, Wilbert pays little attention to the prosaic economic uses of canoes, concentrating instead on the social and spiritual aspects of canoe construction and the relatively infrequent, high-status activity of ocean voyaging.

Fieldwork Location and Methods

Two seasons of ethnographic fieldwork, totaling ten weeks, were conducted in 2022 and 2023 in Imbotero. During the fieldwork, the investigator lived in the Imbotero Research Center, a small guesthouse and conference facility run by the Guyana Marine Conservation Society. Located on the border with Venezuela in Guyana's furthest northwest corner, Imbotero (pop. ~465) stretches about 2km along both sides of the Barima River and into Imbotero Creek, which enters the river from the north (see Figure 2). Aside from its river frontage, the village is completely surrounded by permanently inundated swamp forest in which mixed mangroves and nipa palm (*Nypa fruticans*, also known as china palm or mangrove palm) dominate. With an elevation below mean high tide, all land in Imbotero floods regularly. There are no roads into or within the village. All houses are built on stilts, and horticulture is restricted to polders – fields surrounded by earthen dikes and drainage ditches (built by hand with much physical labour) to protect against flooding. Even at low tide, the muddy ground outside the polders is so soft and wet that walking impractical.

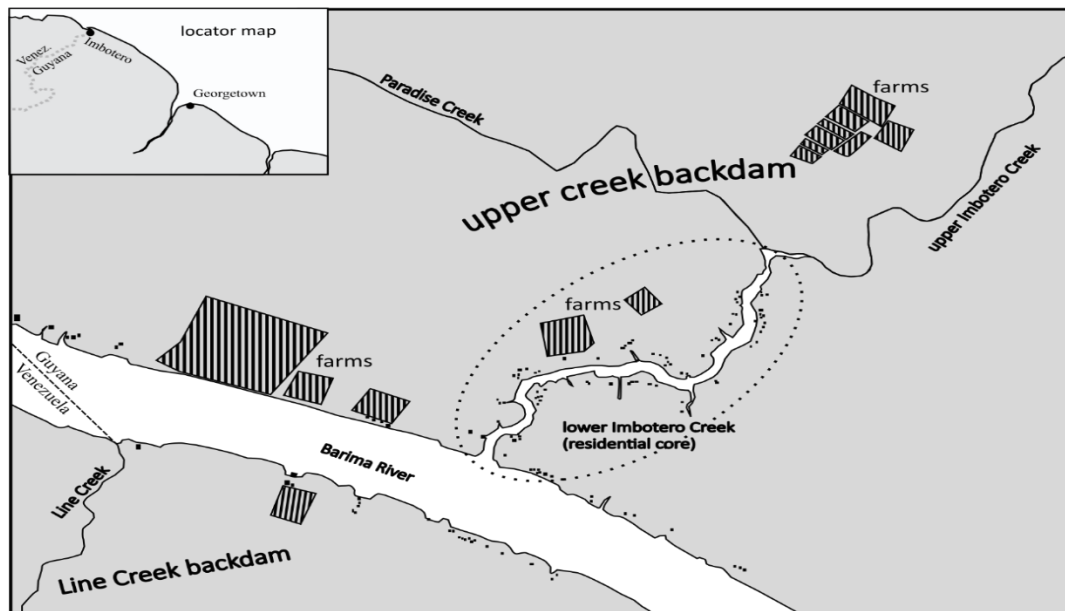


Figure 2. Mobility in Imbotero conceived as four zones of differing usages: the residential core of the village on lower Imbotero Creek; commercial activities and long-distance travel on the Barima River; and resource exploitation and small-scale farming in the “backdams” around upper Imbotero Creek and Line Creek.

Data were gathered through the ethnographic methods of participant observation and interview. Observations were conducted on a continuum of engagement in the activities being observed. When functioning as a “complete observer”, the investigator *only* observed, whereas when taking the role of a “participant observer”, he took part in the activity – for example, paddling a canoe with the

individual being observed (Bernard, 1995:ch.12 p.1). Many observations occurred at a level of engagement between these two extremes. Interviews likewise varied in nature from extemporaneous, casual conversations to formal interviews, the latter of which were conducted both one-on-one and in groups of up to eight informants.

Results

Imbotero's geographic layout can be conceived as four adjacent zones, each with distinct usages (see Figure 2). On the lower part of Imbotero Creek is the residential and social core of the village. Here are most of the homes, the elementary school, two churches, and the Imbotero Research Center, all of which are located right on the shores of the creek. The second zone lies just beyond the creek's mouth, on both sides of the Barima River, where there are two or three small businesses, a couple of commercial farms, a combined police/coast guard/border control station, and more homes. With its businesses, constant traffic of commercial fishing and cargo vessels, and direct access to larger communities upstream and Venezuela downstream, this riverine zone is more outward-focused than the village's relatively parochial residential core.

Upstream of the settled part of the village on Imbotero Creek is the "backdam" – thousands of hectares of swamp forest where villagers maintain farms and pursue a variety of resource gathering activities, both described below. Another resource-rich backdam exists along Line Creek, on the opposite side of the Barima River.

The Heart of the Village

Within the village's residential core on lower Imbotero Creek, the muddy ground makes walking impractical, and even a visit to one's next-door neighbour requires a boat of some type. Most movements are made in dugout canoes propelled with paddles (see Figure 3). Every household owns at least one canoe, and literally every person over the age of five knows how to paddle. Children travel by canoe to school in the morning; many families paddle together to church on Sundays; for any meeting or event within the village, canoes are the predominant means of transport.



Figure 3. Paddled canoes are the predominant means of mobility within the residential area on Imbotero Creek.

Although most canoes are propelled with paddles, a few – perhaps eight or ten – have outboard engines. Also present in Imbotero are five or six ballahoos – outboard-powered speedboats of a type common throughout Guyana – and two or three flat-bottomed skiffs, also outboard-powered. All boats are built from wood.

With the exception of the churches, which are attended by many but not all, there are no public meeting places in Imbotero: no village square, cafés, bars, or shopping centres. In default, the creek serves as a public common. People pause as they paddle up or down the creek to chat with the occupants of other canoes or with people in their homes, all of which are within a few metres of the shoreline, if not overhanging it directly at high tide. Most houses and all institutional structures have raised plank walkways, called *bridges*, that extend over the edge of the creek, which enable people to enter and exit their canoes without traversing the muddy foreshore, and much socialising occurs on the bridges. Even if they do not stop for a chat, paddlers tend to greet everyone they see as they pass with a “good morning” or “good afternoon”.

Canoe paddling is highly egalitarian. When opposite sexes share a canoe, either may sit in the stern to steer or in the bow or amidships to provide the majority of propulsive power. Either may paddle solo or may carry a passenger of either sex. Age is similarly a non-issue: children and adults, including the elderly, may paddle together in any combination, so long as the individual has the necessary strength and skill.

That skill is acquired early. Children begin riding in canoes from infancy, and by the age of three they begin playing a role as paddlers, often with miniature paddles made especially for them. By the age of four or five, they can handle a canoe on their own while caring for a younger sibling or friend who rides along as a passenger (see Figure 4). Paddling skill is learned not by instruction but by observation and practice, the latter frequently obtained within the context of play. Children play in canoes as soon as they can walk and learn to use them through experimentation. They try different methods of propulsion; play games of “chicken” to perfect their handling skills; learn the limits of stability by intentionally capsizing canoes; and learn how to right, empty, and re-enter them mid-creek.



Figure 4. Children become proficient paddlers at a young age and use canoes daily to attend school and for play.

The level of skill achieved is invariably high. Regardless of current or crosswinds, one never sees a canoe wandering side to side as it makes its way up- or downstream. In a canoe only 60cm broad, paddlers may stand up and walk to the opposite end as they approach a landing, or even switch places, without endangering its stability. Unintentional capsizes are almost unheard of, and no one – not even the youngest child – wears a life vest.

Relatively few families own boats with engines, so engine use and associated skills are less equally distributed throughout the village. Within engine-owning households, children do not begin to learn their use until they reach adolescence. And whilst either sex may own and run an engine boat, when both men and women are aboard it is usually the man who drives, even if the boat is owned by the woman.

When not in use, canoes are tied to the uprights supporting the home's bridge or to the ladder at the end of the most bridges, where they float or go aground as the tide changes – a practice unchanged from the colonial era (im Thurn, 1883:203; Williams, 1928:209). Canoes are never covered, so they must be bailed out after a rain. Many owners keep a steel bowl or a cut-down plastic jug in the canoe for that purpose. If a bailer is not readily available, water may be emptied by “shoveling” it out with a paddle.

Although paddles vary considerably in length, almost all are of the same design, with a large, angular, leaf-shaped blade, a relatively short, round-sectioned shaft, and a triangular hand grip with a crescentic cut-out on the top. The shape is identical to those documented by Wilbert among the Winikina Warrau in the Orinoco Delta (Wilbert, 1977a:313, fig. 2). Only two double-bladed paddles were observed in the village, both used by men of the same household. Most paddles are left unadorned, but some are brightly painted with geometric patterns, national flag motifs, or images of wild animals.

In contrast to the consistency of paddle design, canoes exhibit surprising diversity for such a small, ethnically homogeneous community. All four of the basic dugout canoe “types” (as described by McGrail, 2001a:178–179, 1978:38–43) are present: simple or basic; expanded; extended; and complex. Basic dugouts are formed by carving only, with no other construction techniques applied. These are necessarily narrow, being limited in breadth to the diameter of the tree from which they are made less the thickness of the bark and sapwood, which must be removed in the interests of durability. Only two or three basic canoes were observed in Imbotero, all owned by Warrau migrants from Venezuela who make up about 15% of the village population. A canoe builder native to Imbotero told me that Guyanese Warrau do not build canoes of this style.

All other canoes in Imbotero are expanded, i.e., wider than the trees from which they are built, their sides having been bent outward during construction by the application of heat and mechanical force. In addition, many canoes are extended, their sides being raised by the addition of washstrakes (i.e., planks nailed to the upper edges of the expanded dugout hull). While expansion improves a canoe’s stability, extension increases its volume, carrying capacity, and resistance to swamping, especially in rough waters. Complex canoes have major components other than washstrakes fitted, the most common being a transom (i.e., a flat stern board) to carry an outboard engine and, less frequently, a foredeck. All canoes, however, have plank seats, and neither paddlers nor passengers ever kneel or sit directly in the bottom of the boat.

Within these four “types,” there are other areas of difference, including a wide range of sizes (ranging from about 4m to about 10m in length); several aspects of hull form (e.g., sheerline or profile of the top edge of the hull; rocker or profile of the hull bottom; cross-sectional shape (e.g., round versus flat bottom; convex versus concave ends); bow and stern profile and plan form; length-breadth-height ratios); outfitting (e.g., number and fastening of seats; presence or absence of mast step and/or foredeck); finish or decoration (primarily painted versus unpainted), and more. Many of these aspects of canoe design and construction have functional implications (affecting, for example, speed, capacity, stability, and maneuverability), and Imboterans will sometimes borrow a canoe that is better suited to a particular task or voyage than their own. But there is no evident status or ownership prestige associated with the different designs, and it is common to see canoes used in tasks for which they are not well suited: for example, a small canoe carrying an inordinately heavy load.

In the Backdam

Little economic activity occurs within Imbotero’s residential core on the lower creek. Canoes are essential to travel further upstream, where there are resource-gathering opportunities and the majority of the village’s farms. Within this undeveloped backdam, Imbotero Creek and its multiplicity of small tributary streams are too shallow, narrow, and overgrown to permit the use of outboard engines, making paddled canoes the only practical means of access.

Farms in the backdam are small – most are 1-3 ha, and none more than 5 ha – and are all concentrated in the same area between upper Imbotero Creek and its largest tributary, Paradise Creek. They are owned and maintained by families or individuals mainly for subsistence, with small surpluses being sold in Kumaka, the nearest market town, about 25km upstream of the village via the Barima and Aruka rivers. Many farms support ten or more different crops – a large number, given their small size. Along with bitter cassava, which is grown by all, crops include other root vegetables (sweet cassava, sweet potato, black potato, eddoe, ginger), green vegetables (cucumber, okra, bora, chillies, coriala), fruits (plantain, banana, pawpaw, pineapple, coconut, avocado, pumpkin), and grains (maize).

Most farmers visit their farms daily, or at least every other day, to plant, weed, or harvest enough produce for the day's meals. All work is done by hand, so canoes of modest size – typically no more than 6m long – can easily carry everything needed on a single trip. Few farmers, though, carry produce to market in paddled canoes, because the 50-kilometre round-trip to Kumaka is too far to paddle comfortably in one day. Those who do not own engines find space in the powered canoe or ballahoo of a friend who plans to make the trip for one of Kumaka's twice-weekly market days, or in a powered canoe owned by the village which makes the trip once a week. When riding in another's canoe, one pays for a share of the fuel and engine oil but no fee for the trip itself.

Fishing is among the most common of the resource-exploitation activities conducted in the upper creek backdam, (see Figure 5). Several methods are used, all of which require canoes. People fish from canoes with handlines or fixed-line poles and use canoes to set trotlines and seines. A trotline (called a *setline* locally) is a stout piece of fishing line tied between trees or the aerial roots of mangroves on opposite sides of a stream. Hanging from this main line are dozens



Figure 5. Angling with a fixed-line rod from a canoe is one of several methods of fishing practiced in the backdams and on the river.

of “snoods” – short sections of light fishing line with baited hooks at the ends. Weights tied near the ends of the main line hold it beneath the surface of the stream so that canoes can pass above freely. Canoes are used to set the trotline in place, to check it twice daily for fish, and to re-bait the hooks.

Seines are nets that are tied across streams or small inlets. The net can be many metres long and 1-2m tall, with small weights attached to its bottom edge to keep it extended so that fish become entangled when they swim into it. As with trotlines, canoes are used to set the seine in place, check it for fish, and retrieve the catch.

A third fishing method that requires a canoe is “chopping”, which is the only common activity pursued at night in the swamp forest. A paddler in the stern guides the canoe slowly and silently along the edge of the creek while the “chopper”, who sits in the bow, uses a head torch to illuminate the shallow water near the shore. Fish resting among the vegetation there are easily seen because their eyes reflect red in the light of the torch. The chopper directs the stern paddler toward the fish,

and when he is close enough, the chopper strikes it with a machete (called a *cutlass*). Sometimes a chopper will work alone, sitting in the bow of the canoe and using his machete as a paddle.

One more fishing method does not employ the canoe as a fishing tool *per se*, as do the previous methods, but relies upon it nonetheless for access. Some fish inhabit small pools in the furthest reaches of the swamp forest, where the water is fresher than in its lower, more brackish areas. To reach them, a canoe is required to paddle up small streams to the furthest limit of navigability, after which the angler proceeds on foot through the mud and dense growth until a promising pool is reached. A fixed-line pole with a line less than 2m long is used to place a baited hook right in front of the fish, whose movements can be readily seen in the small, shallow pools.

Other faunal resources exploited in the swamp forest include wild honey and land crabs of two species: bunduri or blue crabs (*Cardisoma guanhumi*) and mangrove, red, or bok crabs (*Ucides cordatus*). As with fishing in the isolated pools as described above, crab gathering requires canoes for access but not as a tool, *per se*. One paddles upstream until one finds a patch of relatively open forest floor that is exposed at high tide, then digs the crabs out of their mud burrows with a machete. Although crabs are eaten locally, they are collected mainly for sale in Kumaka, being carried there in powered boats much as surplus produce is.

Vegetal resources of a wide variety are also exploited in the backdam, and again, canoes are required for access. Most cooking in Imbotero is done over wood fires contained in steel fire pans inside the home, and families collect firewood in the forest at least weekly, cutting up fallen trees or branches with an axe and loading their canoe with enough to last for several days. Wood is also cut for building materials. Logs and poles for house piles and roof frames are generally cut with axes, while larger trees are felled and sawn into boards with a chainsaw for house siding or bridge decking. (Every family owns an axe. There are only a few chainsaws in the village, but these are sometimes made available to others by negotiation.)

The huge fronds of troolie or temiche palms (*Manicaria saccifera*) are collected for roof thatching, and leaves of moriche, ité, or æta palms (*Mauritia flexuosa*) are gathered as a source of fibres for making hammocks and in other crafts. Moriches were previously essential to the Warrau economy in some areas, providing the diet's main source of starch, in the form of sago, as well as edible grubs, fruits, and beverages (Andel, 2000:157–158; Arneaud, 2021:2–3; Heinen and Ruddle, 1974:116; Hilhouse, 1834:327 ; Margolies, 2008:154–155), but they have long since been supplemented or replaced in that role in Imbotero by locally-grown cassava, eddoes, and plantain, and by rice and milled flours purchased in Kumaka.

Another palm gathered in the backdam, the manicole or açai palm (*Euterpe oleracea*), is probably the most important economically, because it is the source of hearts of palm (locally called *cabbages*). Collectors use dugout canoes to travel as far as they can go into the backdam, after which they proceed on foot, looking for stands of manicole to cut, and carrying the hearts back to the village in their canoes. Once a week, the collectors paddle just outside the creek to a boat landing on the Barima River where they sell their cabbages to a “buy boat” owned by a foreign-owned food processing company that cans them for the export market.

Other plant products gathered in the forest include mockru (*Ischnosiphon arouma*), a reed-like plant whose stems are split to weave *quakes* (baskets) and in other crafts; crabwood seeds (*Carapa guianensis*), from which oil can be extracted for use as a mosquito repellent or as an ingredient in various medicinal and cosmetic products (Andel, 2000, pt. 2:45); and medicinal herbs for local use.

Many of the same activities are pursued on Line Creek, across the Barima River. But in spite of its less convenient location, Imbotero's second backdam offers additional opportunities not present on

upper Imbotero Creek: fresh water collecting, and larger-scale timber cutting. Shortage of drinking water is a chronic problem in the village. Imbotero Creek is brackish, and while some households with corrugated metal roofs capture rainwater and store it in large plastic tanks provided by the national government, this affordance is not available to households with palm-thatch roofs, and even households with metal roofs may run out during dry season. Because Line Creek flows fresh, many families make regular trips there to collect water. Line Creek is also deeper and less sinuous in its path than upper Imbotero Creek, permitting the use of larger powered canoes and ballahoos, which can make the trip quicker and carry a 200-litre drum of water (see Figure 6). Households without access to a large, powered boat must make the trip more frequently in smaller, paddled canoes, collecting water in used, plastic, 5-gallon (about 23 litres) cooking oil jugs.¹



Figure 6. Collecting fresh water on Line Creek, one of many essential resources gathered with canoes in the backdams.

Two factors explain the more intensive exploitation of timber on Line Creek than on upper Imbotero Creek. Because it is wider, deeper, and straighter, Line Creek permits access by larger, powered canoes, up to about 10m long, enabling larger cargoes of longer, heavier sawn boards to be brought out of the forest. And being farther from the residential core of the village, Line Creek has been less heavily exploited, so economically valuable trees are more readily available for use in building construction and for conversion into dugout canoes. It is important to qualify that this does not constitute commercial forestry by any means, and that all of the limited quantity of timber cut on Line Creek is used locally.

Beyond the Creeks

Between Imbotero Creek and Line Creek is the Barima River. At a width of some 250m – compared to a maximum of about 35m for the creeks – the river is a very different fluvial environment, and boat

¹ Following the completion of fieldwork, an NGO arranged to provide water-catching and -storage facilities to more homes, including those without metal roofs. The results of this initiative, and its impact on canoe use, are not known at the time of writing.

use differs accordingly. Among the Guyanese Warrau in Imbotero, the use of paddled canoes is self-constrained to a limited radius. As described above, residents of Imbotero Creek paddle into the upper creek area and across the river to Line Creek. Residents of both river shores paddle their canoes into Imbotero Creek to attend the primary school, church, and occasional community meetings which are held in one of the churches, and residents of both areas paddle on the river to fish or to visit a small grocery and petrol dealer just outside Imbotero Creek. None of these travels take more than about 45 minutes, and most are considerably shorter.

For longer-distance travel, engine boats are strongly preferred. The use of powered canoes and ballahoos to carry crabs and agricultural produce to market in Kumaka has already been noted. But the river opens up additional opportunities, economic and otherwise.

Kumaka is the nearest location to Imbotero where a large range of goods and services is available, including groceries, clothing, pharmaceuticals, tools and building supplies, and ferry service to Port Kaituma and Georgetown. Imboterans also travel by boat to Kumaka in order to reach the adjacent town of Mabaruma, where they can receive medical care at the hospital, conduct business with local offices of national government agencies, and fly out of a small airfield to Port Kaituma and Georgetown.

The river lends itself to other economic activities such as crab catching and cabbage gathering, which can be more productive several kilometres outside the village, in areas that have been less heavily exploited. The Atlantic coast, also reached via the river, offers good fishing for species not present in Imbotero. Some Imboterans find employment far outside the village in the mining, forestry, and offshore fishing industries. Imboterans also travel occasionally for social reasons to other Warrau villages such as Warapoka, a trip of some 125km by river.

For all of these objectives, Imbotero's Guyanese citizens travel almost invariably by engine boat. The village's migrant population, on the other hand, is more willing to paddle long distances. Many of them arrived in Imbotero via paddled canoe, traveling more than 100km from their homes in the Orinoco Delta. The trip to Kumaka, therefore, is not so daunting. Additionally, the Venezuelan migrants tend to be poorer than Imbotero's Guyanese citizens, and some cannot afford to pay a share of the fuel for a trip by engine boat.

Those who paddle from Imbotero to Kumaka have two options. They can make the long round trip in a single day, starting early on a rising tide and returning in the evening on a falling one. Even with the help of the tides, though, this is a long, strenuous undertaking. The other option is to paddle to Kumaka early (still, preferably, on a rising tide), conduct one's business there, then paddle only a short way toward home, spending the night sleeping in the canoe tied up to the bank of the river and completing the trip the next morning.

Discussion

Canoe use is present in almost all activities within Imbotero. For activities within the village's residential areas, such as visits to friends or relatives, school and church attendance, and trips to the grocery shop on the river, powered canoes and ballahoos are feasible options for those with access to them, but paddled canoes are predominant, as they are ubiquitous, cheaper to run (essentially cost-free), and highly convenient – if perhaps marginally slower on these short trips.

Most local economic activity, however, occurs in the backdams, and whilst both paddles and engine power are practical on Line Creek, the area around upper Imbotero Creek can be accessed only via paddled canoes. For some backdam activities, such as farming and crab catching, the canoe provides only the means of access, but for most fishing methods, the canoe is an essential tool in the process.

The canoe makes the backdams accessible to the people of Imbotero, enabling the primary economic activities of fishing, gathering, and subsistence agriculture. As such, it has made a dense tropical swamp a feasible place in which to dwell and, in doing so, has engendered close familiarity with the physical environment, leading to the creation of a *cognitive landscape*, through which people engage the environment through perception, work, movement, memory, social action, and other cognitive processes (Duncan, 2006:10; Ingold, 1993:152, 156; Tilley and Cameron-Daum, 2017:175–233; Westerdahl, 2007:213). Those who work in the backdam learn the twisting, frequently changing routes of the small streams through the mangrove forest, know its affordances and hazards, discover and remember places where resources can be productively exploited.

Landscape knowledge also has a temporal constituent. Water levels, which change hourly with the tide and on the annual cycle of dry and wet seasons, impact mobility and resource accessibility in the swamp. Tide tables for the area do not exist, but in Imbotero these cycles are understood and taken into account for any planned activity, to the extent of knowing whether and when a particular canoe will have clearance over a shallow spot or around a tight bend in the stream.

Landscape knowledge is accumulated and transmitted vertically (between generations) and horizontally (between generation-mates) within the village, so that individuals' cognitive landscapes merge into a community-wide *cultural landscape*. Children accompany their parents on canoe trips in the backdam, learning through observation and experience and later providing the same learning opportunities to their own children. And information is shared freely, not hoarded – encouraged by the web of consanguineous and affinal relationships which encompass almost everyone in the village. If one discovers a newly formed mudflat that will be a productive site for crabbing, or notices a fallen tree that will yield good firewood that they do not need immediately, it becomes public knowledge that anyone may exploit. Similarly, any village resident may clear land for a farm in the backdam (although the village council's permission must be obtained first). Like the lower creek that connects all households by water, the backdams are a commons, a community legacy and a resource that all may use.

Historical Context

Most of the patterns of canoe use observed in Imbotero are of long duration. Indirect evidence suggests that ancestors of the present-day Warrau were using dugout canoes when they first settled the region near the beginning of the Archaic period. Shell middens, some of which are dated as early as 7,500 (cal.) BP (Plew and Daggars, 2022:61, 65; Williams, 2003:57, 76, 1993:5–6), were mostly formed in the midst of mangrove swamps, their contents including – in addition to mollusc and crustacean shells – remains of plant foods, fish, turtles, and small mammals. This indicates a mixed hunting-fishing-gathering economy that required a high degree of mobility (Boomert, 2019:124, 2000:69–72) – something difficult if not impossible to achieve in a mangrove swamp without a canoe. Watercraft of some type were clearly essential to the settlers of Barabina Hill, in nearby present-day Mabaruma, which was an island at the time of its first occupation in 6885 +/-85 (cal.) BP (Boomert, 2019:125; Williams, 1993:5).

There is abundant evidence from the Archaic and Horticultural periods in Guyana's Northwest for long-distance exchange of raw stone, stone tools, raw materials for ceramics, and finished pottery (Plew and Daggars, 2022:83–84; Rostain, 2008:299–300; Williams, 2003:111–113, 133–147, 225–232), all of which must have been transported by river in canoes. Horticulture was also practised (Plew and Daggars, 2022:75–77; Williams, 2003:242–245) which, again, probably relied upon canoes for the basic requirements of access and carriage.

The Warrau's broad-based reliance upon canoes is firmly attested in the historic record, beginning with the earliest European observers and continuing throughout the colonial era and into the

ethnographic present. Canoe use was documented in connection with habitation in the region's swamps and with hunting (Kalamandeen et al., 2009:6, 9, 38; Roth, 1924:184–185, 205), fishing (Roopnaraine, 1998:21), gathering (Brett, 1868:88–89; Roopnaraine, 1998:20; Roth, 1924:209–210), agriculture (Wilbert, 1970:41, 44–45), and trade (Raleigh, 1893:75; Roosevelt, 2019:236–237; Wilbert, 1977a:331–332). Although some of the examples cited are from Venezuela (or its colonial- or post-colonial predecessors), they remain relevant to the present discussion, as the similar physical environments have resulted in a degree of cultural homogeneity among Warrau people on both sides of the border, and cross-border movements have been frequent and usually relatively unhindered (Allard, 2020, 2019; Menezes, 2011:200).

In many of its essential functional aspects, then, canoe use in Imbotero is characterized by centuries, if not millennia, of persistence. Although early observers were not so conscientious in recording non-technical, non-economic aspects of Warrau culture, it is clear that some social behaviours associated with canoe use are also of long duration. As it is today in Imbotero, canoe use was universal among the colonial-era Warrau, practiced by all ages and both sexes (Brett, 1868:1689–169; Wilbert, 1977a:316–318, 350), and the general level of canoeing skill was very high (Brett, 1868:167; Williams, 1928:206).

Certainly, not all aspects of past canoe use remain unchanged. Imboterans no longer hunt from canoes (hunting in general is scarcely practiced in the village), and canoes are not used for long-distance trade because it is no longer necessary, trading opportunities in nearby Kumaka sufficing for local needs and some travel there still being conducted in both paddled and powered canoes, although ballahoos play a gradually increasing role. Canoe construction, formerly a universal skill among Warrau men, used to be central to men's gender identity and social status (Wilbert, 1977a). This is no longer the case: in Imbotero, there are now only nine or ten men who build canoes, and those who do not suffer no loss of status or identity as a result. A whole infrastructure of spiritual belief and practice was formerly associated with canoes, ranging from canoe builders' rituals to propitiate deities associated with canoe trees (Wilbert, 1977a:339–344) to a taboo against the use of canoes by menstruating women (Wilbert, 1977a:335). None of these have survived in Imbotero, having been supplanted by years of Christian evangelism and the influence of Western empiricism.

But change within the context of stability is the very nature of intangible cultural heritage (Apaydin, 2020:2; UNESCO, 2003 [2.1]), and it is clear that dugout canoes are an important part – perhaps the central aspect – of Imbotero's Warrau heritage. In interviews with adolescents and young adults in the village, even those who aspire to own ballahoos expressed the belief that dugout canoes will remain central in local culture in the foreseeable future.

It is difficult to see how it could be otherwise, as long as the village economy relies upon small-scale horticulture and resource gathering, for canoes are essential to both. To the extent that the economy shifts toward other activities, though, such as wage employment, larger-scale agriculture, and tourism (all of which show signs of increase), canoe use will probably decline in favour of ballahoos and perhaps other powered watercraft.

Conclusion

Canoe-enabled mobility has pervasive implications in Imbotero, heavily influencing economic activities and social interactions, providing access to the physical environment and thus enabling the formation of a cultural landscape, and serving as a foundation of the community's cultural heritage. That this heritage is in the process of change – shown, for example, in the adoption of engine power for canoes and in the declining use of canoes for longer trips – does not negate its profound significance in a community that still sees itself as Warrau – “canoe people”.

Prior to the proliferation of outboard engines, roads for motorised land transport, and airplanes, travel throughout most of Guyana's hinterland depended upon canoes (Schomburgk, 1922:78; Waterton, 1885:88). Although many Indigenous communities in Guyana continue to use canoes, few (if any) rely upon them so intensively as does Imbotero, because its swamp environment precludes other methods of mobility. Imbotero, then, could serve as a worthwhile analogy which might shed light on Indigenous canoe use in Guyana's past. Certainly, one can not "cut and paste" Imbotero's present-day cultural patterns directly onto the Warrau past – much less onto the pasts of the country's other Indigenous peoples – but current ethnographic evidence might be used to raise new questions and suggest possible interpretations concerning past patterns of Indigenous mobility and its role in the development and maintenance of culture (Blue, 2003:335; David and Kramer, 2001:52–54; McGrail, 2001b:3, 1984:149).

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Article

“Dem W’ite Man mek Obeah wan wrang t’ing”: Suppressed Spiritscapes, Colonial Christianization, and Religious Racisms¹

JEREMY JACOB PERETZ

Abstract

Pervasive vilification of Spiritualists, or Komfa practitioners, in Guyanese society is one among many lamentable legacies of colonization and enslavement. Animosity directed towards Spiritualists arises from forms of Christian demonology—sometimes transposed to meet Hindu or Muslim doctrines—that conceives of Komfa as inherently impious, blasphemous, sinful, and so an “anti-religious” threat to moral order. However, Guyanese “afterlives of slavery” and colonization inform anti-Komfa and anti-Obeah sentiments and discriminations specifically as anti-Black and anti-African in both their underpinnings and their ongoing expressions. Komfa communities carry with them the memory of “historical catastrophe,” or trauma, as faced by their ancestors and members of their Spiritual families of past generations, many of whom were incarcerated and otherwise mistreated by the colonial state because of their faith. Colonial Christian “morality” forged the ideological bases for pervasive anti-“African” sentiments held by many Guyanese (including Afro-Guyanese) in regard to religion. Komfa People have suffered numerous adverse impacts on their lives stemming from the widespread prejudice they face in society. The essay details discriminations directed at Obeah and Komfa People in Guyana and their Guianese predecessors from the period of enslavement through to the first decades of the Twenty-First Century, foregrounding the nexus of racial and religious politics, as well as intersections with gender, sexuality, disability, and indigeneity.

KEYWORDS: Komfa, Obeah, religious racism, antiblackness

We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.
The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
Are of equal duration. A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.
—T. S. Eliot²

¹ Quote is from an article titled “Wuk pon she” in the *Guyana Times* (10 October 2018).

² From “Little Gidding” (1991 [1942]: 208). Wilson Harris includes these lines in *The Secret Ladder* (1963: 236).

...a creature invented *for the sake of labor and labor alone*, as well as a useful metonym for describing the experiences of black women living under patriarchy’s unremitting pressures.

—Joshua Bennett³

The word “creature” is decisive here. The dreamer knows that this creature creates light. It is a creating creature.

—Gaston Bachelard⁴

Of course, a lot of these oppressive ideals stem from the violently instilled religion of the slavers, Christianity [...]. Today, we continue to label Voodoo, Obeah and other African beliefs and practices as being the work of the devil. The forcing of Christianity onto Africans was not done because Massa cared about saving African souls from eternal damnation. It was intentionally done so as to make them more docile and accepting of their enslavement and of the white man as master.

—Akola Thompson⁵

Pervasive vilification of Spiritualists in Guyanese society is one among many lamentable legacies of colonization and enslavement. A deep-seated abhorrence of Komfa expressed by many Guyanese is often directly or indirectly justified through one’s religious outlooks, be those informed by Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or other ethical foundations. Christianity, however, has had the most prolonged and profound impact on Guyana’s national culture and has likewise produced the most distressing consequences for Spiritualists and their traditions. As Raymond Smith (1976: 341) has convincingly argued, “Christianization was a deliberate piece of social engineering” used by the authorities of British Guiana in subjugating Indigenous, African, Asian, and Creole populations, including through juridically and morally debasing their traditional practices. As expressed in numerous public comments made regarding the recent 2024 “Obeahgate” scandal, much of the animosity directed towards Spiritualists arises from forms of Christian demonology—sometimes transposed to meet Hindu or Muslim doctrines—that conceives of Komfa as inherently impious, blasphemous, sinful, and so an “anti-religious” threat to moral order.⁶

Whether such senses of sinfulness result from assessments of the substance of the practices in question, or from judgements regarding the practitioners who engage them, is another question. As “afterlives” of colonization and enslavement, the popular demonization of Komfa and the subjugation of Black Guyanese are indeed inextricably interconnected processes of suppression and devaluation. The “afterlife of slavery” is a critical conceptual framework that has been constructively defined by Saidiya Hartman (2007), and further articulated by Christina Sharpe (2016), as an incessant state of

³ These are words from Bennett’s *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (2020: 116).

⁴ From “Lamplight,” an extract from Bachelard’s *La Flamme d’une Chandelle* (1991: 160).

⁵ Thompson shared these views in an illuminating Emancipation Eve column in *Stabroek News* (31 July 2020).

⁶ “Obeahgate” describes the circulation of public responses, primarily published as editorials in news outlets and YouTube and TikTok commentaries, to a 42-second-long video of a so-called “Obeah Lady” allegedly performing a ritual in front of the office of Guyana’s Ministry of Education during a protest of teachers led by the Guyana Teacher’s Union on February 15, 2024. Minister of Education Priya Manickchand posted the video to her public Facebook page with the following title: “Obeah in 2024. Done by the APNU (disguised as GTU) in front of my office, Ministry of Education. Do the teachers believe in this [Obeah]?” See Priya Manickchand, public Facebook post, 15 February 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=920955333372596>. While the GTU distanced itself from the ritual performance, the union’s leader Lincoln Lewis (Feb. 19, 2024) penned a letter to the editor arguing that “Manickchand’s comments are no less racist in overtones than those of the colonisers who criminalised obeah to dilute its perceived ability to fuel the spiritual power of the African slaves’ resistance and strength.” Also see Peter Scott (Feb. 16, 2024) and *News Room* (Feb. 16, 2024).

precarity, susceptibility, and endangerment of Black people’s lives, which determines the present in ways that reveal and reproduce the restrictions and deficits of notions of “freedom.”⁷ “Black lives,” Hartman (2007: 6) writes, in Guyana, in North America and Europe, and the world-over, “are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.” Thus, the afterlives of slavery are perhaps most evinced through the persistence of the continuously unaddressed demand that “Black Lives Matter” and can no longer be rendered socially or civically “dead”—subject to “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” as has been the case for far too long (Hartman 2007: 6). That Guyanese feel emboldened to publicly profess their convictions—en masse—that there exists “a special part of hell” for “satanic people” involved in Komfa, represents far worse than mere slander or individual prejudice, but tells of a profoundly embedded, long state-sanctioned, political and religio-moral ideological entanglement that has unambiguously resulted in incarceration, further impoverishment, and even death for Komfa People, most of whom are Black Guyanese.⁸

In many distinct ways, anti-Komfa or anti-Obeah sentiments and discriminations, are anti-Black and anti-African in both their foundations and their ongoing expressions. Colonial Christian “morality” forged the ideological bases for pervasive anti-“African” sentiments held by most Guyanese (including Afro-Guyanese) in regard to religion. What Guyanese deem as “African” religion—Komfa, Obeah, Orisha/Ifá, and like practices—is considered the complete inverse of “English” religion, and so *epitomizes* non-Christianity, or non-legitimated “religion,” while Islam and Hindu traditions have largely attained postcolonial socio-moral validation. Local Indigenous religions, on the other hand, continue to be regarded in much the same light as “African” religions, representing a “deficit” of Christian, or world religion, “influence.” Yet for many non-Indigenous Guyanese, who come into contact with Indigenous culture far less frequently than with African culture, Indigenous religious practices seem more “distant,” and less of an immediate socio-moral threat than “Obeah,” which is said to lurk in all coastlander (and Creole) communities.

While Guyanese generally tend to—disparagingly—emphasize antisocial, “sinister,” and violent aspects of Indigenous worldviews, such as forms of *kanaimà* “assault sorcery,” these practices are also considered less perilous and removed from the lives of most non-Indigenous people living on the coast (Vidal and Whitehead 2004; Whitehead 2002). Many Guyanese tend to understand Indigenous religions through analogy to African religions, with which they are likely more familiar. African and Amerindian religious cultures share a similar status of moral subjugation, yet Indigenous peoples remain the most structurally disregarded of Guyanese, overlooked in policy and in Guyanese national consciousness through all governing regimes (Jackson 2012; Trotz and Roopnaraine 2009). Still, Guyanese look to “Obeah” as their counterexample through which to know Christian morality. As such, Indigenous peoples’ religions tend, if not to be *only* feared, then to be ignored, or even, in a backhanded way, “absolved.” Guyanese overwhelmingly view “Amerindians,” or *Buck*, through a demoralizing ideology of temporal and spatial “remove” that denies their coeval existence in the “modern” nation and characterizes Indigenous peoples’ so-called “lack” of assimilation to Euro-Christian culture as excusable (Fabian 2014 [1983]; Jackson 2012; cf. Thomas 2016).⁹ The same is not true for Afro-Guyanese. Indigenous peoples, as many Guyanese describe, are said to have not

⁷ Also see Gwen Bergner and Zita Nunes (2019), Orlando Patterson (1991), and Deborah Thomas (2019).

⁸ See Peretz (2023).

⁹ Consider that even within the etymology of the pejorative epithet lies evidence of Guyanese attitudes toward Indigenous people, with *Buck* coming from the Dutch word “bok” or “bokken” meaning “wild,” childlike, and/or, “nimble animal” (Menezes 2019 [1979]: 4).

contributed to humanizing the colonial landscape through their (European-exploited) labor as Afro-, Indo-, and other non-Native Guyanese are said to have done, and as such, are largely rejected from recognition of equal human status in reaping the national rewards of the postcolony (Rodney 1981; Jackson 2012).

African-descended Guyanese may not be alone in facing widespread religious and other forms of social stigmatization, but still, what Guyanese consider *signs* of “African” culture continue to hold distinct functions in terms of demarcating religio-moral boundaries, particularly on a symbolic level. Christian demonologies that inform popular abhorrence for Komfa stem in no small measure from dominant conceptions of Komfa and Obeah as “Spirit Wuk,” wherein practitioners are understood to conspire with agencies of the dead through manifestation and other means, such as “spirit entrapment.” Still, the notion of incorporating spirit within oneself, or, allowing one’s “self” to be temporarily “displaced” by that of a dead person or other entity, is certainly not foreign to Christianity, Islam, or Hindu practices. Yet many or most Guyanese would consider equating Christian, Muslim, or Hindu traditions *with* “Obeah” to be a highly inflammatory proposition. Through Christian doctrine and colonial Christianization, as well as local Guyanese Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies, many Guyanese—including Faithists—understand “working (with) the dead” to amount to an exceedingly morally suspect practice, and one that inherently must involve “demons,” *jumbi*, or wayward spirits “sent” to do “bad things” to others. Not all such notions of doing “bad Work” are necessarily Christian in origin, however, as some also represent *precolonial* conceptions of what anthropologists and others have reductively called “sorcery” or “witchcraft.”¹⁰ Widespread colonial, missionary, and anthropological diffusions of these aforementioned terms instilled a hegemonic “modern” vision conceiving of these practices and “forces as by definition linked to Evil and opposed to all Good” (Geschiere 1997: 13). The ways Komfa People understand and *use* these powers tend to be much more ambiguous and illustrate “the need to nuance” the moralizing dualistic distinction long used to disparage and criminalize non-European religiosities (ibid.; cf. Hodge 1990). “Wukin’ Obeah” or “dealin’ wit’ jumbi” are primary means used by Spiritualists for *healing*, and they often describe their curative practices as such among themselves. The ambiguities arise as certain Works—even healing ones—may entail forms of counteractive measure, what some call their personal “war-” or “warrior-medicine.”¹¹ Still, Guyanese today most often perceive such *afflictive therapeutics* through a colonial Christian framing largely informed by the ruthless racial dynamics of plantation society that conjoined “evil Wuk”—and other work—specifically to “African” culture and Afro-descendent people.

Returning to Raymond Smith’s (1976: 329) account of religion in the colonial British Caribbean, he writes that “the legal suppression of all forms of non-Christian ritual and the relegation of African beliefs to the category of superstition was extremely important” to the “formation of West Indian society.” No wonder then that Komfa remains highly devalued, socially marginalized, and juridically circumscribed when in colonial British Guiana “all apparently African belief and practice tended to

¹⁰ Indigenous American, African, Asian, and European traditions of “sorcery” likely have influenced both popular conceptions of Obeah and Spiritual Work, as well as Spiritualists’ practices. On “sorcery,” “magic,” and “witchcraft,” especially useful sources are Meyer and Pels (2003), Parés and Sansi (2011), Vidal and Whitehead (2004), and Whitehead (2002).

¹¹ Wyatt MacGaffey’s (1986: 156) Bakongo correspondents characterized certain kinds of *minkisi* in a similar way as “cursing charms” that “healed by attacking the witch responsible for the affliction.” Stephan Palmié (2002: 177-178) also quotes from MacGaffey on this point, adding that among many Central African peoples, “the definition of incidents of mystical aggression as witchcraft—and not, for example, the exercise of chiefly power—is a matter, not of intention or effect, but of the social valuation of its ends.”

be classed together as *obeah* and characterized as superstition or devil worship” (R. Smith 1976: 328). Missionaries largely “usurped” the role of local healers, diviners, and other Spiritual workers, while at the same time condemning their works as Obeah. Through such historical processes, the cultural space allowing for “good” Obeah works diminished as all forms of “work” came to be defined distinctly as “superstition,” “witchcraft,” or “black magic.” Yet, through its very persecution by colonists—and colonized as well—the cultural space and demand for Komfa “warrior-medicine” also expanded during this same period. According to Brian Moore (1999: 66), in this period “the churches, though in competition with the *Cumfo* societies, were a much more influential agent of acculturation [than schooling mandated through the compulsory education law of 1876] and certainly did play a major role in this regard as religious dogma and secular British culture were inextricably intertwined.” Neil Whitehead (2002: 166) writes of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century missionization among Indigenous Guianese—Patamuna, Makushi, and Akawaio in particularly—as resulting in a similar dynamic, as missionaries’ “culturally inept suppression” of Indigenous “healing, beneficial piya,” and Christian-influenced Aleluya (Alleluia) practices, simultaneously “opened up” the cultural “space of kanimà death.” While colonial legal precedents criminalizing Obeah and other practices labelled as “witchcraft” may not be widely enforced in postcolonial Caribbean states, as they remain on the books they continue to inform ordinary ethics of the nation (Paton 2019; cf. Lambek 2010). Discrimination, harassment, and violence faced by contemporary Spiritualists typify the consequences of having one’s practices collectively and comprehensively condemned for generations as “diabolical” and threatening to the religio-moral order of both local communities and the state. That Spiritualists’ practices remain “menacing” to many or most Guyanese is a reality that becomes all-too apparent when *signs* of “African” (or “Amerindian”) religiosity emerge in day-to-day life.

Hearing a drum beat-out a Komfa rhythm, especially as sun sets or it is already dark, is commonly considered a frightening, aggressive, and inauspicious portent of perils within one’s own purview. Many mothers call in their charges to return home upon hearing those drums. Seeing a white-robed parishioner pass can and often is also taken as a sign of danger, a reminder that such forms of “superstition or devil worship” *persist* in one’s quarters (R. Smith 1976: 328). Similar reactions to Spiritualists, such as spitting in front of a group invited to participate in a state function, demonstrate the “afterlives” of colonial Christianization. As “symbols derived from African traditions have been pushed into a subordinate position and identified with witchcraft, idolatry, and devil worship,” so too have African-descended and other people who embrace these traditions been subordinated and subject to the outcomes of a “social engineering” based in colonial Christianization (ibid.: 340-41).

“Is ‘cause we heal they say we does kill”: “Semiotics of blood” and Rumors of Obeah¹²

The association of men with sorcery and women with healing may also be based on cultural stereotypes about the sexes. [...] Obeahmen are feared because they work in secret, with malicious ghosts (duppies), and cause harm or misfortune. Women, in contrast, are portrayed as peaceful, benevolent, nurturing, caring, responsible, and trustworthy. [...] Their purpose is to counteract Obeah and malicious ghosts.

—William Wedenoja¹³

When asked about histories of Spiritualist churches and Komfa in Guyana, central to elders’ recollections of the past are traumatic experiences of prejudice, sometimes of the most horrendous

¹² This first quote is from a practitioner, and the second is from Lara Putnam (2012: 256), both addressed below.

¹³ From Wedenoja’s study of mothering and Balm healing in Jamaica (1989: 87).

kinds, oftentimes involving incarceration, impoverishment, and even death. As with Komfa practices themselves, stories recalling discriminatory abuses and persecutions endured by practitioners of the past are often handed down generationally within Spiritual families and extended- or “constructed”-kin groups. Certain of these recollections do indeed reach far back to the times of enslavement, as well as often evoking the era of Nathaniel Jordan’s (d. 1928) expansions of Guyanese “folk” religiosities that often conflicted with—or preached against—the strictures of the colonial state. More often, however, Spiritualists’ stories of abuses faced by their predecessors, and sometimes themselves, focus on more recent time periods, including the tumultuous decolonial movement in the lead-up to independence, as well as the era directly following Guyana’s attaining of statehood, times during which the contours of an emerging national morality were in great flux.

Spiritualists report that during the early- to mid-1950s, a time of unprecedented political upheaval in British Guiana, many of their coreligionists were targeted for assault, accused of various wrongdoings, and that even several of their churches and items inside were destroyed. While political or other motivations inspiring these attacks and the general increased persecution of Komfa People at that time is unclear, that both state-supported and community-based actors instigated these occasions of oppression is evident. The early 1950s through to independence saw periods of prolonged political and social turmoil in Guiana, including much championed by the U. K. and the U. S. In October 1953, after 110 days in power, Winston Churchill had British Guianese governor Alfred Savage dismiss the colony’s first democratically elected administration—the PPP headed by Cheddi Jagan—and suspended the constitution to retake full control of the colony (Fraser 2004; Ramcharan 2005). British military presence was strong in the months and even years to come, only to be supplanted by U. S. interests, namely the CIA under Kennedy’s administration (Rabe 2005). After the British reinstated the colony’s constitution, and both Janet and Cheddi Jagan were released from incarceration, in the 1957 and 1961 elections leading up to independence, Cheddi won again. Yet Kennedy enlisted the CIA to undermine his government and empowered Burnham to become prime minister (*ibid.*; Bahadur 2015; Prados and Jimenez-Bacardi 2020). Disruptions of the period may have contributed to discriminations against Komfa People, as well as increased anti-Black sentiments coming directly from England, whereby the late-1940s, the presence of a generation of West Indians in the U. K. had fostered white supremacist movements such as led by fascist Oswald Mosley.

Likewise, the fact that violence and other forms of abuse Spiritualists were forced to confront in the 1950s were direct successors to similar cruelties faced in earlier periods is also clear. One Spiritual Elder who had “come to the faith” as a young man during that era recalled that coinciding with the increase in popularity of decolonial political ambitions among some British Guianese subjects, other factions of the populace were less than enthusiastic, and revived certain reactionary rhetorics of the past. The Elder explained that “they was scared, ‘nough a them was frighten’ a independence, frighten’ to leave from under we ‘Mother Country protection,’ and most scared a them Africans...What independence they gone get once they get it? Independence for do Blackman thing, for Wuk Obeah! That’s what they are thinking! That the country gone go corrupt with Obeah when come independence!”

The entrenchment of antagonism toward African culture, specifically religious culture, in the decade or two prior to formal independence from Britain, was in specific ways directed at Komfa People and their communities of practice. Much of the popular discourse vilifying Spiritualists at that time reflected earlier misconceptions of Afro-Guyanese religiosity, specifically those surrounding aggressive and violent practices thought to be—and in some cases actually—incorporated into Komfa and Obeah, in the pre-emancipation era, and today. As the same Elder quoted above testified in 2016, “when I first come to this [Spiritual] life, when I’s a boy really, I just start work at the

waterfront. I’s a porter on the wharf, you know,” the man said, “and everybody else there, all them men I working with all day, they does just talk and talk bad-bad ‘bout Obeah all day. Saying how ‘this people does Wukin’ Obeah and then this people by them done dead.’ Saying all this and that...‘bout Obeah murders. You does know, saying ‘bout we does sacrifice children them and all this stupidity!” the man exclaimed. “So I never say nothing to them about my new Spiritual life, no,” he laughed, adding, “I keep quiet. But I also a little frighten’ my own self too, wondering ‘bout what it is really I gettin’ myself into just now! But that’s a test a faith! You know,” he told me. “There’s ‘nough test and trial in this life here. And in Spiritual life you must hold firm.”

There was in fact a highly publicized and much discussed purported case of what was then and still is called “Obeah murder” in 1950, which may have informed or reinvigorated popular misperceptions of Komfa in the period preceding independence. The case involved a young Indo-Guyanese girl named Lilawattie living with her parents in Stanleytown, New Amsterdam, who was allegedly killed by her Afro-Guyanese neighbors living in the same yard, tenants of the girl’s parents (Swan 1957: 104-06). As the story goes, recorded in court documents and widely circulated in newspapers at the time (including, interestingly, covered in papers around the world), the fatal episode began when Kathleen Fullerton had a dream in which a spirit-visitor informed her of a cache of “Dutch gold” hidden in her yard. The “demon-like man” in her dream instructed her on how to locate and retrieve the treasure, but, as Fullerton is said to have testified under oath, the spirit required she sacrifice a child in the process (Jordan 2019). Eager to find the gold, Fullerton told her brother Jeremiah about the dream who enlisted known Spiritualist Eric Benfield and Benfield’s wife, Dorothy Brutus, to assist in accomplishing the task to acquire the buried wealth.¹⁴ Together on New Year’s Day the four are said to have lured the young girl, whose parents rented a house to Benfield and Brutus, to their backyard séance before strangling her in a ritual act. Benfield was accused of raping the girl as well, prior to the group throwing her body into the yard’s latrine once her mother, living adjacent and hearing drumming, noticed her daughter had disappeared (Swan 1957: 105; Coddett 2012).¹⁵ Three of the four conspirators were eventually hanged and the incident as a whole left a deep impression on the social consciousness of the nation, just as discussions of political and cultural decolonization were gaining momentum.

Central to the legal inquest into the murder of this young girl, according to reportage, was testimony given by one Albert King, who claimed to have intimate—and condemning—knowledge of Spiritualist practices including the declared role of “human sacrifice” in such rites.¹⁶ This key “expert witness” alleged in his deposition to have grown up in an East Bank Demerara “Cumfa Spiritualist church,” serving previously as an “altar boy” and “follower” from “1936-1944,” when he renounced his commitments to the faith (Swan 1957: 105-07; *Newcastle Sun* Aug. 5, 1950). In King’s sworn statement he contends that a significant feature of the “cult” involved “offering living sacrifices” at an annual feast, which a “head-man,” “Elder,” or “Bishop” can “order [...] whenever his followers want money or spiritual influence to injure their enemies or prominent people” (*Newcastle Sun* Aug. 5,

¹⁴ According to some accounts, “all the accused in this trial were followers of a religious sect known as the Jordanites,” as Guyanese tend to describe all Spiritualists (Latchana [no date]).

¹⁵ Some sources state that a postmortem examination later concluded that Lil(l)awattie/Lilowatee/Lelawati had drowned, apparently in the outhouse, and not been strangled. She may have fallen in without anyone’s knowledge.

¹⁶ See for examples, “Voodoo Murder of Child Charged in British Guiana” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (13 August 1950: 4), “Human Sacrifice Story in Court,” in *The Newcastle Sun* (5 August 1950: 1), “African Mystics in Cumfa Murder,” in *The Barrier Miner* (7 August 1950: 3), “Head of African Cult, 3 Other Held in Murder,” in *Palladium-Item and Sun Telegram* (30 January 1950: 2), and in *The Daily Times* [New Philadelphia, Ohio] (30 January 1950: 12) and *Circleville Herald* [Circleville, Ohio] (28 January 1950: 1).

1950). As King (quoted in Swan 1975: 105) states, “the feast does be an ordinary feast for the poor, rice and greens does be cooked; no meat nor fish.” Yet, as King goes on, he explains that “whenever that Bishop is having a feast he must have a sacrifice,” clarifying for the court, “that is to say if he ask his spiritual God Lucifer, the Devil of a human sacrifice. That sacrifice will be a boy or girl between the ages of seven to eleven years,” he testified (Swan 1957: 106). For practicing Spiritualists—who still discuss the details of this case—what is truly disturbing is how the damning evidence seems flagrantly fictitious and fabricated. Practitioners are quick to point out that no “altar boys” or altar girls are known to Komfa circles, and moreover, that they have never heard of a Spiritualist entertaining “God Lucifer” or “the Devil,” and certainly claimed to be unaware of any forms of *human* sacrifice involving death in any of the many varieties of practice with which they were familiar. They do share that up until about the early-1950s, blood sacrifice of fowls, goats, and pigs was common among Spiritualists, but that the practice faded fast in the decade leading to independence. As dynamic traditions, transformations have occurred both gradually and in pace to meet the immediate felt needs of Komfa communities, and perhaps—as metaphor *or* actuality—human offerings, like those of other animals, became a “vitiating abstraction” to be abandoned and replaced (Fernandez 1986: 142). More likely it seems, however, that deeply embedded ideas in Guyanese society linking Spiritualists, Obeah, and “child murder” come from a philosophical and/or political position far removed from the concrete practices that Komfa People have maintained, and unendingly transformed, over centuries.

Rumors of human sacrifice connected to Obeah, and to African religious practices generally, are far from a reactionary innovation of the independence era, and instead seem to rely on centuries of ideological precedent. However, these narratives did take on heightened meaning locally and in the imperial metropolises not just directly before independence, but decades prior. As Lara Putnam (2012: 254) writes, “stories of the ritual murder of white children by brujos, voodooists, and obeah men skyrocketed to prominence in print cultural production about witchcraft in the Caribbean in the second and third decade of the twentieth century, with commentators stridently insisting that the atrocities reflected deep-rooted African traditions unleashed by the weakening of civilized controls.” One such case that was written about in England, the U. S., throughout the Caribbean and elsewhere for years to come, took place in 1917 at the village of Noitgedacht on the West Bank Demerara.¹⁷ The incident began with the disappearance of Molly Schultz, the two-year-old daughter of John Schultz, who was a White estate manager working for the sugar firm Booker Bros., McConnell & Co, Ltd., better known simply as Bookers, the largest producer and landowner in British Guiana at that time (Morrill 1920: 190).¹⁸

After nine days of frantic searching by the colony’s police force and others for the missing girl with “blue eyes [and] dark brown curly hair,” as the widely circulated reward notice described her features, she was found dead “not 200 yards away from the footpath which many feet had trodden since the time of the child’s disappearance” (Veerasawmy 1919: 117-18). Reports state that the body had been disfigured, and that “those diabolical demons took the eyes from the child while she was

¹⁷ As noted by Veerasawmy (1919: 116) in reporting on the murder, “there are three Noitgedachts in British Guiana. One in Wakenaam Island, one at Anna Catherina on the West Coast, Demerara, and the third on the West Bank of the Demerara River. It is at the last mentioned place that the crime was committed.”

¹⁸ Some sources use the less common spelling of “Schulz.” On legacies of Booker Bros. and the later Booker Guiana company, including the prestigious Man Booker Prize for English literature, see Ben Richardson (2019).

still alive” (White 1922: 79).¹⁹ Several factors make this case a fascinating one, not least of which was the explicit juridical attention to contemporaneously circulating societal perceptions regarding Obeah. In retrospectively covering the case, J. A. Veerasawmy (1919: 124), a prominent Guianese attorney at the time, wrote that “it was common knowledge—as had been shown by the Attorney General in opening the case that Obeah took a very prominent part in the proceedings.” In fact, the defense for one of the accused of the group of “middle-aged East Indian” sugar estate laborers, including an “alleged obeahman” hailing from what is today Uttar Pradesh, successfully argued that due to popular misgivings regarding the defendants’ traditional practices (i.e. Obeah), that the hitherto selected jury must be disregarded and a special jury appointed to ensure justice was properly achieved. The alleged involvement of Obeah in the murder prompted a new law in the colony that “effectively prevented poor, non-white Guianese from sitting on juries” (De Barros 2021: 346). After a second trial, six men were found guilty and hanged and two women imprisoned.²⁰

While overwhelmingly considered “African culture,” Obeah has indeed been practiced and formed by Guianese of all backgrounds, including “East Indians.” As Elliott Percival Skinner (1955: 251) notes in a study of “ethnic interaction” in early-1950s British Guiana, “Obeah historically has been closely associated with the Africans but the first information I received of it came from an East Indian and apparently, through acculturation, it has become an East Indian trait as well.” Skinner (1955: 253) goes on to note, quoting from an anonymous source writing in *Timehri*, that “the obeahman may be a coolie, but is more often Negro, and his consultants may be members of his own or another race; next to Negroes, I should say the people who most frequently resort to these scoundrels are the Portuguese.”²¹ Not only South Asians and Madeiran Portuguese Europeans practiced or sought help through Obeah, but Europeans of all national backgrounds did as well. As Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1992 [1976]: 91n8, quoting Van Lier 1971: 83-83) note of late-1700s Suriname (as elsewhere), “in cases of illness Europeans often consulted the witch doctors [sic] of the Negroes. A number of cases of Europeans exercising pressure on converted [Christian] slaves who formerly enjoyed some fame as experts in this field to revert to their former practices are also mentioned.”

Regarding Obeah’s intercultural, interreligious dynamisms, Nathaniel Murrell (2013: 66) writes that during slavery, Obeah was practiced among the Maroons, slaves, free Africans, and poor whites. Later, it knew no boundaries; it found reception among people of different faiths, ethnicity, and social standing. Its practitioners were Jamaican Myalists, Pocominists, and Kuminists; it is among the Trinidad and Tobago Spiritual Baptists and Orisha (or Kabbalists) avatars; it is found in Guyanese Hindu Kali Mai Pujah, as well as Muslim and Christian sects. Obeah appeals to descendants of indentured immigrants, people of African and European descent, and other creole peoples; so Obeah is not a religion of illiterate maladjusted Africans. Caribbean people of all hue and faith may visit Obeah men.

¹⁹ For another—likely highly fictionalized and certainly racialized—account of the case that focuses on the victim’s eyes, see Nicol Smith (1941: 79-80): “‘Molly Schultz,’ said the captain, ‘was a very nice little girl. About five years old. A sweet little girl. With so wonderful eyes! Oh, so blue were they! Deep blue, like the flower of the flax, yes? Always she was dancing and skipping about, all day long she was happy.’”

²⁰ For enlightening analysis of the case and its implications for Obeah legislation and sentiments, see De Barros (2021).

²¹ Skinner inaccurately attributes this quote to “Veeraswamy” [sic], but it was written by “X,” later attributed to Walter Roth, in the entry following Veerasawmy’s account of Schultz’s murder trial in an article titled “Stray Notes on Obeah.” See “Contents of Volume VI,” *Timehri* VI, 1919 (September [“Third Series”]).

Yet ideologies adamant on framing Obeah as “a religion of illiterate maladjusted Africans” incessantly persist, as they have over generations. Rumors of “Obeah sacrifice” came to the fore again just after independence in the late-1960s, when a series of kidnappings and murders tormented Guyanese communities across the country, resulting in eight deaths over fourteen months before Harrynauth Beharry, a thirty-year-old fisherman, confessed to the brutal killings. Throughout much of 1969 and into 1970, when Beharry was apprehended, Guyanese widely speculated that they were facing a string of “Obeah murders,” whereby the missing adolescents were said to be required for sacrificial Komfa rituals (Jordan 2018). Yet, not only during sensational and catastrophic events like serial murder do Spiritualists find themselves accused of killing or otherwise harming their fellow Guyanese. Known or suspected Spiritualists—particularly elderly and widowed women termed as *ole higue* (or “old hag”)—tend to be the most commonly targeted suspects in a community when someone has gone missing, been found drowned, or if some other form of furtive foul-play is thought to be involved. Women generally, and those fitting the aforementioned categories more particularly, likely become targeted as they tend to be more candid in revealing their associations with Spiritual life. Raymond Smith (1956 [1965]: 164-65) notes that individuals who are “secretive and unfriendly, or ill-tempered and ill-mannered may be singled out” as an “old hag,” “‘suck man’ or ‘suck woman’ (meaning to suck blood).” Similarly, “a person who is mean and selfish or who is suspected of making a lot of money which he keeps secret and does not spend in entertaining others; a person who lives alone and has few friends; or a person who is a stranger to the village. All these may be singled out for accusation” (ibid.: 165).

While murder typically involves secrecy and deception, in many Guyanese communities Komfa People are considered the chief proprietors of secrets, and especially of the hidden sorts of knowledge that can prove dangerous—or, conversely/complementarily, *therapeutic*—to others. Some Spiritualist gatherings have reported undergoing multiple government inquiries over the years after members of their flock passed away while observing healing rites such as fasting, using *bush* medicines, and extended periods of meditative seclusion. As a primary means of treatment often sought out prior to visiting government or private clinics or hospitals (if such becomes necessary), practitioners say that, while rare, people in their care who have died were being treated and had refused to be taken for institutional emergency medical treatment when it became clear that they required such. While they resent the legal scrutinization and accompanying community stigmatizations that resulted from these already tragic circumstances, Spiritualists have said that they are willing to accept those consequences of honoring their vows to strive to help those who seek their assistance. “Is ‘*cause* we heal they say we does kill,” one elder lamented.

When the tragedy of a drowning does strike a village or neighborhood, as another example, people who are often most affected or closest to the deceased frequently attribute the death to a *jumbi*. Citing the many creatures inhabiting Guyanese cosmologies and folk-story traditions, people gathered by the canal or creek where the body was recovered often decry the wrath of Massacuraman, Wata-mama and her Water People, or an unnamed *force* sent to do the predatory *bad Wuk*.²² Such a form

²² Consider, as Mark McWatt (2008 [2003]: 136) suggests, “a nice list of these entities in David Dabydeen’s novel *Disappearance* [2005 (1993): 36-37], where the protagonist, a civil engineer constructing sea-dams and canals is confronted by a populist leader of the peasant workers, who tries to warn him about these ‘spirits:”

‘Let me see now,’ he said, stretching out his fingers to count the spirits, ‘Churile, Massacuraman, Dutchman, Moongazer, Ole Higue, Bakoo, Fairmaid, Sukhanti, Dai-Dai [...]’

‘You don’t expect me to believe in your superstitious stories? Keep them for your low-caste illiterate folk.’

of affliction as drowning is unfortunately all too common in “the land of (many) water(s),” where it represents the leading cause of death for children (Pan American Health Organization 2012: 379). Important to Guyanese cosmological and ontological frameworks, however, is the notion that such afflictive *jumbi* Work in concert with, on behalf of, for even transform between living-human counterparts. So while “Watermamma” may be publicly blamed for the calamity while one is expressing grief at the waterside or grave, the subtext of such a claim—understood by those present to varying degrees—is that *someone* is responsible. And that someone being often indirectly accused has the special, and “Spiritual,” abilities to engage entities like *jumbi* that are widely attributed to Komfa People. The reasons underlying accusations of murder and human sacrifice levelled against Spiritualists are complex and historically rooted.

After all, as Lara Putnam (2012: 254) observes, themes of child sacrifice and cannibalism became the “centerpiece” of literatures about “black people’s black magic in the Caribbean” penned by European and North American authors in the early twentieth century.²³ However, Putnam (2012: 254) cautions not only against interpretations that see “Obeah murder” and human sacrificial practices as “deep-rooted African traditions,” but also those that assume instead a “European fantasy of African thirst for white babes’ blood” as similarly “deeply rooted in the Atlantic past.” In a deft analysis of the circulation of ideas about Obeah in the Greater Caribbean from 1890-1940, using print sources as well as legal records and autobiographical works, Putnam (2012: 262) argues that the idiom of ritual child murder represented the latest European trope in the popular Obeah narrative genre, *not* “the last lingering vestige of African belief.” That last “European addition” can be traced, however, to what at first seem unlikely and much earlier foundations, or prototypes, in European anti-Jewish propaganda that were transferred to the Caribbean with British, Dutch, Spanish, and other Europeans in a much later period of colonization and Christianization. In the postemancipation period as well, “reports of children being sacrificed in India in what was described as ritual murders” spread widely in British Guiana, contributing to the flow of analogous rumors emerging from European metropolises (Campbell 1976: 7).

As Putnam explains, however, ideas linking child murder to Africans and African ritual practices did not gain salience until just after 1900, as before then no references can be found to curative or other “supernatural” properties attributed to White children’s lifeforce. Yet, Putnam (2012: 256) contends

‘Well sir, believe or not they are still waiting to trap you, drown you, gobble you, suck you, sex you, blind you, cripple you. That’s why you will never build dam proper, because you are sophisticated city man. You moving bulldozer to gouge canal without respecting the spirit living there. If you dealing with water, is Fairmaid you got to pleasure. You got to leave out food and flower by the river outlet, otherwise is drown you drown rass. If you dealing with mountain, is Dai-Dai you watch out for, otherwise they eat you whole and not even spit out the bones for a decent Christian burial.’

“Thus, the imagination multiplies the real dangers, perhaps in order to keep the mind focused and prepared for the worst,” McWatt concludes. One can also compare to the account of masscouraman and a European biologist deemed an Obeahman in Cyril Dabydeen’s *Dark Swirl* (1988) and in Aliyah Khan’s (2015) provocative analysis.

²³ Ideas linking Caribbean peoples to cannibalism go back to the times of the very naming of the region by Europeans. As Neil Whitehead (2011: 12) demonstrates, Columbus’s “ethnographic proposal for enslaving the native population” of what became the Caribbean islands and mainland South America was founded on “the notion that cannibal *caribes* inhabited the Caribbean, as the very place-name suggests.” Consider also the character Caliban of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, based upon early reports of European entrepreneurial-imperial-ethnographers in the Caribbean, whose name is thought to be an anagram for “cannibal” as the sort of people to be found in such parts of the world. Also see Schmidt (2007) and Whitehead and Harbsmeier (2008).

that “a semiotics of blood through which Jews and Christians defined themselves in contrast to each other over millennia” provided a likely model for ideas that were transferred to the Caribbean (cf. Bauer et al. 2015). While notorious “blood libel” accusations holding that Jews killed Christian children to use their blood in preparing ritual foods had been disseminated since at least 1144 in England, rumors of this type saw a proliferation in circulation around the 1880s, when anti-Jewish rhetoric and violence increased, particularly in eastern and southern Europe. Accounts originating in the Mediterranean and eastern Europe of Jewish bloodletting rituals were widely published in Caribbean newspapers in this period and offered a model through which Euro-Caribbeans and others interpreted what was being reported as a general upsurge in Obeah and related practices throughout the region.²⁴ Guyanese Spiritualist practitioners were certainly not alone in incurring the wrath unleashed through the local pairing of blood libel and Africa-derived ritual in this period as the infamous Cuban case known as *el crimen de la niña Zoila* (1904) exemplifies, which “touched off a quarter century in which members of black fraternal societies were accused in dozens of separate incidents of kidnapping white children to use their blood to cure the black brujos’ diseased bodies” (Putnam 2012: 260).

When “eye-water fall like sky-water”²⁵

Ol’ woman wid de wrinkled skin,
Leh de ol’ higue wuk begin.
—Wordsworth McAndrew

Discriminations faced by Komfa People today—as in the past—also take many diverse forms that are unrelated to extremes of direct or indirect accusations of abduction, murder, and mutilation. Spiritualists often find themselves inculpated of various lesser wrongdoings and censured in demeaning and publicly humiliating ways for merely engaging their own practices that are harmless to others. Komfa People suffer numerous adverse impacts on their lives stemming from the widespread prejudice they face in society. Many practitioners report that they never wear their ritual garments outside of their Spiritual church to prevent the stigmatizations accompanying being seen as an “Obeah person.” Some have said that if it were not for their employers they would choose to wear their robes not only at church, but feared being seen at the market or elsewhere by acquaintances who might then share such knowledge of their affiliations with coworkers, which could cost them their jobs. Discrimination in employment is a major concern for Spiritualists whether due to clothing choices or other issues, but is a concern expressed by another Afro-Guyanese religious constituency, namely Rastafari, whose dreadlocks are a visual, embodied religious signifier that is much less situationally modifiable (or concealable) than robes.²⁶ Many Spiritualists wear locks, and

²⁴ On the continued proliferation of Obeah in British Guiana after abolition despite increased suppression, see Bronkhurst (1883: 382-83) and Brian Moore (1999: 65), the latter writing that in the late 1850s fears were expressed about the rise of radical black (racial) consciousness, and a ‘reversion to barbarism’ as Creoles were reported to be once more embracing their African culture, particularly the Cumfo religious rites and obeah. To stem this trend, expenditure on the institutions of law and order was increased, and draconian legislation was passed to curb the increase in the practice of obeah (which included the public flogging and imprisonment of practitioners).

Like Moore, Bilby and Handler (2012: 18-22) and Paton (2015) suggest that strategies intended to criminalize Obeah proliferated in the postemancipation era as Obeah practices burgeoned, or as they came to be considered by both observers and practitioners as “Obeah.”

²⁵ As referenced below, this quote is from a Spiritualist Elder.

²⁶ Because of this discrimination, many Rastas and Spiritualists report that they choose to work as vendors, farmers, or other self-employed or “informal” profession.

many people “move between” Rastafari and Spiritualist practices and circles. Spiritualists tend to “move between” other faiths as well.²⁷

One woman I know from a church on the East Bank Demerara reported that a few years earlier she had been unexpectedly let go from her job as a “salesgirl” at a large furniture store in downtown Georgetown. When she queried a coworker friend after the fact, the friend shared a disheartening development. Their boss had complained to all the other workers on the day the woman was fired that they had not informed their managers that their coworker was a Spiritualist. The boss was said to have told the workers that he thought the woman was a Rasta because of her hair—and that was “bad enough”—but on learning that she attended an “Obeah church” decided plainly then and there that she had to be dismissed. According to the friend, none of this thinking was hidden from the other employees or considered in any way unmerited or unjust—by the managers or coworkers. Rastafari and others wearing locks have been intimidated and attacked in Guyana as elsewhere by police and members of the general public repeatedly over the decades, particularly in the 1970s and 80s when the movement burgeoned in Guyana. I have spoken with people who grew up in those times and remember thinking it was normal to see Rastas harassed or assaulted by police, having their locks cut from their heads on Georgetown sidewalks and hung on nearby fences to exhibit to passersby. As recently as 2017, Sister Woziero Esther Gittens, a central member of the local Nyahbinghi Order and Secretary of the National Reparations Committee, confirmed that such abuses are still carried out by state actors. Speaking at an event held at the University of Guyana, Woziero Esther related how Rastafari continue to be persecuted by police due to their religious practices, marijuana use being one among a number of examples she shared. She spoke of her own experience being arrested for marijuana and recalled for the audience that while she was imprisoned “she nearly had her locks cut off by overzealous prison guards” (Sharples 2017).

Spiritualists and Rastas also both confront hostilities concerning their dietary choices, as members of both groups tend to abstain from meat or animal-derived products, as well as salt and often sugar and (refined) flour. As Norman Cameron (1950: 137) recorded in 1927 after he and his spouse interviewed Elder Nathaniel Jordan at the WEMP’s Agricola village compound, “all were to forego the use of alcohol, tobacco, flesh. On admission” into the faith, Jordan told Cameron, “members were to make a vow and keep it all their life. Since it is in Genesis that the animals were created before man,” Jordan “concluded that the animal is ‘man’s elder brother.’ His members are therefore vegetarians. They eat rice, vegetables, greens—borah, pe[a]s, etc., but no meat” (ibid.). When facing incarceration (often due to related forms of discrimination) or through participation in other institutional programs such as public schools or hospitals, Komfa People and other religionists have often found themselves in positions where their faith-based practices must be compromised, either to avoid exposing themselves as practitioners, out of sheer necessity, or from others misunderstanding their faith to such practices as insincere, or as Obeah.

²⁷ One can compare this notion of “moving between” faith domains, as practitioners say, to Stephen Glazier’s (2003: 149-150) account of Trinidadian “Spiritual Baptists who become Rastafarians and then become Spiritual Baptists again [...] and vice versa,” which he contends, “is not a common occurrence.” Still, as in much of the Black Atlantic world, Glazier (ibid.: 150) also observes that in Trinidad “adherents do not feel that they must break all ties with former religions prior to becoming involved with a new religious group. For many, it is possible to belong simultaneously to multiple religious organizations,” a feeling which certainly holds true for many Guyanese, including those who identify as Spiritualists. “The religious lives of Caribbean people—like the religious lives of people throughout the world,” Glazier (ibid.: 150) writes—“are punctuated by periods of intense religious involvement followed by stretches of relative inactivity sometimes interpreted as a ‘falling away’ from faith. Spiritual Baptists and Rastafarians who are inactive still identify themselves as Spiritual Baptists and Rastafarians, respectively.”

Many Spiritualists have shared testimonies about challenges they or others have faced in maintaining food and related customs while encountering distressing situations. One Elder confirmed that in the past it was common practice for authorities to send Komfa People to the Public Lunatic Asylum at Fort Canje in New Amsterdam, Berbice, for even the slightest improprieties or eccentricities, including merely wearing white robes and engaging their practices in public. According to this Elder, that is precisely what his predecessor—“Brother La-shus”—was doing when he was apprehended on the roadside while preaching and admitted indefinitely for “treatment” at the Berbice asylum. While there, the Elder reports, Aloysius De Souza, or “Brother La-shus,” was denied food that would have sustained “his Spiritual strength.” Instead, he was forced to consume meat, salt, and other taboo items in what the Elder described as a deliberate attempt to “break the brother’s spirit” and “tie he to that evil place” as a captive to live out his days, denied from further spreading his Komfa gospel.

Being forced to break dietary taboos or other proscriptions and prescriptions represents only one example of the persecutions Komfa People have endured over generations, but it is one that is salient in people’s minds and reflects submerged “afterlives of slavery.” In a 1985 conversation between three Kongo descendants on the West Coast Berbice recorded by Monica Schuler (2000: 18), “magical powers of escape came into play” when one of her interlocutors “touched on a common theme about people who found slavery intolerable and were able to fly off the ship because they had observed a salt taboo despite the distribution of salted fish and meat on slave ships.” Schuler (2000: 18) goes on to explain that through their “counter ‘science’”—as a synonym for “Obeah”—certain “slave ship captains, slaveowners or employers who understood the deadly nature of salt deliberately plied Africans with it to destroy their occult powers. This is implied, however,” as Schuler notes, “by emphasis on some slaves’ deliberate abstention from salt.” As Brother Aloysius’s successor attested, the need to “escape” the dehumanizing conditions of the plantation did not necessarily cease with the demise of enslavement, as the “racial calculus” and “political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” largely remain in effect, necessitating inspired and *Spiritual* means of survival (Hartman 2007: 6). Referring to days of Aloysius’s youth, likely around or shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, the Elder solemnly declared that, “you know, them times eye-water fall like sky-water,” adding that “you mightn’t be a slave, but you still ain’ able be you own self,” including in present times when Spiritualists endure ongoing animosities.²⁸ To maintain tactics of survival inspired by the ancestors also presents an additional challenge to “be you own self...when they done forbid you from staying like how you mother stay, she own mother, and going back” generationally, he said—describing the “natal alienation” of enslavement and postplantation regimes of capitalism (Patterson 1982; cf. Guenther 2012; Thomas 2019).

Aloysius eventually left the asylum and go on to nurture a still-devoted flock. Many other practitioners were also incarcerated in Berbice’s asylum and in lockups, jails, and prisons elsewhere throughout the country. Stories are also still told about Elder Jordan’s experiences being confined in Mazaruni Prison, where he too was forced to eat meat and salt as authorities attempted to “weaken” his Spiritual and physical resolve. People remember that these Komfa leaders and practitioners were primarily vegetarians, and when confronting such dire situations as incarceration, they tried to fast from the institutional sustenance they were provided. In succumbing or being forced to consume the “flesh” (called *renk*, more commonly) and/or salt or “salt-foods,” they are said to have lost many of their powers and motivations, leaving them exposed to other greater harms associated with their confinements. One story told of Jordan holds that despite being locked up and allegedly made to

²⁸ In Creolese “eye-water” are tears and “sky-water” is rain. See Allsopp (2003 [1996]: 221).

suffer far worse conditions than other inmates, he was still able to “manifest” a rat in his cell to eat his prison rations in his stead. Upon fasting for enough days without being noticed by guards, he mounted a broad-daylight escape over the main fence, swimming free from the island prison and making his way back to Georgetown, where he was later re-apprehended.

The Berbice Lunatic Asylum, however, the only such institution in the colony, holds heightened histories of religious and other discriminations faced not only by Spiritualists, but also by Hindus and Muslims, in particular, who likewise often observe certain dietary restrictions regarding meat and other comestibles. Dr. Robert Grieve (1839-1906), the Scottish former superintendent of the Berbice Asylum, was considered a progressive intellectual and physician, and an astute reformer of British Guiana’s public health institutions (L. Smith 2014: 98-99). Taking up his charge and relocating to British Guiana in 1875, Grieve quickly set about remedying the “extremely poor” public provisions for mental healthcare and other forms of medicine in the colony (Gramaglia 2010: xiv). As part of his medical practice, Grieve wrote and published *The Asylum Journal* for a number of years beginning in the early 1880s, disseminating reports of his various innovative clinical methods. In an early volume he wrote about forcing immigrant Indian laborers under his care, who were vegetarians on being admitted, to eat meat for their own fitness. “In the Asylum,” Grieve (2010 [1881]: 118-19) observed, “the beneficial effects of good feeding are very plainly seen, especially amongst the coolies. Here they have a diet in which is a fair proportion of animal food, butcher’s meat of some kind given every day, and under its influence they almost invariably and rapidly gain weight and improve in their bodily health.” While Grieve might not have still been around when Brother Aloysius was admitted, the doctor’s approaches to treatment were perhaps still in place, as oral testimony demonstrates.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Dr. Grieve also wrote in his journal about Obeah as practiced at the asylum and neighboring communities of Berbice, and Guiana more broadly. In one instance he began with a general account. “That a firm belief in obeahism is widely diffused amongst the people of this colony anyone who is brought into intimate contact with them is not long in discovering,” he insisted (Grieve 2010 [1882]: 208). Countering certain stereotypes about the practice, and reinforcing others, Grieve added that “this belief is not one in obeahism only as a mode of secret poisoning, a materialistic and gross view of the craft, but in it, as a form of enchantment after the style of that of which we read in the Arabian Nights. By its means it is believed that the fortunes of men can be made or marred” (ibid.). Alluding again to the “work” of Obeah, Grieve (ibid.) holds that “when anyone wishes to wreak his vengeance on his enemies without danger to himself it is to the obeah doctor he applies.” Grieve (ibid.) then recounted an episode that “so strongly illustrates both the belief in obeah and its mode of working as to be worth relating,” and I include the anecdote here in its entirety.

One morning the senior attendant a fair skinned almost white man and one of fair intelligence made a complaint that an attempt had been made to obeah him. He said that early that morning an obeah bottle had been found upon the doorstep of his cottage and as he was the first person likely to pass it, it must have been intended for him. Although he made the complaint he was as loud as usual in his expression of unbelief in obeah. How could he a Christian believe in such a thing? At the same time he showed great reluctance to bring the bottle and only did so after a good deal of pressure had been put upon him. He treated it much after the manner one can suppose an infernal machine is handled when its character is known. It was afterwards found out that he had before leaving his cottage that morning looked out of the window and saw the thing of horror upon his doorstep. At once a hue and cry was raised to bring assistance from outside as no one dare pass it. A woman living near came and undertook to exorcise the demon of the bottle which she did by performing the usual rites of

invocation and a liberal application of salt and water. When examined the terrible thing was found to be an ordinary eau-de-cologne bottle filled with a heterogeneous collection after the approved style of necromancy.

Here were:

Eye of newt and toe of frog
Wool of bat and tongue of dog
Adder’s fork and blind worm sting
Lizard’s leg and owlet’s wing.

or their local equivalents. Conspicuously standing above the cork was a hair certainly much like one from the head of the attendant who complained, and its presence was said to act as a guide to direct the mischief towards him. The bottle was afterwards used as a test of the belief in obeahism amongst the attendants and its effects were very marked. The application of the test was in this manner. First came the question. Have you had anything to do with this obeah business? Do you believe in it? Oh sir! How could I believe such a thing!! It is a good thing you don’t believe in it for then you will be able to tell me what you think of this? On which the bottle suddenly appears. The abrupt start, the tremor and change of complexion, in one instance a bolt made for the door, showed that the heart did not confirm the denial made by the tongue. The bottle is still in existence but its contents have dried up so it is feared that the virtue may have departed from it. (ibid.: 208-209)

While here dealing only slightly with the attendants’ and inmates’ own local Guianese “emic” understandings of “obeahism” and its functioning in their lives, at other times Grieve devoted more attention to such issues. He also revealed his peculiar perceptions of the racialized dynamics surrounding British Guianese Obeah as “African.” Continuing with his literary flourishes, and writing of life in the institutionalized world he regulated, Grieve (ibid.: 196) wrote that as for poetry there is not a scintilla of it to be discovered either in feeling or words. People there [in the asylum] are who having delusions of grandeur fancy themselves to possess great wealth or even to partake of the Divine nature. But the dignified air, the courteous manners, the kindly even if imaginary dispensation of favours which go to form the Asylum monarch or hero are never displayed. Wealth seems only to be associated in idea, with the power of unlimited eating and drinking, and position with the right to swear at every one around them. Delusions of persecution which too are often met with, commonly it may be said invariably, take the form of a belief of having been obeahed by the person who is the object of distrust.

As he went on to observe, disclosing some of the racialized rudiments informing his medical practice, that “mania in the case of Africans is characterized more by emotional than intellectual perversion, irrational and over-displayed anger is its most common symptom,” he wrote (ibid.). Illustrating conditions roughly forty-five years after emancipation, the superintendent noted that the “mania” displayed by Africans and other of his inmates, came also in the form of “delusions of persecution” that they “invariably” associated with Obeah. One must wonder if the colonial doctor himself may ever have served as “object” of his deluded charges’ “distrust?” Either way, he seemed not to be hampered by *their* Obeah, or hold much regard for their self-diagnoses of “having been obeahed.”

A particular case from his clinical record, “diagnosed as one of phthisical insanity,” is also worth revisiting (Grieve 1882: 210).²⁹ In 1882, “J.G.,” identified as a “black creole woman” in her thirties, was admitted into Grieve’s care at the Berbice asylum with no previous medical history and promptly “certified as insane owing to her incoherence, violent conduct and tendency to indecent exposure of her person” (ibid.: 209). In describing J.G.’s “attacks of excitement”—which Grieve (ibid: 209-10) feels have a “distinct erotic tendency”—as well as her “depression,” aural “hallucinations,” “crying out,” and “throwing herself on the floor,” he claims that she is entirely “incoherent”; with the exception that, “it could be made out that she had a belief that she had been obeahed (delusions of persecution),” he writes. In introducing her case, Grieve (ibid.) observes in passing that the woman’s wrists and ankles bore “marks caused from having been forcibly restrained by the use of ropes or fetters,” but he never returns to mention the “marks,” if he had inquired of the patient as to their origination, or if and how such circumstances might have contributed to J.G.’s declined condition. The notes do mention, however, that upon being admitted she “had a most miserable appearance” and was “emaciated,” recorded as weighing “only 77 lbs.” for her “5 ft 2½ in. in height” (ibid.).



Along with his distress that “she tried to strip herself,” Grieve (1882: 209-10) also registers his concern regarding J.G.’s tendency to speak to herself, conducting an ongoing “imaginary conversation with people outside” her cell. He attributes his patient’s soliloquizing, at least in part, to what he diagnosed as her “deafness”—“extreme in the right ear” (ibid.). The “attendant” who directly cared for J.G. had reported, however, that she also “suffered occasionally from attacks resembling fits that in them the eyes were fixed [,] that there was convulsive action of the hands, foaming of the mouth and loss of consciousness” (ibid.). Yet none but her personal caregiver was ever present to witness these episodes, so Grieve writes that he remained unsure what to make of them. Then, after roughly six weeks in the asylum, “one morning she suddenly became unconscious and died,” Grieve writes (ibid.). Shortly thereafter—nine hours—the doctor performed a “necropsy” as part of regular procedure, revealing what he then recorded as the primary cause of death: “tumour of brain (tubercle).” Silenced in Grieve’s archive, there is of course no way to know what J.G.’s own ideas regarding her condition may have been, nor what circumstances led her to being admitted in the state

²⁹ Regarding this archaic diagnosis—“phthisical insanity”—of which the main proponent was Scottish psychiatrist Thomas Clouston, President of the British Child Study Association from 1898, see G. E. Berrios (2005).

she was. Presumably some form of violence had occurred, leading to the “marks” on her body and likely far worse.

The “persecution” she faced was unquestionably more than “delusional.” What J.G.’s doctor and attendant describe as symptoms of “phthysical insanity”—speaking to “herself” continuously and fits of “convulsive action of the hands, foaming of the mouth and loss of consciousness”—however, while signs of a brain tumor to both British colonial and “modern medicine,” all also resemble common features of Komfa possession performance (cf. Dossey 1999). After all, when the founding leader of the Faithist movement commonly known as the Jordanites was “struck down by a shaft of light” in a visionary experience around 1917, some interpreted Elder Jordan as being “a ‘seeing’ man,” while many in his village thought that instead of an “epiphany of light and revelation, [...] ‘Jordan must’ve had an epileptic seizure’” (Carew 2014: 70; Roback 1973: 40). There is a possibility of construing J.G.’s incoherence, disrobing, seemingly uncontrollable movement and speech, and—a finale of cathartic rest—as “epileptiform convulsions” (Grieve 1881: 123) *or* as a form of Spiritual entrancement. Yet for Grieve, “Obeah” as such was incompatible as etiology, sign, symptom, *or* therapy. Likewise, as J.G. is said to have expressed a “belief that she had been obeahed,” which her doctor disregarded, the potential remains that whatever abuses she faced directly prior to her confinement, and ultimately her death, were indeed inflicted through some kind of *bad Wuk*.

Regardless of the actual background to this woman’s tragic story, which, at least from Grieve’s records, can never be satisfactorily traced, as Janelle Rodriques (2018; 2019) and others have argued, discourses ideologically linking women and Obeah—as well as disability—have been crucial to colonial and postcolonial constructions of moral subjectivity in the Caribbean, moderating conceptions of citizen and state (cf. Kennedy 2015). “Both women and Obeah threatened paternalistic imaginings of ‘modern’ West Indian nationhood,” Rodriques (2018: 202) writes, “and as such were often narrated as volatile outliers that had to be subdued and/or ridiculed in order to maintain some semblance of national cohesion.” Grieve’s work as superintendent confirms the centrality of racialized and gendered aspects of constructing and regulating “religion” in a “plural” and “secular” colonial society, as well as a later postcolonial “creole nationalism,” that was and in many ways still is fundamentally substantiated through “the pursuit of respectability and the acceptance of a paternalistic patriarchy” (Thomas 2004: 252).³⁰ Despite Guyana’s “matrifocality,” patriarchy reigns.³¹ According to the authors of the country’s first-ever national survey on gender-based violence (Contreras-Urbina et al. 2018: 8), violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Guyana is widespread, driven by an intersection of cultural, economic, social and political factors that undermine women’s position in society and reinforce notions of female subordination and male domination. [...] Patriarchal norms in which the social status of men and boys is higher than that of women and girls (who are seen as subservient to—and subject to the authority of—their male counterparts), are a primary driver of VAWG.”³²

³⁰ For other accounts of “both women and Obeah” as “volatile outliers” and threats to moral order, see Rodriques (2018, 2019) mentioned below, and Collins (1995), Cottrell (2015), Paton (2015), Paul (2000), O’Neal (2020), Ozuna (2017), Murrell (2013), and Stewart (2005).

³¹ On the concept of matrifocality and its practice in British Guiana and Guyana, see R. Smith (1956 [1965], 1996), and more generally see Apter (2013), Clarke (1999 [1957]), Mulot (2013), Quinlan (2006), and Safa (2005).

³² Also see Peake and Trotz (1999), Trotz (2014), and Williams (1996). On homophobia and transphobia, see below.

Along with ethnoracialized abuses faced by generations of Komfa People, stemming in large part from colonial precedents, Spiritualists have also endured and confronted discriminations aimed more directly at regulating their expressions of gender and sexuality, proceeding from similar legacies of enslavement and colonization. Women, as well as queer and gender-nonconforming Guyanese, make up a significant proportion of Komfa practitioners, realities which tend to heavily inform Spiritualists’ representation as a group in society. That many are gay, bi, lesbian, trans, intersex, or nonconforming in other ways contributes to the stigmatization Komfa People face from the generally homophobic and patriarchally heteronormative Guyanese public in their attempts to “subdue” these “volatile outliers” (Rodrigues 2018: 202). As doubly, triply, or quadruply disadvantaged persons due to their intersecting marginalized subjecthoods, queer Black women Spiritualists, who are many in Guyana, live—and too-often die—at a crossroads of precarities (cf. Tinsley 2018). As one such practitioner confided, “I does feel like I must hide so much of myself from everybody,” because if she revealed her genuine complexities as a person, “it’d be a death sentence,” she feared, quite justifiably.

Guyana has a regrettably extremely high incidence of reported gender-based violence, and other forms of violence, with abuses against LGBTQI people rampant and often unquestioned (Carrico 2012; Jackman 2016, 2017).³³ As the woman quoted above expressed, queer Spiritualists often face the worst forms of hostility and so tend to conceal their identities and affiliations, even within certain Komfa gatherings. Generally, many gay, trans, or otherwise nonconforming practitioners find accepting communities in whom they can safely confide, and countless have reported that they open up in such ways only among their Spiritual “family,” never in public even if at an event associated with Komfa. Others of course are more intrepid, undaunted by the possibilities—and likely realities—of meeting enmity when presenting themselves as they so choose wherever they so choose.

Unfortunately, they often face challenging and even brutal consequences for being themselves. During one incident I witnessed, which serves as a near-benign example of what might in other circumstances have turned fatal, a gay Spiritualist Bishop was attacked during a heavily attended public Service held in Georgetown’s busiest location. This was a part of the first Emancipation Day celebrations in which I had participated, on the night of July 31, 2014, convened in front of Demico building at the Stabroek Market Bus Park. A large crowd had gathered in anticipation of the ritual proceedings, some in white or other colored robes, and many in African-print fabrics. At the center of the mass of people stood a group of five or six practitioners who were attending to a small shrine assembled on the pavement, resting on a large solid block of wood and consisting of a variety of items: plants including flowers and green sugar canes, liquids, fruits, candles, calabash bowl-lamps, a palm broom, and much more. Just as the drums began to roll and the Bishop began to announce the commencement of the rites with a Spiritual hymn, a huge commotion broke-out.

At first unsure what had happened in the tumult, I quickly realized that something had been heaved from above to intentionally disrupt the Spiritual Work. Then I saw that those gathered in the middle

³³ Additional sources, figures, and analysis relating to violence and discrimination directed at LGBTQI Guyanese can be found in a report by Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute (Schoenholtz, Gómez-Lugo, and Armstrong 2018). In terms of self-violence, according to the World Health Organization, in 2014 Guyana was reported as having the highest rate per capita of suicide of any nation globally. See *Kaieteur News* (21 March 2017), Rawlins and Bishop (2018), and for accounts historicizing Guyana’s high rates of self-violence and gender-based violence, see Bahabur (2014) and Hertzman (2017).

surrounding the Bishop, as well as the altar, were soaking wet and standing in an enormous mound of ice. Most of the shrine items had been knocked over or covered in ice cubes, and the Bishop had barely remained on his feet. Many in the throng of people were laughing and craning their necks for a glimpse of the perpetrator(s) on the roof of Demico, who seemed to be long gone. But from among the laughter in the crowd could be heard cries denouncing the Spiritualists and their “Wuk” as Obeah. Yet, what caught me most off-guard in the incident were the shouts of antigay epithets condemning the Bishop specifically as an “*anti-man*” or “*aunty-man*,” and accosting the gathering more generally for their public expression of religiosity. One very vocal remonstrator pleaded to the still-snickering and disbanding crowd, that children should not be present for such an event, and that their parents were negligent for bringing or allowing them to attend “some battyboy Obeah show.”³⁴

³⁴ “Battyboy” is a disparaging epithet used to identify gay men specifically, whereas “*antiman/auntyman*” is often employed regardless of (perceived) gender or sex to demean gays and lesbians, or those identified as such. “Batty” can be translated as “booty,” or one’s posterior, connecting maleness, in adolescent form, with the criminalized act of “buggery,” or anal penetration, which remains punishable by life imprisonment in Guyana, as elsewhere in other parts of the Caribbean and the world. Rajiv Jebodh (2018: 118) notes that “in England, sodomy ceased to be a capital offence in 1861 but was still punishable by life imprisonment. Since sodomy was performed in private, it was often impossible to prove the commission of the crime, and as a result the authorities felt it pragmatic to target associated conduct, with section 153(1)(xlvii) promoting such an objective.” Also see Carrico (2012) and Jackman (2016, 2017).

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Article

A Mabaruma Phase Ceramic Inventory from Kumaka Hill, Northwest Guyana.

MARK G. PLEW

Abstract:

This paper describes a Mabaruma Phase ceramic inventory from Kumaka Hill excavated by Denis Williams. Approximately 10% of the assemblage are decorated sherds including Aruka Incised and Kaituma Incised and Punctate. A small number of Koriabo trade sherds are present.

KEYWORDS: Kumaka Hill, Mabaruma Phase, Aruka ceramics, Koriabo

Introduction

Kumaka Hill lies along the left bank of the Aruka River some 8 miles from its mouth and near Kumaka Creek that drains a swampy area south of Kumaka Village (Figure 1). The Mabaruma Phase site is well known having seen test excavations conducted by Verrill (1918), Vincent Roth (n.d.), Osgood (1946) and Evans and Meggers (1960). Though there is no absolute dating of Kumaka Hill the Mabaruma Phase is believed to date between 1450 BP and 350 BP (Williams 2003). It is characterized primarily by coarse-tempered Mabaruma Plain ceramics (Evans and Meggers 1960, Plew and Dagers 2022:22, Williams 2003). Osgood (1946) excavated on the slope of Kumaka Hill, while Evans and Meggers excavated a 1 x 1 unit in 15-cm levels at the Mabaruma Headquarters (N-1, Evans and Meggers 1960:65). They report the site as extending over an area of 70 x 17 meters. Sherds were found across the area with a concentration in the southwestern corner of the site. The 0-15 cm -level was a medium grey soil containing numerous lateritic concretions to a depth of 12 cm beyond which a light reddish-brown loam was encountered. Sherds were common in the 10-12 cm level with the 15-30 cm -level a sterile reddish-brown soil that changed to a reddish clay. The stratigraphy corresponds to that described in a road cut by Verrill (1918). In 1989, Denis Williams conducted a test excavation at Kumaka Hill. Though the reason for the test excavation is not stated, it appears that he sought to assess the range of decorated ceramic types reported by Osgood (1946).



Figure 1. General Location of Kumaka.

Williams' Test Excavation

Following a survey and grab-bag collection of the site area, Williams (1989) excavated a 10 x 10-meter unit in an area of dense surface scatter. It is not clear if this was the same area mentioned by Evans and Meggers (1960). The excavation was conducted using 5 cm levels to a depth of 25 cm. Sediments are generally described as coarse lateritic gravel though black dirt is reported in level 4 (15-20 cm) and an orange-tinged soil in level 6 (25-30 cm). Small ceramic sherds and European glazed ware fragments were found in the upper four levels. A single European bead was reportedly found in level 1 (0-15cm). Cultural remains decrease in levels 5 and 6 and are absent from level 7.

Material Culture

Though a few historic European items were noted in the upper four levels of the excavation the majority of remains consist of ceramic sherds and a single axe fragment. What Williams describes as fire-cracked pebbles were reported with the recovery of 778 sherds. These include plain and decorated sherds of the Mabaruma Phase and a few sherds of the Koriabo Phase ceramics dating from c. 750 BP.

Plain Wares

The most common sherds are Mabaruma Plain, which Williams divided into modes A, B and C on the basis of temper. Mabaruma A is tempered by fine-feldspar sand while mode B exhibits temper of fine waterworn quartz sand. Mode C plain is described as tempered by waterworn granitic sand. William's types include tempers noted by Evans and Meggers (1960). The variance most probably reflects local mineralogy.

	Hotokwai Plain	Koberimo Plain	Mabaruma Mode A	Mabaruma Mode B	Mabaruma Mode C
Surface	3	84	117	159	146
0-5 cm	2	2	30	16	11
5-10 cm		1	18	12	2
10-15 cm		4	30	24	8
15-20 cm		4	60	8	19
20-25 cm		2	18	2	6
Totals		97	273	221	192

Figure 2. Frequency Distribution of Mabaruma Plain Sherds.

A total of 788 plain sherds were recovered. The frequency distribution of modes is relatively even as might be expected. In addition to the Mabaruma Plain sherds, Hotokwai Plain (n=5) and Koberimo Plain (n=97) sherds were recovered, the majority from the surface (n=84). Mabaruma mode A accounts for 35% of the total. Evans and Meggers (1960:119) consider Mabaruma Plain to be most common in the earliest part of the Mabaruma Phase with Hotokwai Plain most common in the middle phase and Koberimo most common in the Late Mabaruma Phase.

Decorated Wares

Decorated wares recovered from William's surface and excavation collections at Kumaka Hill are of five types that include Kiatuma Incised and Punctate (n=5), Aruka Incised (n=57), Aruka Modeled (n=7), Kumaka Modeled (n=2), and Mabaruma Incised with white slip (n=2). Decorated sherds were few in number except for Aruka Incised accounting for 80% (n=57) of the decorated wares at Kumaka Hill. Notably, Aruka Incised was found throughout all levels of the excavation. The assemblage amassed by Evans and Meggers (1960: 118-120) suggests that the Kaituma Incised and Punctate and Aruka Incised and Modeled become somewhat more common in the Middle to later Mabaruma Phase (Evans and Meggers 1960: 121).

	Kaituma Incised and Punctate	Aruka Incised	Aruka Modeled	Kumaka Modeled	Mabaruma Incised
Surface	5	39	6	1	1
0-5 cm		1			
5-10 cm		3	1		1
10-15 cm					
15-20 cm		12			
20-25 cm		2			
Totals	5	57	7	2	2

Figure 3. Frequency Distribution of Decorated Sherds from Kumaka Hill.

Evans and Meggers (1960) observed that decorated ceramics accounted for 13.8% of the sherds of the Mabaruma Phase. The decorated wares from Kumaka Hill account for 10% of the total Mabaruma collection made by Williams (1989).

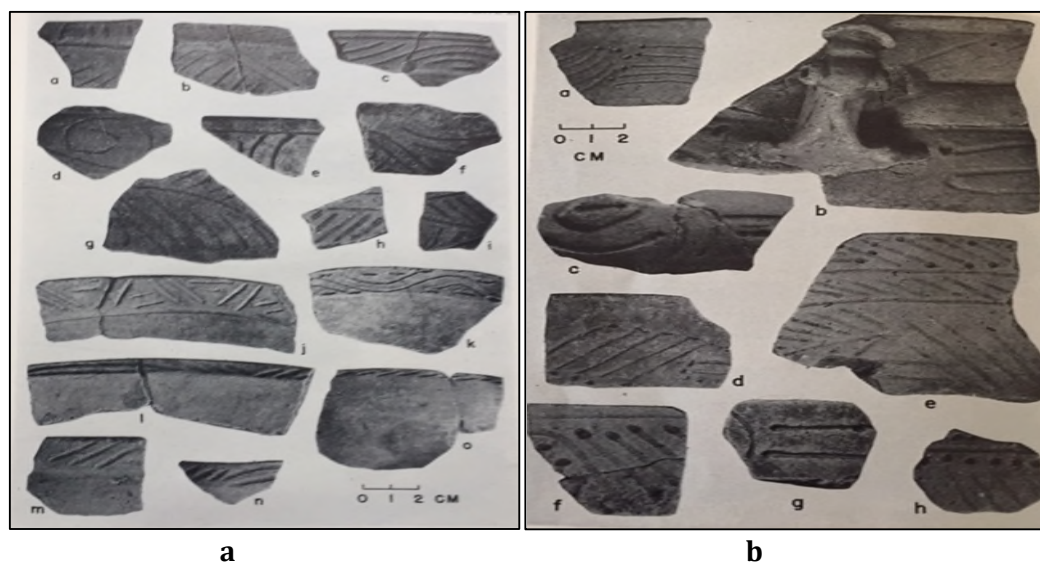


Figure 4. a. Aruka Incised; b. Kaituma Incised and Punctate (From Evans and Meggers 1960, Plates 21 and 26).

Trade Sherds

Of interest is a small number of trade sherds (n=56) recovered from the surface area of the site and upper levels of the test excavation. Types include Baraima Plain (n=18), Koriabo Plain, Koriabo Incised and Koriabo Scraped. Evans and Meggers (1960:116) consider the presence of Koriabo ceramics as acquired by trade. Baraima Plain accounts for 71% (n=20) of the total.

	Barima Plain	Koriabo Plain	Koriabo Incised	Koriabo Scraped
Surface	18		3	
0-5 cm	1	2	1	1
5-10 cm	1			1
10-15 cm				
15-20 cm				
20-25 cm				
Totals	20	2	4	2

Figure 4. Trade Sherds at Kumaka Hill.

Discussion

The William's Kumaka Hill collection reflects the common frequency distribution of Mabaruma Phase ceramics. Seventy-seven percent of the collection are Mabaruma Plain sherds. The remaining plain types—Hotokwai and Koberimo Plain—account for the remaining 15%. In contrast, as noted, decorated ceramics account for 10% of the total collection—a number roughly equivalent to the range of decorated material in the Evans and Meggers (1960) collection. Both plain and decorated types recovered from Kumaka Hill are types occurring most commonly during the middle and later parts of the Mabaruma Phase (Evans and Meggers (1960-118-121). Of additional interest are the

Koriabo materials found largely on the surface of Kumaka Hill. Evans and Meggers (1960:121) note that sherds of the Koriabo phase, specifically the cariapé-tempered Barima Plain, are found throughout the Mabaruma Phase though in limited frequency. Koriabo represents some level of exchange or trade more common during the later part of the Mabaruma Phase. Koriabo ceramics are now known to have a broad distribution in the lower Amazon where it has been noted in Brazil (Hilbert 1982), in northeastern Suriname at sites including Kwatta (Boomert 1993) as well as the eastern portion of the country (Versteeg 2003) and in French Guiana (Van den Bel 2010). Rostain (2008) suggests that Koriabo is the only truly Guiana cultural style. More recently the tradition is seen as extending from the Caribbean southward in the lower Amazon as far as the Xingu River (Baretto, Lima, Rostain and Hofman 2020).

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