
Suriname: gold, coke and malaria

by Iwan Brave

The Venetiaan administration sold the rainforest bit by bit. But the current Bouterse minded NDP government is having a sell-off. Over half the territory of Suriname is already in concession. A few people are getting very rich from this. The inhabitants of the interior are being ignored. Time to get together. Like in a village by the name of Pikin Slee.

PIKIN SLEE. Both English and Saramaccan is heard in the open meeting hall of the Maroon village Pikin Slee on the upper Suriname river. There is a blackboard on the platform, showing a wavy line with little circles on both sides. They represent the river and small villages in the river valley. Symbols designate hunting areas and cultivated fields. Just like a school lesson in geography. But the attentive representatives of the villages know better.

It's a workshop "know your land rights" by Fergus Mackay, human rights lawyer from London, working for the Forest Peoples Programme. The workshop is a warming up for the Krutu (tribal council) that will be held the next day. The existence of the villages is threatened by new timber and gold concessions, that are violating the rights of the population of the interior.

The rainforest is of vital importance for the Surinamese descendents of escaped slaves. Not just culturally or religiously, but every village needs an area with a radius of 30 km for hunting, fishing, medicinal plants and construction materials, as well as for agricultural fields. People wash themselves in the rivers. Drinking water comes from tributary creeks. And then there are places in the forest where the dead are buried and where holy rites are performed.

Five thousand inhabitants counts Pikin Slee, beautifully situated in a wide bend of the murmuring Upper Suriname river, the second largest village of the Saramaccaner Maroons. It can only be reached by canoe. A stranger will easily lose his way between all these similar huts, with roofs made of palm leaves. The other side of the river now has an inviting sandy beach, due to the low waterlevel. Where the shore is meters high, there is a stone staircase to the 'wash place' where the women -often half naked- wash their clothes or cooking gear, or catch fish. Children play there, completely naked.

Peanuts and vegetables are planted inside the village, but the real agricultural fields (kostgrond) are miles away. Pikin Slee is a pagan village. There is no church, the people practice obia and winti rituals. At the entrance of the village is an azan pau, a sort of gate made of dry, young leaves of the palm tree. Who comes from the outside, must pass underneath it, 'to brush off evil'. Goats are not welcome, they could bring bad luck. During its history Pikin Slee has been moved several times, because a kunu (curse) became attached to the village, as a result of manslaughter. The seketi is popular here, a ceremony of women who sing about their disappointment or their joy, while others stand around, clap hands rhythmically and dance with small paces. Short: Pikin Slee is full of authentic culture and religion.

All this might be lost, if the issuing of further logging and mining concessions is not put to a stop. A handful of top-politicians and their friends are getting enormously rich from this. Bouterse and some other military chiefs like Boerenveen and Linscheer collected concessions for themselves and others. Harvey Naarendorp, minister of Foreign Affairs during the military government in the 80's and today ambassador in Trinidad, owns, together with his cousin Henk, 6 logging and gold concessions under the name of NaNa (Naarendorp & Naarendorp) Resources. Under the previous Venetiaan administration, the Javanese leader 'Silent Willy' Soemita paved the way for the Indonesian timber company Musa. The Hindu clan around Mr. Mungra invited Beryaya. The name of Ivan Graanoogst, governmental advisor and assistant of Bouterse, pops up as contact man for Barito, a new company that got a concession of 600,000 hectare (1.5 million acre) following the visit of president Wijdenbosch to Indonesia, in October 1997.

During the Venetiaan administration the forest was sold bit by bit, but under the current Bouterse minded NDP government we see total sell-off. At least half -some say much more- of Surinamese territory is already in concession, for either exploitation or exploration. And for all these issues the same applies: the inhabitants of the interior are treated as if they don't exist.

So they'll have to manifest themselves. The lawyer Mr. Mackay is teaching them how to map their 'lands for hunting and living'. He tells the villagers that their land rights are internationally recognized, on the basis of 'occupation and use'. And the maps serve as 'official document'. He advises his audience to collectively draw a map, in order to prevent concessions from driving a wedge between the villages. He illustrates this by drawing angular squares between the circles, then erases them, and draws a wide, wavy ellipse around the whole river basin. His audience expresses its approval.

'Not to recognize or respect land rights is a violation of international human rights treaties' says Mackay. It seems that the population of the interior may only be saved by the OAS (Organization of American States) or the UN, if they force Suriname to respect land rights. The Trio Indians are further advanced with their land maps and they claim almost all of South Suriname. 'It might not be entirely realistic, but it is a starting position for negotiations' says Mackay.

The next morning, the rhythm of the apinti drum echoes through the village, announcing the beginning of the Krutu. The meeting hall fills up, mostly with men. Women and children choose a modest place near the entrances. On the first row are the Basjas, dressed in panjis. They are second in rank, after the Captains of the villages. The village Elders are sitting opposite the Basjas, facing them, with their backs to the platform. The village Captains sit on the platform, nearly motionless, in two rows. With their brown caps and colorful dresses, it looks like they have been waiting for hours until an official photo has been taken.

Outside flies the national flag. The opening rituals start with a libation, which should appease the ancestors. Because there are also Christian villages present in the krutu, there is now a series of prayers and citations from the Saramaccan translation of the Bible. Not before an hour has passed, and after the national hymn has been sung, may the Captains start to speak, each in turn. When one of them has the word, he addresses a Basja, and the Basja confirms his words: 'Yes, that is true, you are not lying, it is as you say'. The rhythm in this manner of speech guarantees that everyone's attention stays focussed.

Tacoba is another new timber company that was invited to the country last year, after Bouterse came back from China in triumph, with some gratuities. The company got a timber concession and two 'incidental' logging permits, together good for over 150,000 hectare (370,000 acre).

In the case of Tacoba, the villagers were suddenly confronted with numerous 'Chinese Chinese' (as opposed to Surinamese Chinese), with whom they could not communicate, and also with armed men who forbid them to open up fields for agriculture. The Captain of an 'encapsulated' village reports with trembling voice how the Chinese shit everywhere, violating all rules of hygiene.

An atmosphere of desperation arises. Many people present did not believe these rumours before, but now they hear it from the members of their own tribe. It is their greatest fear, not to be able to go to the forest. Sad enough, the direct reason for this krutu is the fact that 'even' Granman (Chief of the tribe) Songo Aboikoni did apply for a gold and logging concession for the area - behind the backs of his subjects.

'One thing must be clear' says the Captain of Pikin Slee with strong voice, 'it is not our intention to fight again for this forest. Our ancestors did that already.' Another Captain: 'We were not taken all the way from Africa to be sold here again'.

The commotion increases when it is reported that a 're-registration' of hunting rifles will soon take place. The last one was 10 years ago. Who does not have a valid permit will have to 'temporarily' hand over his rifle. There is almost nobody who still has this piece of paper. One of the people present points out the 'true intention' of this measure: this re-registration makes the people of the interior powerless in advance, in case the situation should escalate. 'This government is not the same as the previous one of two years ago' he says, referring to the military background of the NDP. 'So let them come here and try to arrest us or try to confiscate our hunting rifles' says a fierce voice from the audience.

When the evening approaches, and the Krutu has ended with a seketi dance and the apinti drum, all that's left is a general feeling of disbelief. It was decided to send a delegation to the Granman, and ask him whether he really acted 'in the best interest of his people', as he claims.

If the Krutu, where every Captain can have his say, is exemplary for the effectivity of the Maroon response, we may fear the worst. The rate at which logging is going on, and the speed at which rivers are polluted with heavy metals from goldmining, is many times higher.

The Indonesian timber companies claim to exploit the forest in a sustainable manner. Regarding their bad reputation, this is very questionable. Musa has been put under guardianship in their own country, because of their 'destructive' logging methods. Beryaya was banned from the Solomon Islands, because of 'attempt to bribe government officials'. And Barito was involved in illegal destruction of communal forests in South Sumatra.

Sustainability is also in Suriname an empty keyword. 'It is the task of the government to supervise production, but there are so many bribes passing over and under the table that they can do as they please' says a biologist. He believes that Bouterse 'personally and as a go-between' supplies logs to Musa.

'The reality is hit and run' confirms Roy Hilgerink, who is a forestry specialist of the department of Bostoezicht (Forest Control) of Lands Bosbeheer (LBB, National Forestry Department). This department is in charge of supervision, but only has three landrovers. Roads are made in the forest, without any previous recognition. When they happen upon a swamp, the bulldozers just change direction. Sometimes hills must give way. Creeks are filled up, thus causing small artificial lakes, and they in turn are causing parts of the forest to die. 'That's a practice I see mainly with Musa' says Hilgerink, who is showing aerial photographs.

Hilgerink describes the situation of foreign loggers as 'exploitation'. 'Those guys get a chainsaw and are left alone in the forest. They level as many trees as they can, because they are payed by the cubic meter. Much of the wood is rejected late.

While a few individuals are getting very rich from these concessions, there is hardly anything flowing into the state's treasury. Companies are enjoying a 'tax-break' of 5 years. And the tax laws themselves are from 1947, completely outdated, certainly when you look at recent hyperinflation. Per log the average 'retribution' still is 5 Surinamese guilders, which is about 1 cent today. LBB touched 2.7 million Surinamese guilders last year. 'You can't even keep a car on the road from that' says Hilgerink. He also tells the story of a high government official, who had a side job in lumber trade. There was a proposal to augment retribution to 3 dollars per log - but in his own best interest he put this proposal 'in his desk drawer'.

Goldmining made the situation critical. Rivers and creeks are being polluted at a high rate. Canadian companies Golden Star and Cambior are working near the village of Nieuw Koffiekamp. In Guyana, Golden Star caused the largest pollution disaster since 20 years. In 1995 all life was extinguished from river Omai, as a result of severe cyanide pollution, following a dam breach.

The gold reserves in Nieuw Koffiekamp are estimated at 2.4 million ounces. Just like anywhere, local land rights are ignored and the population is kept out by armed people.

There are thousands of 'garimpeiros' in the interior at the moment. There is 'no supervision at all' on the working methods of these Brazilian goldminers. 'These individual goldminers cause an ecological disaster' says Hilgerink. 'I am not an expert where mining is concerned, but when you see all these discoloured rivers from the air, you know something is terribly wrong. And thanks to the roads of the logging companies, the forest is conveniently opened up for these goldminers.'

In Guyana and Brazil the army chases the garimpeiros out, but in Suriname they can 'do as they please', just like the loggers. Moreover, in the Marowijne area, in Eastern Suriname, which probably holds the largest gold reserves, the military are involved in mining. This territory of the Aukaner Maroons (Ndyuka) is known as 'gold, coke and many cases of malaria'.

Desi Bouterse reassured the population of the interior during his election campaign in 1996: the NDP would put a halt to the sale of the forest. They all credulously voted for the NDP.

Now it turns out that Bouterse is the sly fox, preaching Passion. On a regular basis the interior receives tools, cassave graters, outboard engines, electricity generators and telecommunication posts. 'But those are all sops' says Hugo Jabini (35), president of the NDP-branch in the Boven-Suriname region. 'In the meantime, billions of Suriname guilders worth are taken out of the forest, and perhaps just 20 Maroons get a job there, at a meager wage.'

Jabini also complains about the undervaluation of Maroons during the formation of the government. 'None of us became Minister or Secretary of State. High ranking people sometimes attend festivities, usually bringing much liquor and food, but local people don't get a chance to talk with them.' The Krutu was an initiative of Jabini and others, who wanted to expose the sly practices of Granman Aboikoni. Quite revolutionary, because in Saramaccan tradition it is not done to openly debate the acts of a Granman.

The NDP is also getting tired of this revolutionary attitude of Jabini. On the day after the Krutu he was carpeted. 'Their reproach is that I am mixing in politics, but the only thing I want is to be receptive and

to make my people aware of their land rights. As ordinary citizen you are not allowed to make any demands in Suriname'. Jabini says he does not want to let the NDP down. 'But when our interests are in danger, he was carpeted.

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