

Where the "global village" is pure reality

Suriname, lessons of future

It is not a nation, it is a treatise on a living cultural anthropology. Africans, Indians, Asians, Europeans, were gathered together in this corner of Amazon overlooking the Atlantic, between Brazil and Venezuela, and they communicate with each other in Dutch. The history in reverse of the most colorful country in the world

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The yellow light of the windows of St. Alphonsus church illuminates all the skin nuances of the God. People. The only white is celebrating the Mass from the altar. He is Father de Bekker, 58, a Dutch anthropologist- priest who works as teacher. The believers listening to his sermon should be photographed one by one: ranging from dreadlocks to shaved heads, the confused facial features, almond eyes and kinky hair, black skin and straight hair; the heterogeneous look, full suits and football shirts, skirts and first communion dresses, high heels and sandals. All stood to recite, with one voice, the Credo. In Latin. And after the Mass, everybody to have tea, as it is done in English churches.

In a tropical heat, in a slow-motion rhythms of life, in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, the reality seems to evaporate in a dream. Walking along deserted Kaiserstraat, you pass by the mosque, a half-dozen Christian churches, the synagogue in wood, while in a short distance we can see the spire of a Hindu temple. No, it is not a dream, the statistics say: the Surinamese are Hindus (26 percent), Catholics (22 percent), Muslim (19 percent), Protestant (18 percent). Here are not a majority and a minority, there is no category of "different", the "we" and "other." Here the ethnic element, the religious and cultural one, which obsess European identity crisis, simply went to hell, all schemes are skipped, but no one seems to care.

There is no criterion that can define this country: too rich to be considered a Third World country, too poor to be part of the global economic North, Suriname occupies a dignified 66th place in human development. *Aurea mediocritas*. Neither fish nor fowl. An unknown land, which before independence (1975) had a name to be divided by three: Guyana, like the British Guyana, and French Guyana, insignificant colonies between the mouth of the Orinoco and the Amazon basin. Places of prisoners or fugitives, "famous" only for the prisons and evasions of the famous "Papillon". Places of jungle and malaria, unbearable heat and salt decay.

But it is precisely in this corner of the world that history turned its heavy certainties, starting from that of the white man absolute domination.

The first exception is for indigenous peoples, who gave name to the region (Wayana e Caribe). Destroyed, subjugated and humiliated throughout the New World by conquistadors and cowboys, Amerindians of Suriname have rejected the attacks of Spaniards, thanks to perfect knowledge of the forest and the deep military organization.

Spaniards gave the green light to the British, led by Sir Willoughby, who established a peaceful co-existence, being interested only in search of gold along the Amazon river.

Things changed with the arrival of the Dutch in the second half of the seventeenth century. Their war against the British in American continent had ended without winners or losers, but their achievements, ratified in the Treaty of Breda in 1667, would have had the opposite fate.

The British got a peninsula on the northern coast called New Amsterdam: nobody could imagine that it would have become New York City, the center of modernity.

The Dutch kept Paramaribo, ie nothing. From that moment the history of Dutch Guyana added another black page to Western "Christian" atrocity of slavery. The new inhabitants of the colony arrived in chains in Fort Zeelandia (which now hosts cultural events) from West Africa. They were mostly Ashanti of Gold Coast, now Ghana. Workforce constantly brutalized, forced to work in sugarcane plantations.

The violence of the white masters is appalling, absolutely gratuitous. But this is the Amazon forest,

not the cotton fields of Mississippi or Alabama.

Slaves rebel, the jungle welcomes them. As soon as they can, they let their wives escape and begin to organize an Africa from this side of ocean.

Masters try everything to squash them, they even try an unlikely alliance with Indians. Nothing to do. According to John Gabriel Stedman, English adventurer who took part in a hunt for the negro rebels in 1772, it is clear that "... An African chief will rise, leading his wounded friends in a bloody fight; he will reward us with a war of revenge, giving back blood for blood and terror for terror " (" Expedition Against the revolted negroes of Suriname").

African leaders are even three, Bonni, Joli-Coeur, and Baron. Their names shakes the Dutch landowners forced to live in a state of siege in Paramaribo, while the insurgency flares up in the plantations. At the end of the eighteenth century, whites must accept the peace: no one can disturb the former slaves, who begin to live according to their traditions and customs in the great green forest uterus. They are the bushnegroes. They will never have to search for their roots out of the ghettos, because they never lost them. It is the only case on the continent, from Alaska to Patagonia: a few thousand people on over fifty million Afro-Americans. "One of their leaders, Asongo Abokoni, Saramacca tribe, made a trip to Ghana, where he was welcomed by Ashanti leaders" says Father de Bekker, "the same rituals, same language, a fantastic experience".

Afro-Americans become the backbone of the nation. They are now 15 percent of the population but they are the majority, if we include "Creoles" (which in Suriname shows all possible combinations of black skin). Under the supervision of the more and more enlightened Dutch, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Afro-Americans who leave the forest, form the political elite, they choose the liberal professions (lawyers in particular), they become teachers. They need new workers, other laborers in the plantations.

They make them come from India, where they already worked the tea and spices to His Britannic Majesty. They are the new proletariat, looked down upon by the black elite (another inversion of the story). They begin as exploited laborers, but not slaves. Then they become small "farmers". Finally, they dedicate themselves to the trade, their true vocation, and within a couple of generations they become the richest people in the country.

To replace them in the hard agricultural work the third wave of migration comes: Indonesians mostly coming from Java island (for this reason, they are referred as "Javanese"). After Hinduism, Islam too lands in the most Catholic continent in the world. The Church of Rome had already developed strong roots among Bushnegroes and Amerindians, facilitated in the conversion by the tradition of monogamy and condemnation of adultery (both communities are curiously matrilineal: the offspring follows the female line). And as far as tiny, Jewish community has also ancient roots in these parts (the synagogue of Jewish Savannah, in the jungle, is the oldest in the Western Hemisphere).

If Jews were greatly weakened, it is primarily for the prohibition of marriage between Sephardic group (which came from Brazil, but was native of Portugal) and Ashkenazi (from Netherland). It is sad that often the children of Israel did not reach ten men to make alive their increasingly abandoned synagogue. But it is nice to see mulattos with the Star of David around their neck, who may attend (like many other Jews) a Protestant church.

Peoples of Suriname are mixed at school, the rest of the game is done by feelings and Eros.

Only Hindus are much more reluctant to mixed marriages, "but there are no social barriers or distinctions, everyone is with everyone" says Leo Morpurgo, 75, coffee-colored Jew, with Venetian origins, for thirty years director of "*De Ware Tijd* ", the main newspaper of Paramaribo. "Only at a political level, from some years up, membership by ethnic group has increased, but this phenomenon seems more oriented to ensure the balance than to blow it up", added the old journalist.

Surinamese Democracy had very fragile foundations, at the time of independence ("but you never learn to swim, unless you jump into the sea", says Morpurgo).

In 1980 an army officer, Desi Bouterse, seized power in a coup. He is a great demagogue, his nationalist populism gets a remarkable consensus. In the eighties Suriname knows the phenomenon

of guerrilla warfare, of apparent ethnic origin: actually, both Surinamese Liberation Army (also known as "Jungle Commando") that would represent "Bushnegroes" and "Tucayama" struggling for Western Amerindians, are substantially bands of adventurers. Ronnie Brunswijk, commander of "Jungle Commando" was the head of the bodyguard of Bouterse.

In 1987 they come to peace and democracy is restored, with the introduction of a new constitution. The 1991 elections are won by the New Front of Ronaldo Venetiaan, an upstanding university professor, who is named president of the republic.

His policy of cuts in public spending to restore state finances caused him to lose a lot of supporters. In the elections of 1996 Bouterse of the National Democratic Party takes a partial revenge, and he is able to get elected President Jules Wijdenbosch.

Bouterse, the old retired dictator, still maneuvers the threads of politics, but now he faces accusations of being involved in cocaine trafficking.

Surinamese people do not seem very passionate about the political events. To tell the truth, they do not seem very passionate about anything.

Without excessive economic worries and without mania of development, with a good basic education, the Surinamese join some tropical joyful indolence with gentle detachment typical of Dutch mentality.

One of the secrets of tranquility is certainly the large available space: Suriname is the nation with the lowest population density in the world (only three inhabitants per square kilometer). Paramaribo often gives the impression of a ghost town: few people in the streets, little traffic. Virtually no tourists, even if this land offers incredible natural beauty (they are developing some alternative and ecological tourism, but it is just a beginning).

The Surinamese actually travel a lot, but almost exclusively in one direction: to and from the Netherlands. "KLM" flights from Amsterdam to Paramaribo are for long periods sold out. The exported best-known "national product" is formed by football players (although in terms of real wealth bauxite is the main source of Suriname). Gullit, Rijkaard, Winter, Kluyvert, Davids, Seedorf: the list of players of Surinamese origin is very long. But "*Voetbal*" as it is called here, is the monopoly of blacks and "Creole": Asians do not let themselves be captivated by the god of football. Nothing to do, however, with the typical frenzied passion of the entire South American continent, as far as all athletic "black boys" who play football are fascinated by neighboring Brazil. There is just a weird sport that unites all ethnic groups in Suriname: the "bird contest", the singing bird challenge. It is impossible not to notice, in Paramaribo streets, dozens of men with a cage in their hands. They are all owners of small singers with wings, which will challenge in endless tournament on Sunday morning in the green square in front of Parliament, a stone's throw from the ocean.

Training a "pycolet" or a "twa-twa" (Birds of the Amazon) is an art (of Chinese origin), which requires an almost maniacal care of birds. The true lovers have at least four birds (certainly the poorest can not afford this game, as a good "singer" costs 4 to 5 millions liras/ 2.500 euros).

The "singers" are all male, they should be excited, so they have the best performance. They live long time, more than twenty years, and then they become members of owners' families. Many birds can be freed, returning alone to the cage, to the owner.

The challenge is a contest of quantity: they calculate how many times each champion emits at least two consecutive notes in 15 minutes. This competition highlights the strong individualism of the Surinamese, who are nervous during the singing challenges. Gambles are prohibited. At the end of each tournament (you can also play in a team) there is a feast open to all.

This is the greatest passion of Paramaribo, the city that was exchanged for New York. Completely ignored by the rest of the world, the Surinamese live every day, quietly, that "global village", that many of overdeveloped Westerners find just on the Internet or television. From the Amazon jungle comes an authentic "lesson of future".

Cesare Sangalli