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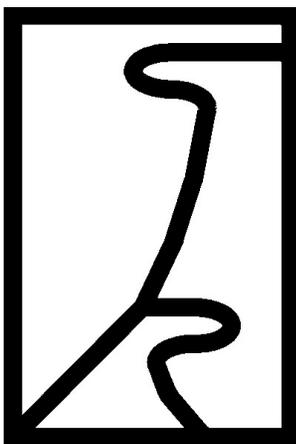
Achtergrondartikelen

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Planning of settlements

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PLANNING OF SETTLEMENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Scattered throughout Suriname's forest interior, some two hundred villages exist. They are quite small: the two hundred of them harbour some fifty thousand people. "Harbour" is here the correct word: Bushnegroes and Amerindians are semi-nomadic people; most of the time they are not at home. Some villages harbour just two or three extended families.

Villagers used to live on subsistence farming, but those days are over. Most money comes in from migrant labour. No money is generated locally, apart some subsidized jobs in health care, primary education and administration. There is some money going on in large scale lumbering, gold mining and drug trafficking, but these operations are controlled by outsiders, and it hardly stimulates village activity so we might view these activities as migrant labour, be it nearer to home.

There is no future in subsistence farming. Increased population density and depleted soils - poor soils to start with - lead to a dead end. Beyond that lies ecological breakdown. Moreover, Suriname has become a relatively prosperous country and its population is no longer satisfied with a life on the brink of mere survival. There is no future in subsistence farming and by now already most of the food is imported. With migrant labour as virtually the only source of income, the villages are not very stable. Organizations planning development projects for them should consider different scenarios for demography. In this essay we will do that.

This essay is about Saamaka - the upper Suriname river basin area. Some observations may hold elsewhere, but we are unable to extrapolate. We know Saamaka and we feel confident to report on it, but we don't know enough about the situation elsewhere.

This essay is rather complex in structure. That can not be helped. The matter under study is a complex one, and in this essay we try to discuss the aspects that always seem to pop up when development planners discuss the future of Suriname's inferior villages.

2. PLANNING

First of all: in demography little can be planned. Communities can be destroyed easily, but the can be created far less easily. Planners tend to overlook this asymmetry. On various drawing boards there are beautiful plans for new population centra. Such drawing exercise is very satisfactory for the planners: it makes one feel like Czar Peter the Great or like God, and that feels good. But it is mostly futile. Demography follows social and economical mechanisms - not blueprints. Anyone involved in (say) slum clearing projects can tell you that much.

Then what is the use of this study?

Migration flows are determined by forces like birth rate, economic opportunities. Migration flows can not be forced, unless by very brute force. But they can be slightly redirected. It is like sailing: no sailor can steer his vessel head on against the force of the wind, but if he understands the forces of wind and water, he can use them.

3. NO ARBITRARY LOCATIONS

Bushnegroes fled to the jungle to escape slavery, they build their villages where the maroon hunters could not reach them, and there they stayed to this day - thus conventional history teaching. It is misleading, in the sense that it suggests too static a picture of settlement on quite arbitrary locations. It suggests something like this: "Here is where the ancestors became hungry, dropped their loads, started a fire to cook their food and after eating they were too drowsy to move on so that is why we live here today."

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In conventional history teaching, for in as far as settlement locations were not haphazard, they were selected for martial reasons: for example, villages are often located at rapids, because there the flotillas of maroon hunters were in disarray and could not fight effectively. Once, I too believed such lore - but since I witnessed a jungle war, I realized that it makes no sense. No aggressor would attack a jungle village from open canoes.

4. NO ANACHRONISMS

Along the river Rhine there are some villages, centred around Teutonic castles on easily defensible hilltops. Originally, the hilltop location was a good idea, but now it is only a nuisance to traffic and the only reasons the villagers cling to their hilltops is that those castles were built so durable and failed to collapse after their useful days were over. But they do attract tourists.

The tourist brochures give a similar picture of the Bushnegro villages: anachronisms from a distant maroon past, still breathing but you should visit them NOW because tomorrow might be too late.

This picture is false.

Bushnegroes use wood-and-thatch architecture, which does not survive for ages, and villages have been replaced four, five, six, seven times since the maroon epoch. That some of them are located near rapids, reveals no anachronism: rapids are where the river crosses a basalt ridge, and that is where one can build a village that is not swamped by three metres annual rainfall. All villages have a very sound reason to be where they are: geographic reasons, economic reasons and strategic reasons, and within a decade after these reasons cease to be sound, the village is replaced when the thatch rots so the hut must be rebuilt anyway.

5. DYNAMIC EQUILIBRIUM

Most villages tend to be deserted after roughly a century. That a considerable percentage of villages are now on the verge of being deserted, does not mean that the concept of small jungle villages is an anachronism. There obviously is some kind of dynamic equilibrium that keeps the villages shifting, but alive.

Very much alive, indeed. Everywhere one can observe huts being rebuilt, and quite often rebuilt in stone. Building in stone is not a sign that the inhabitant is just hanging on, waiting to be relocated. And after the war, every one of the Cottica villages had been rebuilt. After being completely destroyed, left for six years till the jungle completely reclaimed them, after the population had been interned in fugitive camps abroad and both natural resources in the area (lumber and bauxite) had been exhausted ... if there ever were villages nominated to disappear, it were the Cottica villages after the war. But they were rebuilt, every one of them.

Apparently, the concept of small jungle villages is no anachronism from a distant maroon epoch.

It is very much alive.

6. ENNUI

This picture (the inferior villages alive and kicking) is not the first impression a visitor gets.

The first impression is that of the village youths, sitting on the landing with their backs turned toward the village, staring over the river, dreaming of Paramaribo, of Kourou, of the metronome Paris even. Few villagers seem satisfied living in their arcadic villages on picturesque riverbanks. I will give you an anecdote to illustrate that.

In the year 199-, in the village of A--e, a women's organization was created, but it did not wither because it lacked a purpose: it was advised into existence by visiting professional advisors who claimed that no village can develop without a woman's organization.

After some years of stagnation, in the year 200- a consultant team visited A--e and staged some exercises to discover a purpose for this woman's organization. One of the exercises was an

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assignment to make a presentation of what the villagers would like their village to look like in ten years time. Scissors and glue were distributed, and a stack of illustrated magazines to stimulate the imagination. After an hour, the presentation was ready. And very prominent in the collage was this picture of a fugitive camp. No beautiful carved huts in the shade of fruit trees on the brink of a lush jungle vegetation, but cardboard and canvas shacks, row after row, on a shrub plain - this is what the villagers would like their woman's organisation to strive for. End of anecdote.

This, of course, may well be ignorance. The illustrated magazine in the anecdote was a Dutch children's publication devoted to ban all bias against the Third World, and it rigorously censors everything hinting at squalor. So the fugitive camp picture had been bleached and cleaned in the darkroom till all traces of hopelessness were removed and it looked like any modern suburb. The women's organization might have mistaken the pictured fugitive camp for Billiton staff village - that is inhabited by ex-pats too, so here are some similarities.

But those youths sitting on the landing and staring out over the empty river have all visited Paramaribo, and they know that for their class, migrating to Paramaribo means sitting on a wrecked car and staring out over dusty old Ramgulamweg.

There are hardly any economic opportunities in Paramaribo for unskilled labourers. The revenues for a mason's apprentice are just enough to buy chow-minh, they all know that. But in Paramaribo there are more than those three old mildewed videotapes to watch and more girls (most of them sisters and nieces in the village anyway) to discuss when sitting on that car wreck and staring out over dusty old Ramgulamweg.

Boredom it is, the force that drives the youths out of the villages. Search for economic opportunities and education are also urbanizing forces, but they come only second and third. Boredom is the most powerful force, since an arcadic jungle village is as boring as heaven.

This, of course, is nothing new. Villages have always been boring, in the videotape-less past even more so. It is often suggested that boredom only became a relevant migrating force after the introduction of outboard motors created a means of escape. This is nonsense. No exiting three weeks trip over rapids and all, can keep a youth cringing for entertainment confined to a dull village.

Boredom is not a new migrating force, it has been active for ages. The reasons it has not yet drained the villages dry is that the out-flux of emigrating youths is sufficiently offset by an impressive birth rate. It is rumoured that that is related to boredom too, but we are no experts in that field and it is beyond the scope of this paper anyway.

7. EQUILIBRIUM SIZE

For centuries, there have been small villages in the jungle. These villages were not isolated, but in some kind of dynamic equilibrium. There were considerable migrations: old villages were abandoned, new villages emerged, the number of villages increased with increased population - but the SEIZE of the villages remained remarkably stable - small, that is. In the last century, Paramaribo has grown from a small triangle from Zeelandia to Nieuw Comb, to Cultuurtuin to the present spread from Leonsberg to Leidingen, but the interior villages are still as small as three, four extended families, just like in the early nineteenth century. The notion that birthrate, death rate and urbanization rate balance and have been balancing is a platitude, that reformulates this intriguing stability - it does not explain it, for a small unbalance would lead to runaway village sizes.

8. MIGRATION FORCES

To understand the villages' remarkable stability in seize, one should study how attractive and repulsive forces vary with seize. That I will do now.

8.1. SEARCH FOR CULTURE

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The main force that drives people away from small villages, I already mentioned: ennui. Let me use the official terminology, because it sounds more positive: search for culture. In the demographic jargon this does not mean something highbrow: culture includes gossiping about girls and swapping audiotapes. And even when the repertoire of popular audiotapes is very limited, for culture seekers there is only one rule: the bigger the better.

For highbrow culture, this is easily explainable: a provincial town lacks the accumulated talent for a full blown philharmonic orchestra, lacks the funds for a well stocked library and lacks the market for a Michael Jackson concerto. But the rule also holds for more trivial kinds of culture. No cowboy in the North American plains, intend on gambling away his money after deliverance of his herd, will stop at the fruit machines in the saloon in Hicktown, Alabama - he heads straight on to the same fruit machines in Las Vegas. I can't explain it, but it is an amply documented fact. And similarly, a village kid from Saamaka will not jump of the DAF truck in Brownsweg to stare out over the dusty laterite road there, he heads straight on to Ramgulamweg. There is no explanation, but it is an adequately proven rule: culture seekers move to the biggest population centre.

Civil servants planning mid-size urban centra in the interior should be aware of this rule.

8.2. SEARCH FOR EDUCATION

Search for education is another migration force that drives people to larger communities. Whether this is the second or third migration force in strength is immaterial now - I discuss it before the search for economic opportunities because its dependence of seize is easier understood.

Schools need seize.

A six grade primary school needs a hundred pupils, else classes won't fill up and must share teachers, at a cost of efficiency. Secondary schools with their specialized teachers need even more pupils, and a university must be really huge before it can accommodate expertise on (say) early-Hittite literature, non-ferro-metallurgy and everything in between. But for education, size does not mean village seize: Oxford, for example, is not much of a village. Size means hinterland size.

Forget about universities within the framework of this paper, but there have been plans for secondary schools in the interior. Deplorable as it may be for small children, boarding houses for adolescent students at secondary schools are in Paramaribo as accepted as university campuses are in America, and students who dislike boarding houses move in with Paramaribo based members of their extended families. Many parents do claim that they can not give secondary education to their children because they can not find accommodation for them. But this usually means that they can not pay for their maintenance - which is a different thing.

Search for PRIMARY education is a migration force that lures people to communities with one hundred children or more, but once this seize is reached, it ceases to be an migration force. Most Saamaka villages are parts of clusters of at least that seize - clusters of villages close enough to allow for a school boat to collect pupils. So the search for primary education is NOT an urbanizing force in Saamaka, as some planners appear to assume. (There is a complication here, but I will discuss that later.)

Search for SECONDARY education does drive adolescents to larger units, and this induces planners to project mid-size urban units with secondary schools. Such schools might attract students - but not their parents. Since a student from a small village must still live in a boarding house anyway, he will not prefer to spend time in a place like Atjoni or Brownsweg - he will head straight on to Paramaribo, since he does not only seeks education, he also seeks culture.

And that holds for teachers too. A teacher, who has the choice to apply for (say) Hendrikschool in Paramaribo or the public school in a place called Brokopondo, invariably opts for the former, and since it is the better teacher who will form the first pick, the latter school can only be second rate - and publicly known to be second rate, which reinforces its second-ratedness.

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This is what happens to the primary schools in the interior. Above I mentioned a complication to be discussed later, it is due now.

Very few teachers volunteer to live in a compound with five colleagues for their neighbours, so teaching in the interior is considered a punishment for teachers who failed and novices. The level of education in the interior is deplorable - this is a problem that needs to be faced. But mid-size clusters won't contribute to the solution; a place like Brownsveg inspires an intellectual not more than a place like - you name it.

So far search for education. We are studying the effect of size of the community on migration forces, and found that search for primary education is not a migration force at all, and that search for higher education is a migration force indeed - but not towards mid-size towns, but to the biggest town within reach. But it is only a very minor migration force: the number of children that qualify for, can afford and want to attend secondary education, is in the percentiles, and then they migrate for only ten percent of their lifetime for their education. But still, it is a relevant migration: no community can afford to lose its brains.

8.3. ADMINISTRATION

The next migration force we will study is administration. Good administration is invisible, but bad administration can drive people away, and that is what happens in the villages. Traditional village leaders lose their grip on the youths, or maybe a little juvenile anarchism is of all ages - anyway, civil servants, churches and development organisations have tried to solve the administration problem by adding new structures, and by now the villages resemble ships with so many captains in charge that navigation has become impossible. If you want to do something in an interior village, you can easily find support for your plans from one administrator by revealing that a competing council has rejected it, and you can stop any action by revealing that a competing council supports it. This makes for unhappy villages, from whose intrigues people flee.

Bad administration is both an urbanizing and a crumbling force: people flee both ways: to the big city where one can ignore the neighbours, but also to the fields where one has no neighbours.

The mid-size community is the apex of administrative chaos. Small communities are immune: one needs two to quarrel, three to gossip, four to intrigue, etcetera. Big cities are immune too: they suffer other kinds of administrative chaos and unhappiness, but in the big city one can close one's door and leave neighbourhood intrigues outside, and choose another social circuit to join.

In Saamaka, most migration forces lead to bigger scale. Administrative chaos is the only one that keeps the villages small. The bigger villages, from Nieuw Aurora, Gujaba, up to Brownsveg abound in intrigue. Such communities breed skilled civil servants and politicians, and are therefore considered more developed. But they are on the verge of disintegration - an aerial photograph reveals that, even from a kilometre distance.

Demographic planners who design mid-size communities should realize this. Brownsveg looked beautiful on a blueprint in the nineteen-sixties, but this model community is now more renowned for its murder rate than for its community feeling. Of course, the gold industry has something to do with that - we will treat economic forces later on.

8.4. TRIBAL SOCIETY

I mentioned administration, and skipped the subject of the tribal society. The upper Suriname river area is tribal area. Often it is loosely called the Saamaka tribal area, implying the the Saamaka under Paramount Chief Songo Aboikoni form a single tribe. That they are not. They do share a language and much of their culture, but for demographic purposes one should consider the Saamaka a dozen tribes, each with its own tribal area. These tribal areas are not yet mapped, but the Saamaka know the borders between the tribal areas within metres accuracy, and no one can fell a tree or cut a field or build a hut beyond these borders. Demographic planners should realize that if they plan a service centre at, for example, Atjoni, it is not as accessible to members of the Dombi-tribe as it is to members of the Awana-tribe.

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Another aspect to tribalism is the idea that villages are anchored to ancestral graves. This may be true for some tribes elsewhere, but it is not true for the Saamaka. Each village does have its funeral parlour (or something for which 'funeral parlour' is an inadequate translation) but it is a movable unit, and only some Christian sects bury their dead within the villages. Many Saamaka do bring their diseased relatives back to ancient burial fields, but these burial fields may be far away from the present village location and do not anchor the villages. Still, the supernatural is important in demography: whole areas are taboo and quite often the supernatural was and still is involved in decisions to split a village.

The supernatural and tribal structure are something of the past, some argue - not of the future. Perhaps. But then, perhaps not. There seems to be a profound need for a social unit, in size somewhere between a family and a nation.

It needs not be a tribal unit.

More precisely stated, it needs not be called a tribal unit and membership may not be rigorously linked to birth.

But the present popularity of service clubs and soccer hooliganism and sects prove that this need is not an anachronism. In Saamaka no other structure exists to replace the tribal structure, except perhaps sects on a small scale. Since property rights are linked to tribal membership, it is our guess that tribes are far from dead. Demography planners should study the maps of tribal properties before planning new communities. We are sure they haven't, because such maps are yet undrawn. They only exist in collective tribal memory.

8.5. PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Public infrastructure like clinics, schools, electric grids, piped water, public transportation, and offices for social relief are often named as reasons to stimulate clustering of small villages.

From a civil servant's point of view, it is indeed.

But as a migration force, the search for such infrastructure is quite complex. We already studied schools and found that education does not favour mid-size communities. The situation for clinics is similar: one needs small units close to the people for first line health care, but for more complex health problems, hospitals can never be big enough to attract enough expertise. Clinics should be small enough to be close to the people, hospitals should be big enough to attract expertise, and there is no need for mid-size units.

8.5.1. ELECTRICITY

Electricity is so complex an issue, that I devote a separate publication to that. (Buanda Achtergrondartikel #6) Here suffices to summarize that the mid size community is again the apex of awkwardness.

8.5.2. INTERNAL PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Internal public transportation, piped water and solid waste treatment are three public services that share two characteristics.

One is that their costs decrease with community size.

Two is that their usefulness increases with community size.

For internal public transportation, this is obvious: the cost to operate a bus service in a place like Abenasitonu would be enormous - but then, no one needs a bus service in a village that easily fits on four soccer fields.

8.5.3. PIPED WATER

Piped water is equally ridiculous in villages bordering on crystal clear creeks without any upstream inhabitation - be it that most urban people can not believe that water is a natural product, and they only trust it when it comes out of a pipe.

8.5.4. SOLID WASTE TREATMENT

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For the topic of solid waste treatment notions of what is proper even more strongly overrule notions of what is reasonable. Therefore, I will not discuss this item here.

Anyway, the lack of public transportation, piped water and solid waste treatment is not an urbanizing force: villages complain that they lack such utilities, but we have never met one who moved out because of this lack.

8.5.5. SOCIAL RELIEF OFFICES

Social relief offices is quite another matter. No two-family village justifies a social relieve office. But this should not disqualify small villages as communities. The need for social relieve offices signify that the community failed, and demographic planners should not start planning from failures. Economically prosperous communities hardly need social relief, and planners should start thinking from economic opportunities, rather than from social relieve distribution.

8.6. ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Search for economic opportunities is an important migration force, and it usually leads to urbanization. This is not self-evident. Actually, the small Saamaka villages offer ample economic opportunities in the wood sector, especially in the furniture industry. This industry does not demand large scale operation; a lone carpenter with equipment worth 10000 Euro can produce the same quality products as any big factory. True, for the village carpenter the consumer is difficult to contact, but in an industry where a bulk raw material is transferred into less bulky high-quality products, it is the distance to the raw material that counts. And in this aspect the village carpenter out competes the urban factory. Any entrepreneur worth his salt can make good in a small inferior village.

And that is exactly where the problem is: most people are not worth their salt as entrepreneurs.

Roughly one out of every ten people can become an entrepreneur, the other nine need guidance. They need a boss to tell them what to do and to pay them fixed wages. They need jobs, not just economic opportunities. And jobs do not exist in small villages.

To explain why not, In must use an example: carpentry in Saamaka. Other village industries may be possible, but large scale lumbering is too harmful, the service industry (included tourism) is limited and agriculture is hardly possible given the poor soils, so carpentry must be the main industry.

In this industry, there is a gap between the one-man workshop and the mid-size factory. A master carpenter may be tempted to take in an apprentice, but the he finds that the apprentice needs more guidance than his output justifies. Each time the apprentice needs instruction, the master is hindered in his work, so his output drops. With two apprentices, the master may have a team that outputs as much as the master does alone, but then, this three-headed team produces for one and must feed three. That is no improvement. First with five, six apprentices the original one-man productivity can be matched, and then only if the master carpenter is satisfied to stop being a craftsman and becomes a manager.

There is no data available, so anyone's guess may be luckier than mine, but anyway, here is my guess: in half of the 56 Saamaka villages an entrepreneur can be found, statistically spoken. The other half of the villages will disappear within a generation: there are no jobs or cultural activities to keep the people in. Of these twenty-odd villages, maybe three or four harbour entrepreneurs who have the capacity and ambition to become managers. They will attract labour from villages around. Since tribal laws prohibit villages to settle freely, they will create new villages of some ten, twenty labourers with their families. But this will take two or three decades.

In my guess, there will be no clustering of industries. Such industries are competitors for the raw materials, so they will spread. This is quite unlike the clustering of shops, theatres and restaurants

that one observes in urban areas. They are competitors too, but for clients, and then there is quite a different mechanism active.

9. CONCLUSION

Above, we studied migration forces in their relation to community size. Migration dynamics is quite complex, and it is difficult to extract simple rules. But for the Saamaka area, one conclusion stands out: there are no demographic forces that might stabilise mid-size communities. Communities are either small or big, and the mid-size community is the apex of instability, since it merges the disadvantages of small and big communities, instead of the advantages.

In this study, we found some arguments in support of this rule. In realize that these arguments are insufficient. Demography is too complex a topic to allow for simple analysis. But there is experimental proof for this rule: mid-size communities have not emerged spontaneously, and the mid-size communities that have been forced on the population by the transmigration in the nineteen sixties are no success stories.

There may be one exception for this rule: Atjoni. This location offers some potential for economical activity: warehouses, retail, accommodation for travellers, trade. It might become a place like Albina. But remember that Albina is a three way trading post: that is where the Suriname coastal area meets the European Community and the Marowijne-basin. Atjoni borders not on a foreign nation, and the up-river Suriname basin is much smaller, so Atjoni's economic opportunities are quite limited.