

## Indigenous peoples

### Origins

The indigenous people of Guyana are known locally as 'Amerindians'. It is estimated that they number around more than 50,000. They are the descendants of the first people to inhabit the varied geographical zones in the northern part of South America. Some groups were coastal dwellers while others lived mainly in the rain forest, savannahs and mountains of the interior.

The coastal Amerindians are the Kalihna, (Carib-Galibi), Lokono (Arawak-Taino) and Warau, whose names reflect the three indigenous language families.

The interior Amerindians are classified into six groups: Akawaio, Arekuna, Patamona, Waiwai, Makushi and Wapishana. All of these interior groups originally spoke Carib with the exception of the Wapishana, who are within the Taino-Arawak linguistic family.

Indigenous groups now constitute about nine per cent of the total population of Guyana and about 90 per cent of the communities are located in the vast remote interior. This is in contrast to the majority of Guyana's people who are essentially concentrated on the narrow Atlantic coastal strip.

### Current trends

By the end of the twentieth century all of the Guyana's indigenous groups had undergone far-reaching cultural integration. Coastal Amerindian groups now share many cultural features and values with the majority Afro-Guyanese and Indo- Guyanese population., and there has been significant intermarriage between the coastal indigenous groups and Afro-Guyanese.

Afro-indigenous children born in Amerindian villages (usually to an Amerindian mother) are accepted as Amerindians by the village and raised as such.

As a whole the standard of living of Guyana's indigenous groups is lower than that of most of the country's citizens.

Over several decades, almost all the indigenous groups in Guyana have become heavily influenced by the efforts of foreign missionaries. Most Amerindians have been integrated in one way or another into the national economic system, though usually at the lowest levels.

### Cashing in

In spite of rapid changes in many areas of the interior, most Amerindians continue to operate outside the cash economy and are still dependent on a subsistence way of life.

Beginning in the early 1980s, the growth in gold and diamond mining has attracted many Amerindian males. Some individual indigenous prospectors have become wealthy. Other Amerindians employed in medium or large-scale mining operations have also been able to earn large amounts of cash quickly.

Mining now attracts many indigenous males from all parts of Guyana. The scale of Amerindian involvement in mining is causing consumer goods acquisition to become a measure of status and has devalued subsistence agriculture and other socio-cultural practices.

## **Land titles**

Most of the indigenous communities in Guyana now have legal title to their collectively held lands.

The holdings total some 29,000 square kilometres or 13 per cent of the national territory. Most of it lies within the tropical Amazonian or savannah eco-zones hence the soil is unsuitable for sustainable agriculture furthermore potentially lucrative subsoil mining rights are not included. Nevertheless it does include nearly 4 million acres of forested land that is legally under the control of indigenous peoples.

In their efforts to earn cash incomes some village leaders have reached contractual arrangements with loggers and saw millers to exploit timber on their reservations. In the main however these have been unequal exchanges. More often than not the outsiders have been the principal beneficiaries and the indigenous communities have gained very little.

## **Open borders**

Some indigenous languages are still used but most indigenous people speak English (Creole) with those on the border with Brazil or Venezuela also using Portuguese and Spanish as a first or second language.

Border dwelling groups have traditionally ignored imposed international frontiers and for generations have moved freely back and forth. With the current poor state of the Guyana economy, Venezuela and Brazil have become increasingly attractive to the indigenous population due to greater cross-border access and affordability of health and educational facilities as well as communication and electricity services.

Some Amerindians in the west are also attracted to Suriname through family ties. Furthermore Venezuela has made it easy for indigenous Guyanese to obtain Venezuelan passports, thus allowing a free and easy path to Venezuelan citizenship.

In light of the unresolved border claims by Venezuela and Suriname this development is viewed by some national officials as a potential security threat to the country's territorial integrity.

## **Historical context**

The original inhabitants of Guyana were the indigenous groups who lived in the coastal zones and the rainforests of the northern part of South America and used the areas large rivers and ocean in an effective trade and transportation network that stretched into the Caribbean Sea.

### **Lokono (Arawak-Taino)**

Of the three indigenous language families used in Guyana the most extensive and predominant was

Arawak-Taino which was also spoken around the Caribbean Basin extending as far north as modern day Florida.

In Guyana Arawak-Taino was spoken by the coastal indigenous group who called themselves the Lokono (Arawak)

Arawak-Taino cultures were indigenous to most islands of the Caribbean. Unlike the hostile Kalihna and Kalinago (Carib-Galibi) groups, early European settlers found the Arawak-Taino on the Guyana Coast and elsewhere to be the most accommodating of all indigenous communities to the European presence.

The Lokono of the Guyana Coast like their Caribbean counterparts were an agricultural people with settled matrilineal societies and complex social structures. They therefore placed a high value on peace and stability. In the long run therefore the Lokono (Arawak-Taino) of Guyana did not become involved in ultimately genocidal wars of resistance like the Kalihna but accommodated to the new reality.

In Guiana The Dutch employed the Lokono in their fishing and salting undertakings on the upper Orinoco and for recapturing fugitive slaves. Furthermore unlike the Arawak-Taino of the northern Caribbean islands the Lokono (Arawak) of mainland Guyana seemed to have been spared the diseases and enslavement that came with initial European contact.

By 1771 the Spanish Governor of Guiana could report that the Lokono-Arawak of Guyana had already been working together with the Dutch for many years and had become well assimilated into their colonies in many ways including intermarriage.

After the British took possession of the Dutch colonies, in the 1800s the Lokono of Guyana voluntarily sought employment as labourers, especially in the sugar plantations along the rivers. The Lokono-Arawak were therefore among the first indigenous groups in Guyana to come in contact with the African population who had been brought into the region to provide forced labour.

### **Kalihna (Carib-Galibi)**

Both the Kalihna of the Guyana Coast and the related Kalinago (Caribs) of the Caribbean islands earned a regional reputation for being aggressive warlike adversaries. (See Dominica, Saint Vincent and Grenada)

Of all the indigenous groups encountered by the early European colonizers on the Guiana Coast, the Kalihna-Carib were considered to be the most numerous and powerful. Throughout the whole period of Dutch presence they were known and feared as the 'warrior tribe.'

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the Kalihna travelled extensively between the South American Coast and the rest of the Caribbean in large fleets of up to 100 sail fitted canoes.

The origin and main territorial base of the Kalihna (Caribs) was the giant Orinoco waterway in Venezuela. They permanently occupied the lower portion of the right bank of the Orinoco River as far east as the Barima district in the interior of present day Guyana.

In Guiana the Kalihna lived in small settlements. In addition to fishing they also farmed and hunted game with bows and arrows and blowguns. On the coast of South America as on the islands of the Caribbean, the Kalihna (Carib-Galibi) harassed and were in turn attacked by forces of all the incoming colonizing powers and eventually became overwhelmed by more powerful armaments.

By the time of the British occupied Guyana the numbers of Kalihna had become greatly reduced and some had even taken up full time farming around the coastal riverheads and in the lowland forests.

### **Guarao (Warau)**

The Guarao were the boat-building specialists of the region who hollowed out both the large and small canoes used by the indigenous people of the Guiana coast and rivers. The Guarao spoke both Galibi-Carib and Arawak-Taino but their own language was not related to either.

The Guarao originally inhabited the swamps and islands of the huge delta region at the mouth of the Orinoco (today Venezuela). Their settlements also extended to the lower reaches of the Barima River all of which traditionally were also zones under Kalihna (Carib-Galibi) control.

In 1767 having begun to experience increasing harassment and ill treatment from the Spanish colonizers, great numbers of the Guarao migrated from the Orinoco region to the swamps of the Barima River of Guyana. At the time this was Dutch controlled territory but the Guarao remained there even after the British took control in 1803.

Under the British colonial government of Guiana, the Guarao were encouraged to work on the estates and became much more involved in sugar plantation labour than any other indigenous group in the country.

Like the coastal Lokono (Arawak) who were also drawn onto the colonial plantations it was in and around the sugar estates that Guarao (Warau) came into close contact with the African population.

It is perhaps significant that by the nineteenth century the population of Kalihna (Carib-Galibi) on coastal Guyana had sharply declined, however Lokono (Arawak) and Guarao (Warau) communities that were more accommodating of early European coastal plantation presence are now among the largest remaining indigenous groups in the country.

### **Interior groups**

In Guyana the interior Amerindians are classified into six groups: Akawaio, (Kapohn) Arekuna, Patamona, Waiwai, Macusi, and Wapishana.

All of the interior Amerindians originally spoke Carib languages, with the exception of the Wapishana, whose language is of the Arawak-Taino family.

The Akawaio, Arekuna, Patamona live mainly in river valleys in western Guyana. The Macusi and Wapishana live on the savannahs and the Waiwai in the southern lowland forests.

### **Kapohn (Akawaio)**

The Akawaio who live in the lowland and upland forests of the present day Guyana interior, originally called themselves Kapohn and during the colonial era were the next most important warrior group after the Kalihna (Carib-Galibi). The Kapohn like most of the interior tribes are Carib speakers and were found across a wide region from Essequibo to Berbice and especially down the main rivers.

In the early years of colonial presence the British considered the Kapohn (Akawaio) to be the most hostile of all the indigenous groups in Guyana.

## **Arekuna**

The Arekuna were late migrants into what is now Guyana. They lived originally in upper regions of two large rivers in Venezuela (Caroni and Paragua). After 1770, the Spanish Capuchin missions, with the support of the colonial authorities, began to forcibly resettle the Arekuna and other indigenous groups away from their traditional lands to missions located on the Orinoco River. Groups of Arekuna escaped to Guyana to avoid this process and established villages in the upper areas of the Mazaruni and Cuyuni Rivers.

## **Makushi and Wapishana**

The Makushi and Wapishana are also migrants into Guyana. They originally lived in the Rio Branco region of Brazil and began drifting into the northern part of Rupununi savannahs of Guyana from the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Like the Arekuna of Venezuela a decade before, Makushi and Wapishana fled to Guyana to escape colonial resettlement policies in Brazil in the 1780s. The Makushi ended up occupying the northern half Rupununi Savannah region and the Wapishana the southern half.

Smaller groups from decimated tribes of the same region of Brazil also moved into Guyana around this time and subsequently joined up with either the Makushi or Wapishana.

## **Waiwai**

Another the incoming group was the Waiwai. By 1837 the Waiwai had migrated to the Guyana Acarai Mountains most likely because of pressure for resettlement from Portuguese missionaries in the Rio Branco region of Brazil. The Waiwai moved to the far south of the country, in the lowland forest area of the interior near the headwaters of the large Essequibo River.

## **Patamona**

Another indigenous group that now dwells in the mountain region of the Guyana interior are the Patamonas. Very little is known of their history. They are thought to have lived in sections of the Pakaraima mountain range from very early times. Initial contact between the Patamona and European colonists did not occur until the early nineteenth century when the Patamona were described by the British as 'mountaineers.'

## **Internal migration**

In contrast to the coastal indigenous groups who were displaced by European colonization, those of the interior tended to remain in their specific geographical zones until the mid-1800s.

These traditional settlement patterns began to be altered in the 1840s with the coming of Christian missionaries to the Guyana hinterland. This began a process of voluntary migration of Amerindian groups away from their traditional zones to the Christian mission stations in search of 'modern services'.

This pattern of migration has continued into the present era with the attractions now being secular education and health services or resource extraction ventures.

## **Colonial policy**

British colonial policy towards the indigenous population was largely one of benign neglect. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century the British administration focused mainly on the lucrative coastal strip with its large sugar enclaves.

The interior of Guyana was viewed by the colonial Government mainly as a source of mineral deposits and natural resources such as gold, diamonds, bauxite, manganese and timber. Whatever little health care or education reached Amerindian communities was left up to Christian mission stations.

The areas where Amerindians lived were considered to be state or Crown lands. The Amerindian Protection Ordinance of 1902, and subsequent regulations in 1903, 1905 and 1922 provided indigenous people with the right to use the fruits of the lands, but denied rights to the underground mineral wealth (sub-surface rights)

The exploitation of gold and diamonds in the interior and the establishment of logging enterprises in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century brought wealth to the investors and encouraged the movement of some Afro Guyanese to the hinterland making them the first coastland group to become familiar with the interior of the country.

These activities only provided a few marginal low paying jobs for the indigenous population in some of the logging and mining camps. The only other income sources were the handful of large cattle ranches set up in the sparsely populated savannah areas mainly by British settlers.

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of the indigenous population of the interior continued to lead a semi-traditional subsistence life based on fishing hunting and shifting agriculture. A handful managed to obtain an education via the mission schools where instruction was essentially aimed at speeding the assimilation of indigenous students into the rest of colonial society.

The political turmoil of the 50s and 60s which mainly occurred on the coastal strip also had very little affect on indigenous life however the 1957 swearing in of the first Amerindian Parliamentarian Mr. Stephen Campbell constituted somewhat of a milestone.

## **Post independence**

Some notable groundbreaking efforts began to be made during the 1970s and 80s to better include and enhance the profile of the indigenous population. This included the passage of an Amerindian Act in 1978, which allowed communities to obtain land titles.

Up until 1992 indigenous affairs in Guyana were dealt with by the Hinterland Department of the Ministry of Regional Development.

The 1978 Amerindian Act allowed for titling of land to both individuals and communities, but in practice little was carried out. Most indigenous communities in the interior remained unaware of the availability or the need for land titling and logging, and mining continued.

## **Amerindian law reform**

In October 1992, a special Minister of Amerindian Affairs was appointed. In addition ten Amerindian Members of Parliament were elected to the 65 member National Assembly.

In 1995 when the government designated September as national Amerindian Heritage Month to focus on

culture, sports and environmental activities in Amerindian communities, and to nationally showcase and promote Amerindian culture and contributions.

In 2003 a fourteen-member Parliamentary Select Committee was constituted to study and make recommendations for the revision of the 1978 Amerindian Act. Among other things this prompted the formation of the National Amerindian Council, which is an umbrella-organization that brings together representatives of the centrally-based Amerindian NGOs and regionally-based Amerindian organizations.

The government accepted 46 of the 74 recommendations presented during national consultations and tabled the bill in August.2004. Many Amerindian groups, NGOs, and the parliamentary opposition parties opposed the new bill.

Furthermore the three largest NGOs - the Amerindian People's Association, the Amerindian Action Movement of Guyana, and the Guyana Organization of Indigenous People - advocated complete withdrawal of the document altogether.

The main issues of contention were the lack of autonomy given to community governing institutions, the degree of power held by the Minister of Amerindian affairs, the inadequacy of land and resource rights and the use of the term 'Amerindian' rather than 'indigenous'. Nonetheless the new Amerindian Act was passed in Parliament and signed by the president in March 2006.

## **Current issues**

The issues facing indigenous groups of Guyana are all related to lack of empowerment, their marginal status within the overall society and the affect this has on their self-determination as indigenous people.

The standard of living of the indigenous minority of Guyana continues to be lower than the majority of the country's citizens. A larger proportion of the Amerindian population is classified as poor.

Impoverished indigenous women are particularly at risk of being lured to mining and lumber camps deep in the interior with promises of employment and end up being forced in to prostitution through debt bondage, intimidation or abuse.

There is a National Plan of Action in place to combat human trafficking in Guyana monitored by Deputy Commissioner of police however such activities occur in hinterland areas with little or no law enforcement or government supervision.

Even with the new Amerindian Act village administrators still lack the degree of power and autonomy needed to legally control the actions of non-Amerindians in and around their communities.

They are especially unable to affect the activities of Itinerant miners and loggers either in the extraction of resources or in the terms under which they remove young Amerindian men and women to the unfamiliar cultural environment of the coastland where they risk being entrapped in illegal activities.

In the gold and diamond-bearing heartland of the Guyana interior, Amerindian population numbers have now been reduced to close to one-third due to an exodus of Amerindians and the continuing invasion of people from the coast.

## **Education**

Access to education and health care in Amerindian communities continues to be limited however the stated government policy is to provide indigenous children with the same educational opportunities available to the rest of the population.

All Amerindian communities have primary schools, and there are eight secondary schools in the hinterland regions. These are government funded residential schools that house approximately 800 students away from their communities. While this provides them with a contemporary education it is at the expense of further reinforcing out-migration trends. The government also offers scholarships (300) for Amerindian children to attend secondary school in the capital Georgetown.

Concerns have also been expressed regarding the education of indigenous children at the formative level, especially with respect to both the form and content of primary education.

The continuing lack of trained Amerindian teachers means that most of the instruction in Amerindian villages is provided by teachers from the coast. These incoming non-Amerindian instructors receive no prior orientation. As a consequence they are generally unfamiliar with and unable to instill an appreciation for indigenous traditions and values within the academic environment.

Moreover the nationally standardized teaching methods and curriculum often serves to hasten the erosion of many key Amerindian cultural characteristics. These include language, community history, sustainable environmental practices, medicinal knowledge, and other life skills necessary for promoting self-determination and balanced indigenous community development.

## **Health**

While the government has established health worker training programs and basic service 'Health Huts' in most communities, major gaps exist in cases requiring advanced medical care. Most of the cottage and Regional Hospitals in the Guyana interior continue to lack adequate medical supplies and functioning electrical generation systems.

Most of the Amerindian communities continue to depend on creeks, rivers or shallow home dug ponds for their water supply. Communities close to mining areas (for example bauxite and gold operations) continue to be at particular risk due to lack of access to safe sources of potable water.

Along with the problems like respiratory infections there is an increasing incidence of water-borne diseases and skin rashes in all hinterland areas, which has arguably been attributed to resource extraction industries.

## **Land titling and resource extraction**

For the Amerindian population, land rights remain a major issue. Complaints persist that the government continues to allocate land to mining and logging interests, and to create environmentally protected reserves without proper consultations. Some communities have viewed these allocations as illegitimate seizure of community lands and complained that consultations on development in the interior does not provide enough time for their responses.

The concerns are crucial since mining operations in or near Amerindian areas are socially, culturally and environmentally disruptive in many ways. These include excessive noise, land degradation, flooding, pollution of domestic and public water sources, and the poisoning and death of the aquatic life that represents a major traditional food source for populations on the margins of the economy.

To this can be added social disruptions that include higher food and transportation costs, loss of traditional skills, changing social and cultural values, family breakdown, violence, prostitution and alcohol and drug abuse.

Nevertheless the scale of mining in and around Amerindian areas in the interior of Guyana is set to increase substantially in the coming years. Large-scale operators such as Golden Star Resources, Cathedral Mining, Guyana Goldfields, et al are prospecting within indigenous areas. Moreover some 3,000 plus medium-scale prospecting licenses have also been issued. Even if only 10 per cent are activated the effects on the natural environment and lives of the indigenous people of the Guyana interior are likely to be quite extensive.