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Yeye Sani: an Afro-Surinamese concept of the self in a model of mental well being

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This article presents a model of mental well being based in Afro-Surinamese knowledge, experience, and cultural history. The model is the result of a two-year-long ethnographic research project in Paramaribo, Suriname. Suriname is a former Dutch colony in South America, which is known for its harmonious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic society. The mental well being model entitled *Opo Yeye* – which translates into “Raising the Spirit” – reflects an extended sense of self which is traversed and governed by forces seen and unseen. Mental well being is achieved through striving for harmony between all these forces that contribute to the self. The article provides an in-depth exploration of the concept of the self and highlights the historical origins, yet its contemporary value.

Keywords: self; mental well being; spiritual system; Suriname; Afro-Surinamese; African Diaspora; anthropology

Introduction

The year is 2005. The location is Paramaribo, capital of Suriname, a small south-eastern country on the coast of South America. Three women dance down the street under the accompaniment of a saxophone player. They wave their hands in the air, yelling *heep peep peep hurray!* The women are escorting the birthday lady, the *Bigi Yari Misi*, who is celebrating her *Bigi Yari*, her lustrum birthday celebration. The procession will travel down the street to the corner where female guests are waiting for the *Bigi Yari Misi* in *koto*, the traditional Afro-Surinamese costume, accentuated with a required purple *anyisa*, traditional headdress. The guests will join the procession and will dance down the street, returning to the house where the festivities are to commence (Figure 1).

This celebratory scene is a reflection of an Afro-Surinamese belief that embraces celebration of the self as an essential element of mental well being. This concept of celebrating the self stems from a traditional spiritual belief system dating back to slavery days. The concept still exists and is held even by those who have denounced traditional spiritual practices and who have embraced Christianity. This article will explore in depth the concept and role of the self in the Afro-Surinamese approach to mental well being as discovered through ethnographic research.

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Figure 1. *Bigi Yari* Procession (photo by L. Uhlenkamp).

Method

This article is based on ethnographic research among working-class Afro-Surinamese in Paramaribo, Suriname, that took place from 2003 to 2005 and involved participant observation, group discussions, group interviews, individual interviews, and oral history collection (Cairo, 2007). This research was a direct follow-up study to an ethnographic study that studied the emic perception of mental health in a low-income African American community in a mid-size Southern town in the United States (Baruti, 2001). In this study, community members defined mental health in terms far different from the standard bio-medical Western model of mental health. Being mentally well was directly related to the well being in the community, extended family networks, availability of jobs, treatment received by local government, etc. It was at the conclusion of this study that the more holistic concept of “mental well being” was chosen as preferable over “mental health”.

In Paramaribo, Suriname group discussions were held with three different types of community organisations; an Afro-Surinamese socio-cultural organisation, a men’s and women’s lodge, and a community organisation. Each of these groups is part of an extensive network of contacts in the Afro-Surinamese community, and provided access to the working- class community, including males and females, youth, adults, and elders. These discussion groups were held to gain information on which issues contributed to the concept of mental well being; and to have this information filtered through an Afro-Surinamese perspective, as much as possible. The discussion sessions then, focused on what it means to be Afro-Surinamese in Suriname, and how this cultural identity shaped the definition and practice of mental well being. A total of 73 people contributed to the discussion sessions.

After the information was collected, community experts were selected for individual and group semi-structured interviews to further explore the concept of mental well being. A majority of these interviews were scheduled and documented. There were several interviews which started spontaneously and were not recorded as interview notes, but as field notes. A young man and woman were interviewed for collection of their life stories and to get an account of the lived experience in Suriname. Additional group and individual interviews were held with Afro-Surinamese in the Netherlands. Rather than addressing mental well being, the unstructured interviews explored people's relationship with their relatives in Suriname and their connection with Suriname as a whole. A total of 62 people were interviewed through group and individual interviews.

Participant observation consisted of living and working in Suriname. Similar to the findings in the African American study, the Afro-Surinamese approach to mental well being reflected an interconnected and communal sense of being well and being in the world, as opposed to an individualised understanding as a more Western, bio-medical outlook prescribes.

The Afro-Surinamese in, Suriname

Suriname is a small country on the south-eastern coast of South America, and is considered a mainland Caribbean nation, given its similarity of colonial history, political struggles, population dynamics, and demographics to the rest of the Caribbean. Suriname is a former Dutch colony, and is known and hailed as a model multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society where people of different ethnicities live in relative harmony with each other (Lewis, 1994; St. Hilaire, 2001). Even though language has united people officially in Dutch, and unofficially in *Sranan Tongo*, the lingua franca, the respective ethnic groups have mostly held on to their different cultural traditions and norms.

The Afro-Surinamese (also called Creoles or African-Surinamese) are the descendants of the captured and enslaved Africans who were brought to work on the Dutch plantations in Suriname from sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, as part of the Atlantic slave trade. The Maroons are the descendants of the early Africans that escaped the plantations and settled in the interior. The Afro-Surinamese Creoles, the population this study is based on, are the descendants of enslaved Africans that remained on the plantations. Some of the other ethnic groups include the East Indians (called Hindustani), Javanese, and Chinese who came to Suriname in the mid 1800s as contract labourers to replace the upcoming loss of free slave labour with Emancipation in 1863. The ethnic groups were socially, politically, religiously, and geographically segregated (Hoefte, 2001; Lewis, 1994).

Smaller ethnic groups include Jews, Lebanese, and "Boeroe", the Dutch. The Jews came from Brazil initially as planters in the seventeenth century. Lebanese merchants made their way into Suriname at the end of the nineteenth century by way of French Guyana, and the Dutch "Boeroe" were small farmers that came in the nineteenth century (Loor, 1992). The twentieth century has also brought an influx of immigrants from neighbouring Guyana, Haiti, and Brazil into Suriname, in search of work and better lives.

The Afro-Surinamese spiritual system of *Winti*

Spirituality has contributed to a distinct working-class, Afro-Surinamese identity in the spiritual belief system of *winti*. Due to their social distance from the Europeans, and due to the large number of Africans and Creoles present on the plantations in the early days

of colonialism, a unique Afro-Surinamese spiritual system developed out of the different elements of the various spiritual systems that were represented among the slaves. Unlike the spiritual systems in other slave societies such as Brazil and Haiti, where the slaves lived in closer proximity to the Europeans and where traditional practices were purposely syncretised, the spiritual system of *winti* was initially not syncretised with elements of Christianity. *Winti* provided a system of spirituality, medicine, and social therapy that played a significant role in people's survival (Stephen, 1983; Wooding, 1972).

Winti is a system that is not based in text. Instead, it is based in practical experiences and expressions and is guided by the knowledge of ritual experts and family kinship networks. It provides freedom for private interpretation, and the expert knowledge is often housed in the senior women of the family, providing them with cultural capital and status (van der Pijl, 2002; van Wetering, 1995). As *winti* has evolved over the centuries, it has adopted cultural elements of the other ethnic groups' cultural systems, including Christianity (Stephen, 1983). *Winti* is said to be practiced, to some extent, among the majority of working- and lower-classes Afro-Surinamese in Suriname (Simons, 1993). It remains a marker for those who have maintained their African heritage, as opposed to those who have relinquished it (upper-class light-skinned Creoles, devout Christian Afro-Surinamese).

Since its inception, *winti* was regarded as something uncivilised and backward by the European settlers. Stigmatisation became strictly enforced since Emancipation in 1863 when any association with *winti* was forbidden through joint government and Christian establishment assimilation policies. *Winti* remained forbidden by law until 1972. Practiced mostly in secrecy, in the last 25 years or so, *winti* has become more public, reflective of an upsurge in African identity awareness which has made slavery more publicly debated and explored in Suriname and the Netherlands (Lamur, 2001). Shame and stigma have remained, especially with the continued damnation by the Christian church. It must be mentioned that the division between *winti* and church is not clear cut, however, as many Christians practice *winti* in secrecy, while quite a few reject it (publicly) as idolatry (Hoogbergen & Ramsodh, 2002; Simons, 1993; van der Pijl, 2002).

Afro-Surinamese mental well being

The Surinamese system of mental well being consists of a number of interlocking and interdependent factors. At the core of the model stands the self as a divisible vessel through which numerous forces seen and unseen flow and interconnect at any given time. Within the *winti* tradition, the *yeye* or *kra* make up the "inner" spiritual essence of the self, comparable to the soul, and consists of a male and female part. The self is shaped and guided by nature and ancestral forces. It is connected to spiritual and nature forces, family members seen and unseen, organisations, the physical environment, and other people. The goal is for the self to live in harmony with all of these forces, which defines mental well being.

Ensuing will be an in-depth exploration of the concept of the self. Sections will include lifting the spirit (*opo yu yeye*); knowing the self (*sabi yu srefi*); self and the environment; and self and others.

Opo yu yeye

For the Afro-Surinamese, the self is a vessel that stands in connection with numerous forces, seen and unseen, at any given moment. According to this belief system, which can

be traced back directly to *winti* traditions in slavery days, a human being consists of forces that are part physical and part spiritual. One is connected to the universe that surrounds and traverses him or her. Physically, the person is connected to his or her body, and lives within a world made up of physical elements. Spiritually, the person is connected to nature forces, *winti*, and to the ancestors at any given time.

Wekker (1997) explains that this Afro-Surinamese multiplicitous sense of self is expressed in the language. She states:

Unlike English, in which “I” is a significant repository of personhood, agency, and personal identity, and has no synonyms, in *Sranan* [Surinamese lingua franca], there are infinite possibilities to make statements about self in terms of one specific, male or female instance of the “I.” There exists for instance *mi*, *mi ik*, *mi ikke*, *mi kra*, *mi yeye*, *mi misi*, *mi masra*, *mi misi nanga mi masra*, *mi dyodyo*, *mi madyodyo*, *mi pa dyodyo*, *mi skin*, *a sma f’mi*, and *den sma f’mi*, or in terms of third-person constructions, one’s *winti* (1997, p. 335).

How the self is seen, experienced, and maintained is determined by the state of balance of all these forces. This sense of self is rooted within the *winti* spiritual system. Two phrases that are commonly heard in Suriname are *Opo yu yeye*, and *Sabi yu srefi*, which respectively translate freely into “Raise your spirit”, and “Know yourself”. Within the *winti* tradition, the *yeye* or *kra* make up the “inner” spiritual essence, comparable to the soul, and consists of a male and female part. *Opo yu yeye* has strong spiritual and psychological connotations, but physical and environmental ones as well.

The most common explanation of *opo yu yeye*, is the need to take care of one self, or one’s selves. One should live well, know wrong from right, and be respectful of self and others. Taking care of self or selves involves hygienic practices, but also morally sound behaviours.

Depending on the level of involvement with the spiritual tradition of *winti*, *opo yu yeye* can involve certain rituals to literally uplift the inner spirit, such as praying, meditating, communicating with the ancestors, or having an elaborate ritual performed under supervision of a medicine man or woman. The most common ritual is the *wasi*, a ritual bath, in which herbs, and sometimes flowers and sweet fragrances are mixed in water, and are poured over the head. Throughout the *wasi*, the selves are spoken to in a respectful manner.

Opo yu yeye can also involve performing an action to compensate for the feeling of neglect by one of the aspects of the self. Thus, it would not be uncommon for someone to buy themselves a present, or take themselves out to dinner because one of the selves requested it. This request would be communicated through a sense of intuition, a dream, or in a consultation with a medicine man or woman.

A 30 something year old seamstress explains:

When I hear *opo yu yeye*. . . [it means] that you have to take good care of yourself, so that your things can go better. Because, I do not investigate other people, I look at myself. When I make clothes, for instance – this is what I have discovered from myself – when I feel a bit lazy to make clothes for somebody, the thought will arise: “Make something for yourself.” And when I do that, indeed. . . then I’m normal again. You see? Then I can make clothes for days again. So it is always *mek’ wan san’ gi’ yeye, dan yu go doro di f’ trawan*, make something for your *yeye*, and then go on and make something for someone else.

One of the most common social rituals dedicated to uplifting and maintaining the spirit of the self/selves among the Afro-Surinamese is the celebration of the birthday, in particular the lustrum celebration. Starting with the first, and followed by every fifth birthday thereafter, the birthday is celebrated in a grand manner, usually including a dance party with live music, an elaborate feast, and some type of brass band. Guests are often

requested to attend in costume by choice of the host or hostess. This celebration is referred to as *Bigi Yari*, which literally translates into “big year”. The older one gets, the more elaborate the celebration.

A *Bigi Yari*, for a seventieth or seventy-fifth birthday can easily take three days and might involve one day with a special church or thanksgiving service, one day with family members and/or gatherings with community and organisation members, and yet another day with a traditional brass band – which can come as early as 5 a.m. – followed by a catered dance feast with a live band. For a fifth or tenth birthday, a *Bigi Yari* might involve a marching band with dancers, followed by a costumed ball with a live band. Some of the newer trends involve hip hop dance shows and djs.

The *Bigi Yari* tradition is very common among the Afro-Surinamese working class, even in times of financial hardship. The *Bigi Yari* celebration is an occasion for which people save for years and/or for which they do not mind going into debt. The *Bigi Yari* is such a common tradition that it is not specifically connected with the *winti* tradition. It is related to the concept of *opo yu yeye*, however, more from a psychological perspective than from a spiritual one. It is through this practice, among others, that it becomes apparent that even though *opo yu yeye* can be traced directly to an aspect of the *winti* tradition, the concept itself has been embraced by non-*winti* believers as well, in particular by Christians.

Repeatedly when asked about *opo yu yeye*, the non-*winti* followers would always clarify that they ascribed meaning to the concept, but not in relation to *winti*. For example, the 60-year *Bigi Yari Misi* mentioned in the introduction, expressed herself as follows:

I wasn't raised with the saying “*opo yu yeye*”. We received a Christian upbringing, so not with “you have to wear a ring or a necklace for your *yeye*.” My mother always taught me, you have a spirit in your body and you have to maintain it by taking good care of your body. So that's what my mother taught me about *yeye*, about the spirit that you have. She always taught us – it was very strange what she said – “make your bed, because if you do not, your spirit will stay behind and your body will stand up. Shake your pillow so you will take your *yeye* with you.” That's what my mother always taught us, that your spirit has laid in the bed beside you, and if you do not make your bed it will stay behind and so many things can happen to you. But I think she got that from her ancestors. But like getting a ring or some other thing for your *yeye* . . . I give the *koto dansi*, the *koto* dance party, yeah I think my spirit enjoys it. But to lay the emphasis on *mi yeye wan' wan koto dansi*, my *yeye* wants a *koto dansi*, I do not have that. Again, we were raised Christian, and so I was never taught that, that you do something for your [*yeye*]. It was just that my mother said that if you really want something than you can get it, or should do it.

Other voices that highlight *opo yu yeye* outside of a *winti* context state:

When I think about *opo yu yeye*, I think about self respect, self knowledge, taking a stance for yourself. I am me, and nobody can get me down.

(42-year-old woman)

It has many meanings of course, but for me it would mean to come clean with yourself. There are cultural meanings you can give it of course, but I see it in general as coming clean with yourself. And that does not mean that you would need to do things in the [traditional] cultural realm. If you were dishonest, become honest. If you were unreasonable, be considerate. Being reasonable is important, sincerity, those kinds of things. I think that they are the basis. So that's what I see more as *opo yeye*. Live responsibly, to put it that way.

(41-year-old man)

You should really start by respecting yourself, and then the respect from others will follow. As soon as you do things to strengthen your mental well being, and then I am not talking about *bonu bonu*, cultural medicine. No, to have the faith to do certain things. To know the difference between right and wrong and step into the world respectfully, than you *opo yu yeye*. It's not for nothing that people say: “Doing good things lead to good encounters.”

(70 plus year-old man)

These voices collectively confirm a belief system in which taking care and nurturing the self are an essential part of living well. This taking care of the self involves rules and lessons about morals, values, and healthy social interactions that go beyond *winti*. The arts, for instance, are seen as significant forces for *opo yu yeye*. Dance, live music, singing, poetry, fashion, decorative arts and so on, are all considered nurturing to the self. Participation and expression in the arts nurtures the self directly, but it also nurtures the self as artistic activities allow for social bonding. Storytelling, Folk theatre, and humour are popular activities of the Afro-Surinamese. These art forms can be traced back to the days of slavery when dramatic expression, stories, songs, games, proverbs, and jokes were not only part of social gatherings in so-called *banya prei*, but also insured psychological survival and rejuvenation.

Sabi yu srefi: knowing yourself

Opo yu yeye is closely related to *Sabi yu srefi*, knowing oneself. Knowing oneself has psychological connotations, as far as being self-confident and self-secure. From a *winti* perspective, *sabi yu srefi*, means an understanding of the forces that walk with, flow through, and guide a person. For those intensely involved in the *winti* tradition, getting to know one self might involve a cycle of ritual treatments to find out exactly which spiritual and ancestral forces are aligned with the person, and in which order. For others, it might mean the attention and awareness to one's intuition.

Randall is a 41-year-old young man with whom the researcher spent a lot of time. Throughout the duration of the research in Suriname, Randall came into his own as a cultural traditions expert and was turning his cultural knowledge into a business. Randall had worked for years as a mechanic and in the catering business. He had stopped and tried to make his living as a musician, which turned out to be difficult. He decided to go back to work and diligently started pursuing jobs, but his repeated efforts to land a job kept being met by rejections, even when success was expected. All the while he had been collecting information on his family's history dating as far back as slavery days. He had also documented his knowledge about traditional music, dance, theatre, and plants.

Randall describes his self discovery as follows: While in the Netherlands on a trip he was asked to give a lecture about traditional culture. Upon his return he was asked to give another lecture. He continues...

When I returned to Suriname I just bared my soul and said "Randall, what are you?" I went to sleep and heard a voice tell me: "do not do this, do not do this, follow that course." I startled awake, thinking: "this is it." The next day I received an offer to give a lecture here in Suriname. Everybody told me what to talk about, and I just started to talk. I started to talk about things my father did not even know, about ancestral veneration And everybody asked, why did not you do that before? I told them, I did not know. Now I see, I applied to so many jobs, but it just isn't working. But the moment somebody comes to me to talk about cultural traditions, than it does work . . . And more people keep coming and they all want to know about the culture. And then I told myself, "Randall, *i no sab' i sref' ete*" you do not know yourself yet. . . . When I talk about it [traditional culture], I see that "hey, I should choose this." I keep looking [for a job], but when I pursue people to work, nobody will listen to me. But the moment I open my mouth and talk about plants, other things, the culture, then everybody pays attention. And that's how I discovered that, "yes Randall, not until now have I gotten to know myself, who I am." Finally I have become aware. A woman that knew me told me: "Randall, you sing, play the *apinti dron*, the apinti drum, and you know all the songs, you play [theatre]. Do you know who does all of that?" I told the woman: "Why do you ask me such a question?" She said "yes, do you really know yourselves?" I said no, and then did some investigating. That's when I found out who the person is who sings. Because I always

thought “yes, Randall you can sing, you are great.” But it isn’t Randall who sings. It isn’t Randall who plays the *apinti*. It isn’t Randall who tells the *tori*, the stories. That’s how I found out in 2003. Now we are in 2005, so I have only known for two years who I am. So like, “Randall that’s you”, and that’s how I’ve gotten to know my selves.

The concepts *opo yu yeye* and *sabi yu srefi* come together in the belief that if one knows oneself/ves, adheres to the guiding messages from the self/ves, and does right by him or herself and others, one will live in prosperity. It does not mean that one will not encounter hardships. It does mean, however, that whatever hardships one encounters, one will be equipped to handle them. One does not need to fear any kind of evil being directed at them. As one man said: “Your ‘I’ will protect you if you live well.” Although Christianity and *winti* are publicly portrayed as polar opposites, it is in this concept of the self, ironically, that Christianity and *winti* believers come together. The belief in the importance of doing good and its rewards, are the cornerstones of both Christian and *winti* beliefs.

At the core of the mental well being model then, stands the self. In order to have a strong foundation in mental well being, and thus a strong sense of self, one has to understand the self, which means knowing who one is. One has to treat oneself with care and respect, and one has to be diligent about engaging in acts that will strengthen the self.

A weakened sense of self would be reflective of and/or contribute to destabilising the mental well being model. A weakening of the inner self is the opposite of *opo yu yeye* and is denoted as *saka yu yeye*, lowering one’s spirit. Not knowing the self, straying away from what one knows to be right, not listening to the self, not adhering to cultural rules about the body and the environment, are all things my informants identified as contributing to *saka yu yeye*.

Self and environment

When examining the self in relation to the environment, one encounters the same concept of *opo yu yeye*. Physically *opo yu yeye* relates to an uplifting relation with the physical, that is the physical body of the self, but also with the physical embodiment of the nature forces. One should take good care of oneself, such as eating the right foods or maintaining proper hygiene. One should also have a respect for nature and nature forces. As such, one should not enter certain spaces when menstruating, urinate in certain spaces, and so on. These acts could contribute to nature violations, and might be answered with harsh repercussions in the forms of illnesses, misfortune, or other punitive actions by nature forces.

Numerous taboo actions have their origin in plantation and rural living, where an interdependent relationship with the environment was and is a lot more self-evident. Physical aspects of *opo yu yeye* cause concern for elders, in particular as it relates to the person and his or her relationship with the environment. Many of the elder people in the city, are first-generation migrant country people. They remember and value a relationship with the natural environment. They are also more likely to complain about the loss of the connection with nature.

For those who have been raised in the city either since birth or since moving there as a small child, the relationship with the natural environment is different. It is easy to think that by living in the city one maintains a relationship with nature, because the city of Paramaribo is not the type of city that is covered by concrete. Sandy roads, creeks, palm, mango, and papaya trees and many luscious greens are everywhere. But people, think, and behave as city dwellers.

One of the statements repeatedly heard and that often leads to heated discussions is the statement: “We do not suffer in Suriname, because we can always find something to eat.” This statement is then followed by: “We do not need to go hungry because we can plant our food.” Indeed, Suriname is known for its fertile soil, commonly expressed as “You can drop a seed and tomorrow there will be a tree.” The reality however, is that very few people plant their own food. People in Paramaribo are city dwellers, carrying the stressors that city living brings with it. The average person works three jobs just to make ends meet, but more so, many do not have the necessary knowledge to cultivate fruits and vegetables.

And so, knowledge from rural living, and rules about *opo yu yeye* that pertain to a connection with nature, have been minimally passed on. The sense of a personal connection to nature was, in the past, cultivated through rural experiences, which is something the second generation of country migrants might have experienced, but the subsequent generation, far less. Two women highlight this concept stating:

When we were children we would spend every school vacation on grandmother’s *boiti*, piece of land outside the city. It would be over there, by [...]. We would fish, pick fruit, and help prepare for her *winti* work. We would help collect herbs and things like that. (33-year-old woman)

We would spend every school vacation at our grandmother’s in the district. All the cousins would be there. It would be so much fun. We would play outside and have to help maintain the grounds, pick fruits, hunt for *leguana*, iguana, things like that. At night we would all sleep together and play jokes on each other. That is why we still love that land so much. It is really our land.

(42-year-old woman)

These voices imply the role of generational traditions. The mention of the relationship with nature as a means of maintaining well being and balance were always brought up by elders, or by younger people who were either raised by grandparents or otherwise stood in close relationship with elders in the family and spent time with them in the rural district. Rural living does not just recall nostalgic memories of the good old days, however. Life was hard, and many came to the city merely to pursue better lives. But even for those who left the countryside, the relationship with nature made a significant impact.

People do not tell you this, but plantation living was hard work. Even as a child you had to work, taking care of the chickens, weeding, chasing monkeys away. Life was hard on the plantations. I left early on and would go back to visit. I had opportunities in the city, nice clothes. I have lived in the city ever since, but the funny thing is, I cannot get the country side out of my system. I feel most at peace when I am around nature. I think it goes back to my childhood.

(72-year -old woman)

I will tell you. I have had to work hard all my life. I started working when I was just a child. I grew up on the plantation and then moved to the city. I have lived all over the world. I have lived in cities. But if you ask me where I am really happy, than I would have to tell you on plantation in the [...] district. There is nothing like it. That’s where I wish I could be. The nature is incredible.

(75-year-old man)

In addition, those city people that maintain *boiti*, today, and that cultivate their land to produce fruits and vegetables for their own use, are mostly people over the age of 50. In discussions with teens and youth, nature was never brought up as an essential part of well being.

Tourism, however, is transforming the relationship with nature for the younger generation. Young and old talk about the desire to take a vacation outside of the city, fuelled by Dutch relatives and tourists, who prefer to visit the country sides and the

interior, to escape city life. This appreciation of nature by the younger generation, however, still seems different from the elders, in that it is experienced from the perspective of being fed, nourished, and rejuvenated by nature, as opposed to having a mutually dependent relationship with nature, which involves a certain level of responsibility.

Tourism has additionally added the factor of globalisation. Beach-like resorts, which have been developed mostly with foreign investments, are aimed at tourism and a young audience. These new resorts have artificially created beach fronts with the latest amenities. Whereas the older tourist resorts consist of huts or places to hang a hammock with or without a natural creek nearby, the new resorts have bungalows with running water, bars, a beach, a playground, and rent jet skis. On the weekends, the most popular music bands and dance shows are held at these resorts, and tickets and transportation are offered at a reasonable price for youngsters. Globalisation has made a return to the country side attractive and accessible for Surinamese youngsters who otherwise could not afford to go, but globalisation has also helped to transform the relationship with the country side into a relationship based in and driven by consumption.

In general, one could say that a deep spiritual and personal connection to environment has made place for a psychological connection and appreciation, and that this represents a generational difference. Elders believe that the young generation's lack of connectedness with nature negatively impacts their mental well being. The new trends seem to suggest, however, that the young have not lost their connection to nature, but that it has taken a different form, adapted to the globalised tastes of today.

Self and others

The last aspect of the self includes the self in relation with other people. Three interpersonal relations that stand out are: (1) self and family; (2) self and organisations; and (3) ethnic self and other, differently ethnic Surinamese.

Self and family

"This is my cousin. We are from the same *bere*, the same womb", is one of the ways my cousin would introduce me. The receiving party would then look me over and nod approvingly" [Fieldnotes]. The connection to family members legitimises a person, especially the connection to the mother's family.

The Afro-Surinamese predominately have a matrifocal family system. Many Afro-Surinamese families consist of female-headed households. Women usually raise their children with some financial and emotional support from their children's fathers, but mostly with support from their female kin. Interestingly, the law, which is based on Dutch law and tradition, acknowledges a bilateral kinship system. Legitimation, validation, and inheritance rights are all dependent on the father's legal acknowledgement of his child. The relatives on the father's side are considered *brudu*, blood relatives (Pierce, 1998). It is important to know who you come from, on your father's side as well as on your mother's side. Still, an extra special bond is felt with the relatives on the mother's side, the *bere*, womb family. The *bere* referred to is generally an ancestral matriarch.

Being part of a family infuses the self in three particular ways: it contributes to the *yeye*, provides a network of affinity connections and resources, and provides a special connection to land. The family provides the self with a spiritual, psychological,

and cultural basis. The *yeye* of a person is connected to those of the family. Randall explains:

Everybody is born with their own “I”, we call it *yeye*. That’s the first thing you get from God, and nobody can take that away from you. You are raised with it. Two things will then happen. When your mother is pregnant, you will get one from mother’s side and one from father’s side, that is the *yeye* who will raise you. Your own “I” will give permission to those two *yeye* to raise you.

Families are connected by blood, but also on a spiritual level. Families have ancestors who walk among and with them, and who are still very much part of family life. In times of trouble, ancestors are called down and consulted. Given that ancestors attach themselves to particular family members, it is important to maintain good family relationships, so that when the family needs to come together, there are no difficulties.

Family also provides the self with a set of relationships that provides networks and concrete resources. Access to finances, material goods, job connections, and so on, can all be accessed through family relationships. Membership within the family carries participational responsibilities. Being related, gives permission to get called upon, or to call upon if necessary. From household chores and child care responsibilities to using one’s influence on the job, family members help each other. Families do for each other, but more so, are expected to do for each other, more than a non-relative would. A field note entry illustrates this.

May 2005

I received a telephone call from one of my friends today. He was called out of work because his cousin is in the country. Given that the cousin came unannounced that can only mean one thing; she is here to smuggle drugs. So he has been sent on a mission to find her and straighten her out. You could say he is on a mission to save her soul. As her big cousin he was automatically called to do the job, and he does not question his responsibility to have to do so.

But families are not just about “doing”, they are also about “being”. You are because of who you are related to. And to whom you are related immediately ties you to a place, a particular (former) plantation in Suriname. Family relationships can thus provide the self with some sort of anchoring to a place on earth. Afro-Surinamese people are well aware of their distant connection to Africa, but like most of the African Diaspora, the relationship with the original motherland is mythical and far removed. As such, knowing that you belong to a place can infuse the self with a sense of connection and belonging, similar to a sense of connection and belonging that is provided by the connection to spiritual forces, ancestors, and family members.

This relationship could best be regarded as an emotional or psychological relationship with ancestral land, but there is also a spiritual relationship. A person has a special relationship with a particular plantation because of the ancestors that lived there, and are still housed there. If needed, they can be called upon. A person can call upon ancestors at any time, any place, anywhere, but it is assumed that one will have a stronger and direct connection in the place where they lived.

The relationship with the ancestral land has many dimensions. It is believed that after people pass on, their spirit returns and chooses a specific place to live, such as a fruit tree or a bush. Consequently, a person’s relationship with the physical environment takes on special meaning. If a tree is not just a tree, but also a place where somebody’s grandmother’s spirit resides, than that person might look at that tree differently. He would think twice about cutting it down, and might give it more care, because there is a direct connection between person, (ancestral) spirit, and nature force.

The connection between land and family can also foster a link between psychological and spiritual well being through the interdependent relationships that have been fostered there. In order to survive, people had to rely on each other and support each other, in a more direct way than in the city, where institutions play a more significant role. In addition, where there was no money, collective blood, sweat, and tears were shed to eke out an existence, and the idea of family would often expand beyond blood relations because of communal support. Having this sense of collective living, working, and surviving on ancestral lands provides a greater sense of psychological and spiritual security, as the ancestors are presumed to be part of an invisible support network. According to the elders, one of the many complaints channelled through people from the ancestral world, is a sense of disconnect and neglect as people no longer maintain their ancestral grounds, or have abandoned them all together.

Self and organisations

Another way in which the self stands in relation with other people, is through membership in organisations. The relationship with organisation members can be similar to family relations in terms of responsibility, loyalty, and resource sharing. However, whereas family relations contain a strong spiritual aspect, relationships through organisations are based more in concrete transactions.

From childhood on, people are encouraged to become members of organisations. These organisations provide extracurricular activities and opportunities that parents otherwise cannot afford. But it is not only the young who participate. Adults are very active in community organisations, from cultural organisations to lodges. These lodge organisations have a long history, and are rooted in similar principles as the free and service societies of African Americans in the United States. The creation of these organisations was – at the time – a matter of social, emotional, financial survival, and identity affirmation. Today their function is the same, but things are changing.

There are many different types of social organisations in Paramaribo that provide age-specific socialising and activity opportunities. Organisations are often also grouped according to ethnicity, reflective of a specific cultural emphasis, such as Javanese culture, Indian dancing, etc., but sometimes ethnicity seems prominent while really neighbourhood and class are the more salient factors. Organisational membership contributes to one's mental well being as organisations provide a network of resources, but also as they provide a space of identity affirmation. One can receive status, self fulfilment, and a sense of belonging, regardless of one's chronological status. This is different from the family system, where one's family position is far more difficult to shed, and where identity is ascribed as opposed to achieved.

These organisations have taken on the role of extended family systems for their members. They provide opportunities for friendship, support, resources, and networking. Resources, intellectual as well as material, are also an important asset of organisations. Organisations in general do not have much material wealth, but they do provide access to opportunities to which individuals or families might not have access. Another, specific benefit of cultural organisations, is that they provide a space for people to freely explore their traditional culture. In particular through the arts, song, dance, music, and theatre, people are allowed to learn about and express their traditional culture. People take great pride in being knowledgeable in these art forms, and these traditional art forms contribute to one knowing oneself.

Besides social activities and identity formation, since their onset, lodges have played major roles in family and community caretaking. Burial funds, death rituals, finance cooperatives, and extended parenting, among others, have directly contributed to the well being of its members. Well being can be compromised within these organisations as the close involvement with and by the organisation exerts a lot of pressure on an individual. One is not only a member, one is a representative of the organisation at any and all times.

In addition, people are usually members of multiple organisations, and the responsibilities and expectations of all of them can be overwhelming. This is especially true for women, who are more likely to have multiple memberships. Women are also more likely to take their responsibilities towards their memberships more seriously than their male counterparts, and are less likely to say no when called upon. As we look at organisations as extensions or parallel forms of the family network system, we see that women here too play a significant and dominant role in keeping things going.

Ethnic self and other ethnicities

The last interpersonal aspect of the self within the mental well being model, is the self in relation with other ethnic groups. Interaction and comparison with other ethnic groups provides additional feedback to the self about being in the world. Dealing with those of another culture forces the self to look beyond a range of cultural comfort and familiarity. To be Afro-Surinamese in Suriname means that one lives in relation with and to other ethnic groups at any given time. Of course there exists a range of stereotypes about each of the ethnic groups. However, it is in going beyond the stereotype, by exploring how working-class Afro-Surinamese relate to other ethnic groups, that we gain some insight into how the Afro-Surinamese view themselves. There are two groups in particular that are of interest, namely the Maroons and the Hindustani.

The Maroons and the Afro-Surinamese have the same ancestors. Early on during slavery, large numbers of enslaved Africans escaped the plantations and formed Maroon colonies in the interior. The relationship between the Afro-Surinamese and their Maroon “cousins” can best be described as “ambivalent”. Within the adult Afro-Surinamese community, the Maroons are appreciated and respected for their African-rich heritage, and they are acknowledged as sharing the same ancestry. At the same time they are a source of envy as the Maroons are always heralded as being more authentically African than the Afro-Surinamese. The value and authenticity of Maroon culture is never questioned, and is always publicly heralded and presented, whereas this is not the case for Afro-Surinamese culture.

Prior to the 1980s when one would refer to somebody as a *fos'tron Djuka*, first timer Aukan Maroon, it would be a derogatory statement, connoting the ignorance of somebody from the bush who is confronted with the modern world. As Maroons started to become active players in gold mining in the interior and became more integrated in city life, this term and derogatory attitude disappeared. With the onset of the civil war in the interior in the mid 1980s many Maroons escaped to neighbouring French Guyana, while many moved to the city (Paramaribo). A sense of compassion towards this population that was felt by all citizens, soon made way for feelings of reserve as Maroons quickly occupied the bottom rung of society. Ill equipped for city living, many young people failed or dropped out of school and succumbed to teen pregnancy and crime. Stories of male teen gangs who commit violent robberies are common.

Although the Maroon population receives negative attention due to their high crime rates, they fare far better artistically. Many young Maroons try their hand at making music videos. Similar to North American hip hop videos, themes of sex, women, cars, and “bling bling” [flashy jewellery] are central to their often self produced videos and cds. Among Surinamese teens of all ethnicities, the Maroon pop artists are extremely popular.

At any government and tourist function, the Maroons are hailed and paraded along with the Native Americans as the true indigenous people of Suriname. Whenever there is room for performance the Maroons are asked to showcase their traditional dances.

The Afro-Surinamese do not deny the rich heritage of the Maroons, but they often feel that people undervalue and underestimate their own African heritage by contrast. This is evident in the numerous Afro-Surinamese cultural organisations who constantly battle for recognition and position. These inter-group conflicts are fuelled by a government that consistently supports Maroon artistic presentations, but who selectively supports Afro-Surinamese artistic endeavours.

As such, the relational comparison with Maroons affects a sense of self, as the self is continuously imbued with messages of being “less than”, “less authentic”, and “not as African”.

The strongest inter-ethnic relationship, however, is with the Hindustani. During interviews, or even in casual conversation, when Afro-Surinamese talk about themselves, more often than not, they make comparative remarks about the Hindustani, usually placing themselves in a negative light. Some examples:

With the Afro-Surinamese, a part is easily satisfied. I mean the group who does not want to work hard to get ahead. They sit rather than do something regardless of their situation. Then another portion of the Afro-Surinamese is never satisfied. No matter what you do for them, or what you give them, or what their situation may look like, they are never satisfied. You could give them the world and still they would want more. I am not just talking about financial wealth, but about other things too . . . The Hindustani, they pray and work just to get richer. No matter what you give them, no matter how small, they are usually grateful because it will help in their progress. (41-year-old man)

What is ours is not good. When you as an Afro-Surinamese do your things, they accuse you of idolatry, *d'en bonu*. It's the Afro-Surinamese themselves who make these remarks. I saw it myself. When a Hindustani is near they are respectful, but they will turn around and laugh at another Afro-Surinamese. (Elder man)

At other times, when discussing the Afro-Surinamese within the larger Surinamese society, people would consciously hold the Hindustani up as a successful example of a group that does better and is respected more by others. They state:

Hindustani bring their whole family forward. Afro-Surinamese have less family loyalty. (70 plus year-old woman)

We have been brainwashed by the *bakra*, the white man. The Hindustani are far ahead of us. (Elder man)

Hindustani work hard, they have a sense of trade. We are too ashamed to sell stuff. (60 plus year-old woman)

Hindustani raise their children with cultural traditions from birth. We do not systematically pass on our cultural knowledge to our children.

(60 plus year-old woman)

The Afro-Surinamese participants indicate that Hindustani always seem to do better, from preserving cultural traditions to in-group unity, with one exception: suicide. Hindustani have an extreme high rate of suicide, which receives national attention. And so, in spite of their successes, Afro-Surinamese do consider themselves to be emotionally stronger than Hindustani.

In general then, there is a tendency to compare the self in a negative framework in comparison to the Hindustani. Similarly to the relational position between

Afro-Surinamese and Maroons, the relational views of the Hindustani affect the self, by always receiving a self-imposed “less than” message, or feeling some sense of conflict about one’s own position. This rivalry with the Hindustani is reinforced by governmental parties, which have always been ethnically segregated and competitive.

It is obvious in Paramaribo that the Hindustani are the big business owners and that there are more upper- and upper- middle-class Hindustani than there are Afro-Surinamese of the same class, which could be an obvious contribution to inter-ethnic envy. However, in daily living Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani get along very well. People may have their prejudices, but they live side by side and in general do not exhibit hostility towards each other, which is very different from neighbouring Guyana, where inter-ethnic bloodshed has been known to happen.

In talking with Hindustani colleagues this researcher was assured that Hindustani do not think as highly of themselves as Afro-Surinamese may presume. As Afro-Surinamese have a tendency to reflect negatively on themselves, so do Hindustani. Several Afro-Surinamese elders who were born and raised in the rural districts say that this divisive and envious attitude towards Hindustani is a city phenomenon and that their rural upbringing provided them with a totally different experience and attitude.

The Afro-Surinamese in the district had a plantation mentality. Families would go out and plant together. They did not make any ethnic distinctions. Everybody was called grandpa, grandma, auntie or uncle, regardless of their ethnicity. That separation stuff is stuff from the city. It’s that racial stuff from those Afro-Surinamese in the city. We used to learn Hindustani songs and how to write the language in the Roman Catholic school in the district.

(Two elder sisters ages 60 plus and 70 plus)

It [social connection] was actually something very important, especially where we lived [in the district]. We did not know any of that separation stuff. We did not have that “apartheid” situation with Hindustani or Javanese. Everybody was together, and when we had story nights we all came together. Where we lived were Hindustani, and they would be part of the party. Our social life was very peaceful and that was important for our community. That social element was one of the things you held on to. We helped each other, language was not an issue. You would learn to speak Hindustani and that made you even closer. I always say it, politics forced things to separate. (59-year-old story teller)

Living in close proximity to those of different ethnic backgrounds provides feedback to the self about being a citizen in Suriname. Ideally, these exchanges are positive and contribute to a more secure and confident sense of self of being in a world of different beings. However, if the comparative feedback is predominately negative, founded or not, what are the implications for the self?

Conclusion

The working-class Afro-Surinamese have provided an insight to mental well being, that though born out of a particular, cultural history, is accessible to a wide audience. The Afro-Surinamese model of mental well being has its origins in an African centred model of spirituality. In this model the self is seen as a container or vessel in and through which numerous forces flow. The self can consequently be referred to in a plural sense. The self is at any time interconnected with other people, all the natural elements, ancestral and spiritual forces. The self has a particularly strong relationship with blood relatives from the maternal lineage. Other interpersonal relationships that have a significant role in shaping the self are the participation in organisations that provide kin-like structures, and the relationship with other ethnic groups that continually provide comparative feedback to the self.

Mental well being is achieved and maintained through maintaining a harmonious relationship with the self and all these self-extended forces. There is never a level of homeostasis, but a continuous shifting of relationships and adapting and renegotiating of life conditions that provide continuous feedback into the model. The active pursuit of mental well being then should involve engaging in activities that “raise the spirit”, or *opo yeye*, as opposed to activities that “lower the spirit”, or *saka yeye*.

Although the model of well being is rooted in cultural and historical traditions, it encompasses and adapts within the globalised culture of today. There is a difference in perception and practice between the older and younger generation in relation to a connection with nature, rural and city sensibilities, and even inter-ethnic perceptions. Although elders complain about what has been lost and how consequently, the younger generations’ mental well being may be at risk, it appears that the younger generation has their own interpretations that help them raise their spirits. As such, there is hope that a purposeful approach to mental well being might be created to support people who live in today’s world governed by globalising conditions and globalising challenges.

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