

## Moving Frontiers in the Amazon: Brazilian Small-Scale Gold Miners in Suriname

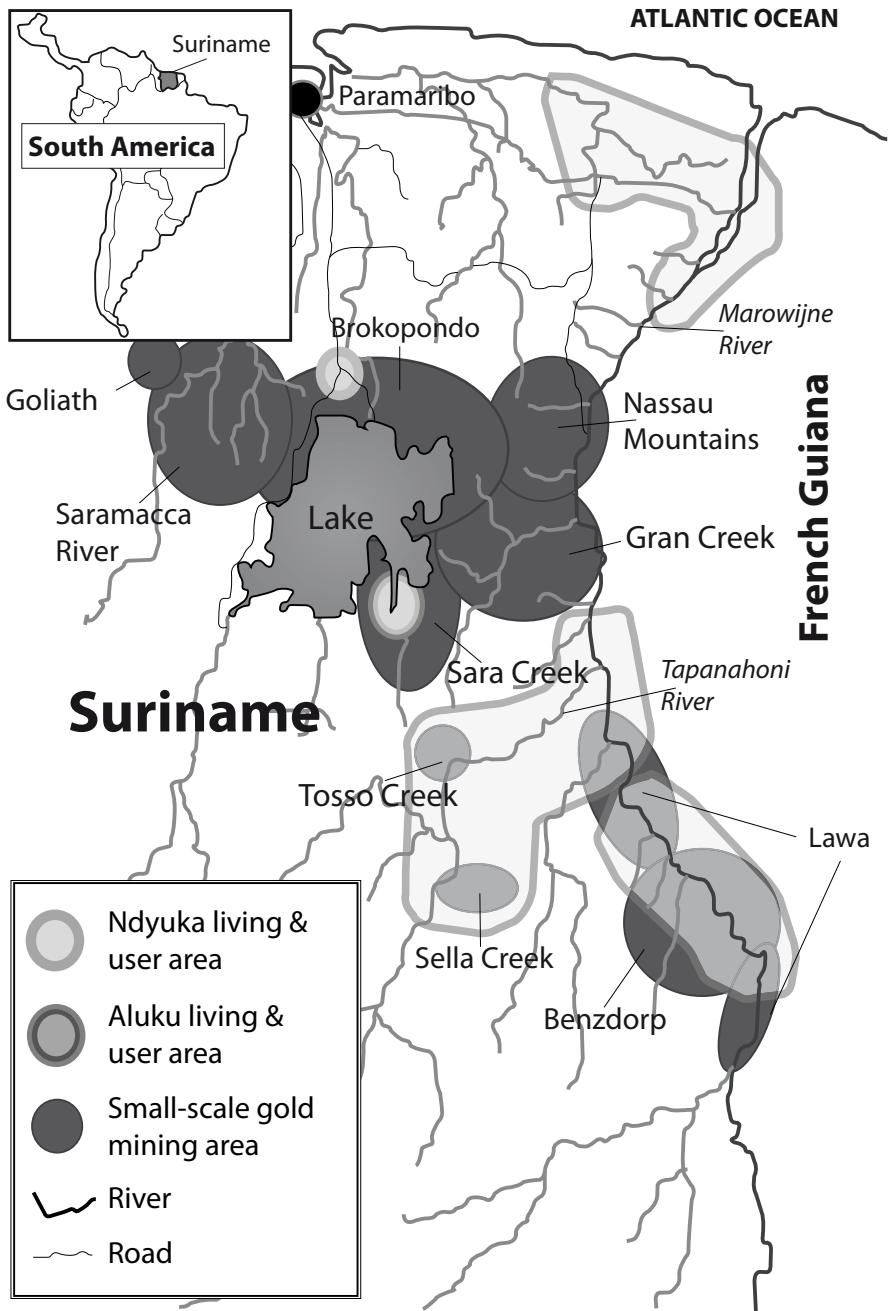
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*Abstract:* This article explores the national, local, and personal frontiers that Brazilian small-scale gold miners – called *garimpeiros* – cross in their quest for gold in the larger Amazon region. Ethnographic research was conducted among *garimpeiros* and mining service providers in Suriname. In the past three decades, thousands of Brazilian migrants (the exact number is unverifiable) have entered Suriname and consequently affected its society, economy, and culture. It is argued that in the absence of strong state control, these *garimpeiros*, along with local forest peoples and legal title holders, are traversing the fluctuating boundaries. These boundaries include national borders, customary and legal regulations, technological limitations, and personal livelihood goals. The continuous reformulation of these multiple boundaries drives the development of local mining cultures. Social networks increase the volatility of formal and informal borders, and are the key to these mining cultures as well. The authors conclude that while entering Suriname and its gold mines is relatively easy, financial and conceptual barriers often prevent miners from leaving. *Keywords:* *garimpo*, small-scale mining, Suriname, gold, migration.

The frontiers between nations and people are fluctuating and porous in the northern Amazon region. The indigenous citizens of Suriname regularly traverse the forests on foot to visit relatives in Brazil. Meanwhile Maroons crisscross the rivers between Suriname and French Guiana on a daily basis to work, meet family, or enjoy an evening of drinking and dancing on the other side. Passports, visas, foreign currency, and languages seem superfluous to local people who consider large stretches of these borderlands as their traditional customary lands where they are at home, regardless of the nation states claiming the area. In addition to locals, numerous Brazilian gold miners or *garimpeiros* cross these same porous borders either walking, or by boat or plane. They also bring advanced knowledge of hydraulic mining techniques and small-scale mining management as well as different customs of interacting and relating to people and places. Following the footsteps of these *garimpeiros* are other Brazilians such as shop- and bar-owners, operators of gold-buying houses and commercial sex workers who enter Suriname hoping to earn something from the small-scale mining industry.

We use the notion of mining frontiers to analyse the impact of Brazilian *garimpeiros* on the society, economy and culture of Suriname. Artisanal and small-scale gold mining societies are characterized by the continuous movement of people, goods, and knowledge, and Suriname is no exception. *Garimpeiros* not only cross geographic and national borders by leaving their homes and jobs; they also leave their personal confines – if only because of boundless dreams of riches and a new life – and cross over social and cultural boundaries in their encounters with other peoples in these gold mining areas. The receiving peoples, in turn, face the arrival of foreigners who bring in their own customs, food and social contracts, as well as new mining techniques and working practices that transform the boundaries of mining activities and local economies. We will explore the geographic, technological,

Figure 1. Map of Suriname with the main small-scale gold mining areas and tribal territories



legal, socio-cultural, and personal frontiers the *garimpeiros* are crossing in their quest for gold. In doing so, we analyse how both local miners and Surinamese society are responding to these fluctuating frontiers.

Literature on mining frontiers in the Amazon describes the rapid social change taking place as a result of migration to mining areas and the resulting emergence of something like a typical mining culture in the camps and towns (Cleary 1990; Heemskerk 2000, 2003; Laretta 2002; MacMillan 1995; Rodrigues 1994). Such mining cultures evolve around reasoning, rules and procedures that are consciously or unconsciously being developed to establish social relations and modes of social integration adapted to a situation in which most people are not connected by kinship or ethnic and class ties (Laretta 2002, de Theije 2007a). While our findings support these analyses, we will go further into the complexities and contestations that are shaped by the social and cultural processes on the mining frontier, not in the last place because these frontiers are multiple and constantly fluctuating. By focusing on migrant *garimpeiros*, we take the working lives of a group of people as our departure for the analysis. This gives us an insight into the way the gold mining activities substantially affect the socioeconomic and environmental realities of the greater Amazon region in a way that goes further than general images of gold diggers.

Because of poor documentation and registration of migrant miners, little is known about their exact numbers, origins, and work experiences. The stereotypical image of the mining areas as lawless places full of danger and violence also brings relatively few anthropologists to work among the *garimpeiros* in their places of labour. However, this study builds on anthropological research done in the mining areas of the Suriname interior from 1996 and in the capital city of Paramaribo from 1998. Most fieldwork was conducted in the mining areas of Benzdorp and Sella Creek, both in the south-eastern part of the country (Figure 1), but many other mining sites, mainly in the Brokopondo area, were visited for shorter periods.<sup>2</sup> By sharing ethnographic accounts of the daily lives of Brazilian miners and their families we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the many 'sides', effects and meanings of the (notion of) frontier and small scale gold mining for the *garimpeiros* and local populations in Suriname. (Although little research has been done in Guyana and French Guiana bordering on Suriname, those interested can refer to Colchester 1997; Forte 1999; Herman 2003; Petot 1986; Roopnarine 1996, 2002; Strobel, 1998).

## **Gold mining in Suriname**

Suriname is situated north of Brazil, between Guyana and the French Department of La Guyane, or French Guiana (Figure 1). Suriname's small population of less than half a million people (ABS 2006) has settled almost entirely in and around the capital city of Paramaribo. The country's vast interior is home to indigenous peoples and Maroons, who are the descendents of runaway African slaves that established independent communities in the rainforest.<sup>3</sup> Suriname is rich in natural resources. Relatively intact tropical rainforest covers 80 per cent of the country. Exports of minerals such as bauxite, oil, and gold exceed 50 per cent of GDP (IMF 2007). Gold mining has historically been part of the Suriname economy, but today the number of people involved, the amount of gold extracted, and its social and

ecological impacts are unprecedented. Most gold is extracted by often informal and semi-legal miners from Brazil, where small-scale *garimpos*, or small-scale gold mining sites, have been an important sector since the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s as it became more difficult to find work in Brazil, opportunities arose just across the border in Suriname. Suriname had experienced an armed conflict, the *Binnenlandse Oorlog* (Interior War) from 1986 to 1992, fought between a military government and local insurgents of ethnic Maroons that were bundled in a group named the *Jungle Commando*. Soon the Maroon communities in southeastern Suriname had become isolated from the more populated coastal zone. Without access to the urban economic infrastructure, gold became the only valid currency to buy food, supplies, and arms in French Guiana. The Maroons had long been involved in small-scale gold mining, but they usually worked manually in areas relatively near to their home villages along the *Marowijne*, Suriname, *Tapanahoni* and *Lawa* rivers. The war-related isolation and elimination of job opportunities forced Maroon men to increase their participation in artisanal and small-scale mining.

According to local sources, Ronny Brunswijk, the leader of the Maroon fighters, invited the first Brazilian miners to Suriname to work on dredges that were confiscated from the governmental Geology and Mining Department (GMD). It is unclear whether a formal invitation was extended, because accounts about the conflict are peppered with myths and tales. Certain is that the *Jungle Commando* partly financed their armed struggle with gold, and that Brazilians were mining with Maroons at that time (Hoogbergen, Kruijt and Polimé 2001; Kruijt and Hoogbergen 2005). Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the number of *garimpeiros* in Suriname remained insignificant. Of the 175 *garimpeiros* we spoke to, only one had arrived in the country before 1992, when the peace treaty was signed to conclude the Interior War. A few years later, a larger migratory movement of Brazilians to Suriname took off when the interior opened up and was safe again.

Today approximately twenty thousand Brazilians (although the exact number is unverifiable) are working almost exclusively in Suriname in the small-scale gold mining industry and accompanying service economy (ABS 2006, de Theije 2007a). Our estimate is that another ten thousand Maroons are also engaged in the gold mining business. We use the term *garimpeiros* to distinguish Brazilian migrant miners from local gold miners, called *gowtuman* or *porknockers*. Their activity is called *garimpagem*, and small-scale gold mining sites are called *garimpos*. The Suriname government has failed to control the small-scale mining sector, and much of Suriname society sees small-scale miners as a problem, a barrier to large-scale mine development, and the culprits of the country's environmental problems.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the production of gold in small-scale mining is still increasing, and the Central Bank of Suriname's purchases from *garimpeiros* and *porknockers* almost doubled between 2000 and 2006. Gold produced by small-scale gold mining constituted 17 per cent of the national export in the recent years (IMF 2007, 2008).

### **There are no frontiers in the Amazon**

In terms of geography, Suriname is just as much a part of Amazonia as Brazil is. The same Amazon rainforest that dominates the landscape of northern Brazil cov-

ers southern Suriname. The Amazon's renowned diversity of flora and fauna is found on both sides of the border. Similarly, geological formations rich in minerals such as the Guiana Shield, where most of Suriname's gold deposits are found, do not stop at the frontiers that have been drawn by nation states. Transportation to remote settlements and mining camps in the dense tropical rainforests occurs mostly by dugout canoe or small aircraft, as roads or even dirt tracks are non-existent in the southern half of Suriname and very limited in the Brazilian Amazon. For *garimpeiros*, the perceived differences between the two countries are very few in terms of nature and natural resources. Many of them migrated with their parents from southern and north-eastern Brazil to the newly opened agricultural areas in the Amazon region in the 1960s and 1970s. Others left for the mining areas of Pará in the 1980s, often on an intermittent, seasonal base (MacMillan 1995, Schonenberg 2001, Slater 1994). They may now move on to Guyana and French Guiana, or in this case to Suriname, because they see opportunities to work in a familiar environment.

For the local population, migration and movement in the territory is also a common feature of their lives. The indigenous groups in southern Suriname – Wayana and Trio – as well as the Maroons, cross national boundaries with still more ease than the Brazilians do. Aluku Maroons have lived on both sides of the Lawa River since the early nineteenth century, and the Ndjuka and Saramaka have histories of labour migration to the coastal zones of Suriname and French Guiana. In the past decades, as a consequence of the Interior War in Suriname and national politics in the French Guiana, thousands of Ndjuka settled along the eastern bank of the Marowijne River, and are now French citizens. The same is true for the indigenous inhabitants in this region. Most Wayana have moved to the French side of the border because the French state offers more social support and security to its subjects (Heemskerk and de Theije, forthcoming). The Aluku and Ndjuka who venture into small scale mining usually have to leave their villages too, because the most prosperous gold fields are to be found further away. A young Ndjuka man from the lower Marowijne or Paramaribo River may work at the Lawa or Sella mines, for example. Many Maroons who work or have worked in French Guiana, in the famous Dorlin or Mana River gold fields have encountered no physical or social obstacles that would limit their space to move around.

The nation states involved do not make up for the absence of natural boundaries. In the interior of Suriname the state is virtually non-existent. Kruijt and Hoogbergen (2005) speak of a 'government void' and [partial] 'state failure' with respect to the situation in eastern Suriname along the Marowijne River, one of the regions where small-scale gold extraction dominates the local economy. *Garimpeiros* say they are attracted to Suriname by the relative lack of government interference and the fact that the *garimpo* is 'open' to anyone: 'You have no documents, but nobody is asking for them either, so why bother', said a man who had already worked in Suriname for eight years. Indeed, there are hardly any police, military or other government representatives in mining areas.<sup>6</sup> No one asks for papers when foreigners sell gold or board a plane leaving for a mining region. And public authorities hardly ever check passports and labour licenses in urban neighbourhoods where legal and illegal Brazilians are known to congregate (de Theije 2007b).

With little natural or formal obstacles in their way, the *garimpeiros* find it easy

to come to Suriname. They come by road through Amapá or Roraima, by boat from Belém or other Amazonian harbours and by plane from Belém or Boa Vista. On entering the country, they receive a short stay permit that can later be extended up to one year. Although many forget to have the necessary administrative requirements done, they do not encounter major problems because of an invalid visa or lost passport. Several garimpeiros from the Benzdorp mining area (Figure 1) said they worked on the French side of the border before they came to Suriname. For garimpeiros, Suriname, Guyana, and French Guiana are not thought of in terms of being separate nations, but are just other garimpos and not fundamentally different or strange places to go to.

The networks Brazilians use to organize their move to the garimpos reinforce the idea of familiarity. Most Brazilians have friends or relatives who invited them to come or who at least told stories about the many opportunities in Suriname. Even those who come alone to Suriname are rapidly integrated into the existing Brazilian community. The large concentration of Brazilians already in the country helps newcomers find a place to stay, work, the required documentation, if necessary, and other support. It is no wonder that the Paramaribo neighbourhood where many Brazilians live is called Klein Belém (little Belém), symbolizing that the frontier of Brazil stretches all the way to the capital of Suriname. For people involved in small scale gold mining in Suriname, the national frontiers are fluid and penetrable, and the Amazon is just another territory for Brazilians and Maroons alike to move around in.

### **Multiple legal frontiers**

That garimpeiros find it relatively easy to find work in Suriname is not to say that everybody is free to start a mining operation in this country (de Theije and Bal, forthcoming). The mining law, dating from 1986, states: ‘Mining operations can only be conducted after rights to do so have been granted by the competent authorities [...]’ (Suriname 1986, art. 2.6). Historically, however, this law has not been followed to the letter, in part due to the limited government presence in the interior. Maroon miners have worked for decades without mining rights or permits from ‘competent authorities’ in Paramaribo. They feel it is unnecessary to apply for official permission to work on lands that they traditionally view as theirs (Heemskerck 2001; Figure 1). The bureaucratic application procedure for the concessions is complicated, slow, and believed to favour government connections. Maroons also have little means to meet the legal requirements of having an office in Paramaribo that supplies the Geological Mining Service with a written report of all exploitation and exploration findings every three months (Suriname 1986). Instead, they resort to their traditional authorities, the Granman (paramount chief of the tribe) and Kabiten (captains or village headmen) of the tribal villages, for endorsement of their mining activities.

The Maroons’ mining practices were tolerated by the concession holders as long as the price of gold remained low and few other Surinamers were interested in the country’s gold deposits. This changed in the early 1990s when the interest of non-Maroon Suriname citizens for the mining business increased. These mostly Paramaribo-based business men applied for and were granted concessions

throughout the country, and today the mining rights to most Suriname mining areas have been formally assigned to a title holder. By law, concessions can only be granted to Suriname nationals (although this may only be as representatives of foreigners), which excludes the Brazilian miners of direct legal access to the mineral resources of the country.

However, concession holders do not explore or exploit the gold fields. They sublet their concession to small business entrepreneurs who invest in the equipment and organize the extraction of gold. Some concession holders make up for the absence of government control by putting their own system of regulation and registration of work sites and employed persons in place. They usually hire a mine manager to oversee the area and collect fees, as well as armed guards to protect both the concession holders' interests and the safety of the gold miners. The Brazilian machine owners and service providers (such as bar and brothel owners) on the concession will pay a fixed fee or a production-percentage per month in exchange for a safe place to work. Such regulations are fairly clear, and miners appreciate the 'security' offered, both in terms of the physical security that is somewhat guaranteed by the concession holders' crew in the field and by the economic and legal security that working on the property of a Surinamese citizen with the right documents offers them.<sup>7</sup>

Many other concession holders have obtained mining titles for speculative purposes and are not at all actively involved (Healy and Heemskerk 2005). When the concession holder is not physically or administratively present, one of the Maroon clans will usually claim ancestral rights to the land. In this case the clan head or his representative will install the rules and regulations, which usually do not differ much from those of the formal concession holders. As long as it is clear who the legitimate land claimant is, there are few problems; the gold miner pays his dues in exchange for protection from the customary land owner. Sometimes, however, a Brazilian mine owner who initially pays his dues to a legal concession holder is subsequently forced to pay a Maroon Granman or Kabiten, or someone claiming to act on his behalf. When these arrangements become too difficult to meet, many garimpeiros prefer to avoid problems with the Surinamers and move on to another place of work instead of trying to demand their 'mining law rights'.

At the onset of new mining activities in a certain area, the interests of a legal title holder, the local Maroon population, and Brazilian mine operators may clash. In these cases the parties involved usually negotiate until they come to an agreement – again without involving national law enforcement agents, but rather based on the miners' laws of the garimpo. Only in rare cases are the police or military involved, as happened in Sellakreek in 1999 and in the Benzdorp area in 2000. In Sellakreek a young Ndyuka mine operator was murdered by a garimpeiro. Immediately after the crime, the local *basjas* (tribal secretaries) prevented the outraged Ndyuka miners from lynching all garimpeiros in the area. In a matter of hours Ndyuka Granman Gazon decided to expel all garimpeiros from the Sellakreek area; a decision that has been enforced up to the present. When the police eventually arrived some days later, they did little more than record the known facts. A year later the assault on the production site of an Aluku in Benzdorp also led to the expulsion of Brazilians from the area by the local Maroons. In this case the intervention of the police re-established order by arresting some Surinamers who had

abused innocent Brazilians, and helped the *garimpeiros* to return to their houses and work places.

As these events show, the governing mining law is not explicit, as it is easily adapted to new circumstances. A reconstruction of the development in the Benzdorp area, part of the traditional homelands of the local Aluku Maroons, further illustrates this point. When the first Brazilians arrived in the area in the early 1990s, they were not allowed to have their own operation but could only work for the Aluku. One mine operator remembers that when he arrived in Benzdorp in 1994, there were only two Aluku entrepreneurs working then, employing about 18 to 20 Brazilians. The situation changed when concessionaries from the city wanted to lay claim to the rights that had recently been allocated to them by the Suriname government. In 1997, the military was briefly sent in to help the legal concessionaries establish their authority. Since this intervention the concession holders have maintained their own security and taxation personnel. They also have allowed Brazilians to put up their own mining operations, which has increased the productivity of the area considerably and sparked an influx of more *garimpeiros* who now are no longer dependent on the investments of the Aluku.

Ever since the above crisis, the Aluku and Ndyuka Maroons and Brazilians have mined side by side. Yet they often have their own mining teams and their practical status remains separate. As a traditional people who think they are the only rightful owners of the land, the Aluku feel that they should be granted special treatment. On one of the concessions, for example, the Aluku refused to pay the concession holder the stipulated percentage for mining on 'their own' lands. Furthermore, when Brazilian or non-Aluku Surinamese mine operators wanted to work on areas the Aluku claim, they were sent away. At present, concession owners try to overrule such claims, stating that the mining laws contain no such orientation of the kind, but it is still uncertain how successful they will be. Some of the Maroons in the Benzdorp region have a violent reputation in addition to their local authority, and for that reason they are feared and respected by the Brazilians. The security employees of the concession where these disputed grounds are situated do not dare to impose the official regulations. In other cases, arrangements may be designed to avoid such unclear situations, as when Maroons negotiate successfully with the owners of concessions that have ceded part of the area to the local gold miners.

It is important to understand that the limits of Suriname's legal system are being expanded by both the legal title holders and the Maroon clans claiming authority over an area. Virtually all Surinamese mining concession holders have exploration or small-scale mining titles, neither of which may be sub-let to third parties for gold extraction. The Maroons have no formal rights to the lands that they have used and inhabited for centuries, even though they may regard the area as theirs.<sup>8</sup> Hence neither the legal title holder nor the Maroon clan has the right to collect fees from *garimpeiros* – often without residency papers or work permits – or to allow them to mine gold. They also do not have the authority to protect people on their concession by armed guards, who may punish wrongdoers according to their own perception. Nevertheless, the Suriname government allows this system to prevail not only because it 'works', but also because the state does not have the human and financial resources to regulate and control the mining areas. In addition, small scale gold mining delivers an important contribution to the economy of the country. In

the process, the limits of legality are continuously being renegotiated with the arrival of new concession holders, governmental authorities, and miners. Each disruption or conflict, like the ones described above, leads to a new consensus or status quo.

In general Brazilians consider it normal that they must pay ten per cent of their production to a land owner – whoever that is. However, they are concerned about their inability to obtain secure land titles. In practice neither payment to a legal concession holder nor gold transfers to a tribal claimant provides tenure security, which leaves the *garimpeiros* in a vulnerable position. On any given day the concession holder can decide to send away someone he thinks is causing problems, is not paying sufficiently, or for any other reason is no longer desired on the concession. *Garimpeiros* have complained about arbitrary treatment by concession holders, and feel they have little power to protest unfair decisions. The police prefer not to interfere in issues concerning tribal land claims in isolated areas. Hence they usually give the concession holder the last word in issues on his concession and will only interfere if this person asks for assistance. The multiplicity of rules, laws and authorities creates a fuzzy situation in which the ultimate convention can only be a flexible ‘local mining law’.

### **Technological frontiers and the cultural formation of labour relations and economy**

Of the ninety Brazilian *garimpeiros* interviewed by de Theije between 2005 and 2007, only five had not been mining in Brazil before they came to Suriname. The same is true for many cooks, mechanics, sawyers, and brothel owners. Most had already been working in the mines before relocating to Suriname and other Amazon countries including Guyana, French Guiana, Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela. Key factors driving the mining boom in the Amazon were rural-settlement policies and the failure of agrarian reform, which had left many small farmers impoverished and landless (Hanai 1998). The situation was exacerbated by the series of economic crises that struck Brazil in the 1970s and '80s. Extensive highway construction during this period facilitated migratory movements to the Amazon region where gold mining is concentrated. The dramatic increase in the gold price in the late 1970s made gold mining relatively more lucrative than scarce employment alternatives.

In recent years, more Brazilians have come to the capital city of Paramaribo. They cater to the growing Brazilian population as sellers of Brazilian merchandise, gold-buying agents, mining equipment salesmen, service providers, singers, hotel managers, and bar and restaurant owners. These urban Brazilians tend to be in closer contact with Brazil, where they buy mining equipment and other *garimpo* necessities for resale in Suriname. They are the main motor behind the increased flows of money and commodities across the Brazil-Suriname border.

One of the main impacts the Brazilians have had on the Suriname mining industry is the technological modernization and professionalization of labour relations. As we noted above, the Maroons were mining for gold long before the massive arrival of the *garimpeiros*. Although mining was not considered a serious profession, families mined occasionally when they needed emergency cash. In the 1950s and '60s, miners worked manually with a shovel, pick-axe, *baté*, and long-

tom sluice box. An elderly Ndyuka Maroon man remembers how gold miners and their families paddled up-river:

In those times you brought your wife and children. You stayed perhaps seven months ... The woman washed; cooked ... sometimes she lay down in her hammock. When she ... got bored, she took a baté and she washed gold. At that time there were not many people, sometimes maybe only five adults. At times you worked alone, other times you worked with another man. You found more money then, because there were fewer expenses (camp boss, 56, Sella Creek mining area 1998).

Today mining has ceased to be a family enterprise and only rarely occurs manually. The arrival of the Brazilians has had everything to do with this change.

The garimpeiros that came from Brazil in the 1980s were acquainted with the manual method, but they had been working with much more sophisticated hydraulic equipment. They also were familiar with excavators, bulldozers, and tractors in the mines. Moreover, they were running their small-scale mining operations as a professional business, working in teams with specialized workers, during fixed working hours, and with an established hierarchy. The Maroons, particularly young entrepreneurial men, were quick to catch on. They bought machines and hired Brazilians to be their foreman, and started mining 'the modern way', too.

Brazilian-style mining is not a guarantee for success, however, and just as many garimpeiros do not succeed in 'striking it rich' in a short time, their Surinamese counterparts have often had to stop work, sell off their equipment or return everything to their creditors. Many Maroons who were machine owners in the mid-nineties left to go to other sites or stopped working in the gold business altogether. Several Brazilians assured us that, 'They had poor luck and they didn't know how to continue work with a small quantity of gold' (mechanic, 45 years old, in Suriname since 1995; interview 27 July 2006, Antino). According to many Brazilians, one of the problems of the Maroons who work for gold is the fact that they have too many wives and children and spend all their money in the maintenance of their family instead of investing it in their gold businesses. This comment reveals different cultural views of the economics of gold mining and (how to achieve) prosperity or a good life.

Notwithstanding their more advanced mining techniques as compared to earlier times, the small-scale gold miners still use rather rudimentary technologies. They do not know beforehand if a certain place will give enough return to cover all the investment costs of the machines, fuel and workers. These costs continue to rise because they have to use ever more advanced methods to extract the gold, often on locations that have been exploited before, at ever more distant gold fields. Investments in transportation of equipment, personnel, fuel and provision become a critical factor in the economic profitability of the enterprise of garimpagem. Twenty or thirty years ago, it was still relatively easy to find a big amount of gold, but now our informants agreed that 'easy gold, at the door of your house, near to the city, easy to extract, [...] is finishing' (machine owner, nine years in Suriname; interview 20 March 2005, Paramaribo). To find gold nowadays, one has to invest more in exploration, transportation, and mechanization. For the small-scale garimpeiros this is more difficult as compared to the large companies that are granted conces-

sions in the Suriname rainforest, because their methods are different. ‘The garimpeiro prospects through mining. He takes his machines and when it works out, congratulations, and if not, the losses are his own’, the same machine owner continued.

Adopting new technology looks easier than it often proves to be, because the work methods and advanced machinery demand specific work attitudes. The Maroon culture does not readily adapt to new Brazilian procedures to extract gold. After more than a decade of garimpeiros training Maroon miners, even Maroon bosses still often prefer to work with Brazilian workers instead. Maroon employees, often related, will unexpectedly travel to their home villages for festivities, rituals, and funerals. Brazilians, by contrast, have the reputation that they will labour 12-hour days for months in a row. Maroons are also less likely than Brazilians to follow rigid work schedules and orders from their kinsmen. Additionally, the custom of community consultation and discussion that is a core element of Maroon culture seems to disrupt the work process introduced by the Brazilian garimpeiros. A Maroon machine owner who has been in the gold business since 1996 said that Surinamese workers always argue with him, while Brazilians carry out the orders he gives them without any comment. He said:

Surinamers say, ‘No, we don’t want to do that, it should happen a different way’, you know. Look, once they get along well with you they think, ‘Ah, he is my friend, he won’t do anything to me’ [such as being fired]. So for me it is best with Brazilians (owner of several machines, age 40, interview 28 May 2007, Benzdorp).

In some cases Brazilian supervisors take care of the entire business of Maroon mine owners. Garimpeiros also think that Maroons are generally not as good in mining as Brazilians are, although they also mention exceptions to this opinion. They also acknowledge the Maroons’ extensive knowledge of the river system and local environment. However, Brazilians prefer to work with and for other Brazilians as in their eyes Maroon operations are chaotic, slovenly and poorly managed. The food in Suriname mining camps, in particular the lack of vegetables and fresh meat, was a source of continuous complaints. ‘I only worked for three days there’, recounted one garimpeiro of his experience: ‘When you work with the blacks [Maroons] you are always hungry’.

It is difficult to estimate how much money the average garimpeiro would literally have in his hands by the end of the month. While production has increased with the arrival of modern hydraulic technology, the operational costs of mining have been on a par. Above we quoted an old Surinamese miner who had been working manually. His expenses would have been no more than the costs for a shuffle, a gold pan or *baté*, and a few tools to construct a long wooden sluice box called the *long-tom*. Vegetables would come from his wife’s garden plot, fish would be caught by non-mining family members, and the man might have hunted once in a while to obtain bush meat. The family would paddle up and down the river from the village to the gold fields, thus no money would be spent on fuel or chartering a boat. Older miners agreed that they could recover about 10 grams of gold (which is about US\$ 200 at current prices) a month with these basic tools.

Few modern-day garimpeiros would work for that small an amount of money. A mining team consisting of the boss, a foreman and six workers, and using plain

hydraulic equipment could expect to extract somewhere between one and two kilograms of gold a month. In this system a worker's share is typically 5 per cent of the production, which would amount to 50 to 100 grams of gold, or between US\$ 1,000 to US\$ 2,000. Teams that also used a backhoe excavator and/or a bulldozer might dig up four to five kilos of gold a month. Even though the percentage share for workers might be less in this system, they could earn slightly more than others working without heavy equipment. Of course, this only occurs in an ideal situation when all the equipment is in good condition, fuel arrives on time, and most importantly, a good location has been found from which to extract the gold.

Cooks and operators of excavators and bulldozers are the only categories to receive a fixed salary. Cooks typically get paid the equivalent of US\$ 1,200 per month, and operators obtain between US\$ 2,000 and US\$ 3,600. Sex-workers reportedly earn up to US\$ 3,000 a month. In all cases this is much more than an un-schooled labourer could ever expect to make in Brazil or Suriname. These potential earnings are also the attraction of mining for many Maroons, who are generally disadvantaged in their access to the national labour market. Moreover, there are few other employment opportunities in the interior (Heemskerk 2003).

Miners and mining service providers do not think in US dollars; they think in grams of gold. Gold is the currency in which they receive their salaries, as well as the commodity used to pay for a shot of cheap rum in the evening, boat transportation to and from the mines, and a visit to a commercial sex-worker. In this world of gold, people's perceptions of sound economic decision-making are elusive. While one might declare a person foolish for spending US\$ 10 on a can of coca cola in the city, half a gram of gold might not seem to be too much for a well-deserved cold soft-drink after a long day working in the burning sun. In the end, the average garimpeiro may easily spend a thousand dollars a month on small luxuries that make life in the rainforest more bearable.

Given their variable and unpredictable incomes and haphazard spending patterns, it is difficult to estimate how much money garimpeiros regularly send home. And although many have children in Brazil, they often do not send money back on a regular basis for various reasons. They may not have had contact with their families for a long while, and those who do not invest in their business tend to spend much of their earnings right away. Small farmers who are temporarily working in mining often say they are saving money to invest on the farm. However, it is questionable how many of them actually manage to take money back to their families. Women working as cooks and sex-workers are the most likely to send money home regularly. They tend to express a stronger sense of responsibility towards their children in particular, who may be staying with relatives in Brazil. Women also earn relatively more secure wages, as the need for food and sexual satisfaction remains whether gold has been extracted or not. Women also typically spend less than men do on drinks and other items.

Ultimately, many Brazilian workers end up spending all their earnings in Suriname, regardless if they have struck it rich or have only accumulated 'bad luck'. Those garimpeiros who did not find (enough) gold or who made unfortunate economic transactions also find out that, while it was easy to enter Suriname, it is not all that easy to leave. Opportunities to return depend on local political conditions, health or illness, and financial circumstances. It is considered humiliating to return

ill or without (sufficient) money. Some do not have the money to pay for a return ticket.

### **Confronting ethnic divides in the mining culture**

The Republic of Suriname is a multi-ethnic society in which the boundaries between ethnic groups are clearly demarcated, yet they do not generally cause problems.<sup>9</sup> Suriname's publicly touted ethnic tolerance, however, does not eliminate ethnicism and racism on a smaller scale. Persistent stereotypes about the different population groups are widespread and held by many as true. One should not be surprised to hear friendly, educated Surinamers explain certain socioeconomic conditions by claiming as fact that indigenous peoples are lazy, Hindustanis are sly, Creoles are more likely to spend rather than earn money, Javanese women are masters in bewitching men, and Maroons are thieves. Mixed dating is accepted in some groups, but a Hindustani girl who brings a Creole boyfriend home is awaiting trouble. Even today, particularly within Creole families, lighter coloured children tend to be favoured over the others. Brazilians find it difficult to carve out a space for themselves in this complex world of ethnic alliances and frontiers: 'Every group has its celebrations, its traditions [...]. It is difficult to enter that world, even though there are exceptions of course', says Paulo, who has been living in Paramaribo for the past nine years. Research by Höfs (2006) on the identity of Brazilians in Paramaribo shows that Brazilians feel excluded by the existing ethnic groups.

The fact that ethnically diverse Suriname has seemingly closed itself off to Brazilians may in part be blamed on the Brazilians themselves. The typical Brazilian, even he or she who has lived in Suriname for many years, speaks little or no Dutch and/or Sranantongo. Brazilians rarely socialize with Surinamers other than their co-workers, whereas Surinamers who work in the mining service economy have all mastered the Portuguese language. In day to day life the Brazilians rely primarily on their fellow migrants, and reproduce Brazilian culture through food, socializing, music, religious activities, and watching Brazilian television to stay informed, just as they would in their home country. The culture produced by the Brazilians in Suriname disregards national borders, just as the laws and geography do (de Theije 2006). In Paramaribo it is easy to hear negative remarks concerning Brazilian migrants. Surinamers complain that the *garimpeiros* do not speak Dutch or Sranantongo, their women dress 'indecently', and, because they are clandestine, they do not pay taxes. The public media often compound this negative image by labelling Brazilians as illegal and (thus) criminal.

However, in the interior ethnic diversity is less of an issue. Although the greater rainforest area of Suriname is inhabited by indigenous groups and Maroons, the main mining regions are found in the Maroon habitat, and they are the main ethnic group of Suriname who are involved in mining. Maroons are traditionally a forest people, although a significant proportion of Maroon miners was born and raised either in the capital city or the coastal zone. They make up about a quarter of Suriname's small-scale gold mining population together with a minor number of Chinese, Koreans, and Suriname people of other ethnic affiliations.

Interestingly, each ethnic group has its own professional niche. In the Benzdorp

region for example, where Brazilians represent ninety per cent of the population, a few indigenous men are workers in the team of a Brazilian machine owner. Several Javanese and Hindustani young men work as operators of excavating machines and bulldozers. Ndyuka Maroons dominate the fuel commerce, and a recently arrived Chinese man bought the supermarket in the mining village. The owners of the gold operations are Brazilians and Aluku Maroons, while the workers in the pits and on the mountains are mostly Brazilians and Ndyuka, often in mixed teams. Here the different ethnic groups work together, although some work teams are uni-ethnic.

The relative isolation of the mining camps contributes to the dilution of ethnic differences between Maroons and Brazilians. Indeed, '[i]n a sense, these Maroon and Brazilian miners temporarily share a culture' (Price and Price 2002, 45). They work together, use the same technologies, go to the same bars, listen to the same music, speak the same languages – especially since most Maroon miners have learned to speak Portuguese. The fact that both ethnic groups are regarded as underdogs in Suriname society may also strengthen their bond. Ethnic dividing lines are further blurred through sexual and marital relationships between Maroon men and Brazilian women. Maroons are polygamous, and it is common to find that a Maroon man may have a Brazilian wife and offspring in the garimpo as well as a Maroon wife with children in Paramaribo or their home village. Relations of Maroon women with Brazilian men are less common, as very few Maroon women live in the garimpo settlements, and Maroon men discourage the women from beginning relationships with Brazilian men. Nevertheless, encounters between garimpeiros and Maroon women have also produced mixed children. The mixed children resulting from these ethnic combinations are growing up in both cultures, thus further reducing ethnic divides.

As local and foreign gold miners figure out ways to live and work together in the isolated mining camps that are far removed from mainstream society, they are developing what may be called small-scale gold mining cultures. We say 'cultures' rather than 'culture' because in each different mining area, slightly different rules may apply, depending on the demographic, socioeconomic, political and geographic realities of the place. Notwithstanding these differences, mining cultures typically share a strong sense of solidarity that has developed as a result of shared hardships: labour accidents, occasional violence, malaria, the absence of urban luxuries, and the lack of a stable home environment. They also have in common, however, that codes of conduct that would be considered as inappropriate at home, such as carrying a gun or visiting sex workers, have become the norm.

While Suriname's evolving mining cultures embody elements that may be traced to either of its main actors, the Brazilian impact is relatively more profound. Brazilians not only dominate in numbers, they also strongly favour their own culture over what they consider the primitive cultures found in Suriname's rainforest. A 43-year old garimpeiro comments on the lack of development in the Suriname interior:

The country is poor, the food is poor, only rice and beans. In Brazil one finds vegetables, fruits, and television. Planes land there, there are soccer fields, gambling machines. You feel alienated working with people from Suriname. Brazil is more comfortable (pit worker, age 43, 21 years experience, Sella Creek mining area, 1999).

Rural communities in Brazil have bars, restaurants, and places for entertainment and other diversions. Those items are absent from most Suriname rainforest villages, which are difficult to reach and do not have electricity, running water, public transport, or other signs of urban development.

Another reason for the strong Brazilian impact on Suriname's mining culture may be traced to the incredible adaptability of the Maroon culture. Throughout their history, arriving as slaves in the new world and subsequently escaping to the forest, Maroons have had to move, resettle, and adjust to new environments (Bilby 1990, Thoden van Velzen 2003, Thoden van Velzen and Wetering 2004). If today it is advantageous to speak Portuguese, work according to the Brazilian manner, and eat Brazilian food, most Maroons will make those adaptations without much ado. Moreover, as noted above, Maroons admire the Brazilian work ethic and mining skills. As a result, one might imagine oneself in Brazil when visiting Suriname's mining camps. Satellite dishes transmit Brazilian TV (all crew members cheered for Brazil during the World cup soccer – Suriname usually does not get very far), cooks prepare Brazilian-style meals, and people spend their evenings dancing to the popular Brazilian music styles of *forró* and *calypso*.

On the negative side, Brazilians and local miners alike agree that Brazilian miners have brought violence to the mining areas. Local miners tend to work with and among kin. The kin-based social organization provides protection and a fair amount of social control, which tends to discourage deviant behaviour such as excessive drugs usage and armed assaults. Maroon perpetrators of crime may be ostracized by their home communities. This is not the case for Brazilians. Since they have come to Suriname's *garimpos*, violence has become more common. Nevertheless, violence by Maroon miners has also been reported, especially in French Guiana, but also in Suriname.<sup>10</sup>

Personal boundaries must be overstepped to participate fully, and ethics and emotional feelings are being stretched as people become part of the evolving small-scale gold mining cultures. This may include accepting other people and norms that at home would be rejected when in pursuit of their personal goals. These goals could be starting up a farm in Brazil, sending a daughter to university in Belém, starting a small restaurant or shop in one's hometown, buying a car and becoming a taxi-driver, or leading a lavish life once luck is on one's side.

Moving to Suriname is less of a dramatic life change for professional *garimpeiros* who have been mining throughout the Amazon and perceive this as just another stop. Newcomers to the mining world, particularly women, tend to have a harder time adjusting to a new life in the rough, alien mining environment. While on the one hand women typically work in the mines to give their children a better future, on the other hand they also feel that by doing so they fail to give their children the motherly care and love they need. Young sex workers in the mine-site brothels, or *cabarés*, have a particularly difficult time adjusting. Few had any experience in this profession prior to their arrival in Suriname, and it took quite some courage and personal determination to be prepared for the first client. A 27-year old sex worker said that upon her arrival in the *cabaré*, she locked herself up in her room for a week, crying every night while regretting her decision to move to Suriname. Reassurance from others helped her overcome her personal restrictions and

begin earning the money she needed to build a small home for herself and her two children in Brazil.

Another part of the appeal of working in the garimpo is that many consider it an exciting activity, and much less boring than the manual work many have done before. 'You know, back home (in Maranhão) we work on the land and that is very dull and bothersome', said one older garimpeiro, who had been working in many different places during his lifetime (pit worker, exact age unknown; conversation 18 March 2005, at the airport of Georgetown, Guyana). We heard many stories of individuals who had decided to change their life and 'take the risk', 'try one's luck', after hearing some vague stories about the riches on offer in Suriname. More often than not such a decision is taken during a period of personal crisis, such as a divorce, the death of a parent or partner, or losing one's job.

As Brazilian migrants stay longer in Suriname, they begin to put down roots. These long-term migrants buy houses or build their own in the city or the interior; they start a family with a Surinamese woman or man; they have older children who attend school in Suriname and who are fully integrated. With the passing of the years these migrants feel more at home in Suriname than in Brazil – though they may need to overcome a rigid emotional barrier before they will admit this to themselves. Eventually, they want to become citizens of this country, desiring to stay, integrate and have a good life in Suriname, a country that many migrants consider a good place to live because it is quiet, lacks the social violence of Brazil, and offers many opportunities. One machine owner who recently returned to Brazil after working twelve years in Suriname summarized the experience emphasizing that 'this country gave me the opportunity to grow'. The open mining culture of Suriname gives the freedom (no bureaucracy!) many Brazilians find to be favourable to economic and personal prosperity.

One important difference continues to separate the Maroons from the Brazilians. For many Maroons mining is often a temporary opportunity to earn money, gain experience in another world, and meet other kinds of people. Young Maroon men, either from tribal areas but also from Paramaribo, go into gold mining and related jobs, yet often leave after a few years. On a second visit, a Maroon first encountered as a salesman in the mining area may now be encountered as a pit worker, and some time later may be working as a security guard in the city. Mining, for most is not a lifetime profession; the work is too arduous, the risks are too high and the separation from one's family is too long. The majority of Brazilian miners, by contrast, are miners for life. Although they may shift from being a pit worker to a bar owner or an ATV driver, they continue to work in the gold mining area and business. Ultimately, many of the professional garimpeiros simply have nowhere else to go and there is no other job they know: 'Once you are captured by the garimpo, you cannot leave again, ever. You cannot quit, it imprisons people' (pit worker, age 53, Sella Creek mining area, 1999).

### **Conclusion: fluctuating frontiers**

Frontiers along the gold fields of contemporary Suriname are constructed, deconstructed and constantly renegotiated. The elasticity of the frontiers characterizes the larger Amazon region, where landscapes, geological formations, people, and

commodities disregard state-imposed borderlines. This paper has discussed the evolution and devolution of state, legal, technological, ethnic, economic, cultural, and personal frontiers due to the arrival of Brazilian gold miners in Suriname.

It is no exaggeration to state that Brazilian miners crossing Suriname's national borders sparked its gold mining boom. Garimpeiros took advantage of Suriname's porous frontiers by entering often without the required documentation. In carving out a work space for themselves, the limits of legality were stretched. As local Maroons had already been mining artisanal on lands they traditionally considered as theirs, the arrival of thousands of Brazilian miners forced all parties involved to renegotiate land titling with regards to mining. A so-called 'mining law' developed that was based on customary land claims, formal land titles, practical considerations, and practical experience brought by the Brazilians. This common law has adapted to local circumstances in multiple ways and is accepted by the miners, concessionaries, and even the Suriname government, even though it functions entirely outside of the national legal system.

Initially, the garimpeiros encountered relatively unexplored garimpos to mine in Suriname, and used their Brazilian skills and technologies to development them. Within a decade, the Maroon mining sector that had consisted of temporary, family-based artisanal gold diggers was transformed into a number of professional business enterprises. Adopting new technologies also required adopting a more stringent work ethic aimed at making a profit rather than managing family livelihoods. In this context we argued that traditional Maroon culture, with its strong emphasis on extended family and clan ties, is a barrier to professionalization as a gold miner. With their knowledge and skills in mining techniques, the Brazilian miners dominate in the area of working relations and procedures; thus, Maroon mine operators continue to rely on garimpeiros for their mining skills. In turn, the Brazilians often need the Maroons for the endorsement of their operations at a certain location when this is in Maroon territory. The garimpeiros may also need Maroons as intermediaries between them and a concession holder who lives in town. Maroon skills and knowledge about transport over the shallow rivers and creeks are indispensable for any entrepreneur with the ambition of running a gold mining operation in the Suriname Amazon. This mutual dependency forces both parties to overcome prejudices and other obstacles between them in the formation of the local mining culture.

Although finding a place within the small-scale gold mining industry has been relatively easy for Brazilians, becoming a part of Suriname society has proven to be much harder. Despite Suriname's pride in the harmonious relations between the many ethnic groups living in Suriname, Brazilians have found that Suriname society has restricted their integration, and instead has sharpened the barriers between 'us' and 'them'. Language and cultural barriers play an important role in this attitude among urban Surinamers. In the interior, however, ethnic and cultural barriers are being deconstructed as the Maroons are embracing and adapting to the Brazilian mining culture, which despite its negative side effects (social violence and drug use) is bringing knowledge, skills, and money to the rainforest communities. The ethnic differences are of little importance when all are participating in the social contract of the 'local mining law'. When in 2007 the news came that the Suriname police and army had formed a task force to 'bring order to Benzdorp' Brazilians

and Maroons agreed that this was totally unnecessary, since they had already established order themselves.

Perhaps the most difficult frontiers to tackle, particularly for newcomers to mining cultures, are those that define one's personal values. Becoming part of a mining culture forces people to adopt not only to a new physical environment and social setting, but also to new ethic mores and behavioural codes. In pursuit of the livelihood goals that brought them to Suriname, the women in the sex industry may be the ones who have to overcome the highest barriers to making this new life their own. Others emphasize the opportunities for a better future brought by the open mining culture. Finally, even though the frontiers of Suriname appear porous, garimpeiros confront multiple barriers when attempting to leave. These barriers are not borders imposed by the states but rather are financial and, above all, conceptual frontiers that are inherent in the Amazon mining culture: 'Once you are captured by the garimpo, you cannot leave again, ever'. This 'mining frontier' may be the most impregnable boundary in the world of small-scale mining.

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## Notes

1. We thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this article.
2. Both authors conducted in-depth interviews and spent many hours in informal conversation with Suriname *gowtuman* and Brazilian migrants. These migrants included gold miners, cooks, mechanics, shop owners, missionaries, and sex workers in the mining areas and Paramaribo.
3. There are six tribes, totaling a population of almost 120,000 living in Suriname, French Guiana and also in The Netherlands. In the interior of Suriname they number more than 52,000. The Ndyukas (24,000) and Saramakas (25,000) are the largest tribes. The Aluku, or Boni as they are called in

- French Guiana, are a small group of around 6,000 of which only a few hundred live on the Suriname side of the Lawa River (Price 2002).
4. The emergence of the *garimpo* phenomenon in Brazil was a response to a number of social, political, economic, and technological changes in Brazilian society at the time. In the late 1980s, the Brazilian government began to regulate, limit, and control small-scale mining (MacMillan 1995; Schmink and Wood 1992). The 1988 Constitution introduced the obligatory preparation of an Environmental Impact Assessment before initiation of mining activities. A year later, a legal provision named Garimpo Mining Permit made mining rights dependent on submission of an environmental license to the appropriate environmental authority. It also penalized small-scale miners who damaged the environment (Hanai 1998). In addition, strict restrictions to entering indigenous territories were imposed. As the factors driving Brazilians into mining did not change and working conditions in Brazil began to look grim, miners started looking for other places to go.
  5. Large-scale industrial gold mining started only recently in Suriname, with the opening of the Gros Rosebel mine in 2004, but it now accounts for about half of the gold export of Suriname. The operations of international companies interfere with the small-scale mining activities of both the Brazilian *garimpeiros* and the Suriname *porknockers*.
  6. The police of the district of Sipaliwini have one police unit of five people holding an office in Paramaribo (Geyersvlijt).
  7. Police interventions in some of the most populated mining areas since the second semester of 2008 showed that the perceived legal stability proved to be unlawful and many Brazilian machine owners discovered that the monthly 'tax' they had paid for many years was no guarantee for a permit to mine the gold fields. We will address this change of the status quo in future publications.
  8. In 2007, the Inter American Court ruled in favour of another Maroon tribe, the Saramakas, and ordered the Republic of Suriname to grant the Saramaka people collective rights to the territory in which they live (and had lived in since the eighteenth century) including right to decide on the exploitation of natural resources such as timber and gold. However, so far the Government of Suriname has not implemented the ruling.
  9. The population consists of Hindustani (27.4 per cent), Creoles (17.7 per cent), Javanese (14.6 per cent), Maroons (14.7 per cent), people of mixed descent (12.5 per cent), indigenous peoples (3.6 per cent), and small numbers of Chinese, Lebanese, and whites. More than sixteen different languages are spoken among the less than half a million inhabitants of Suriname including the country's official national language Dutch, Sranantongo (the lingua franca), and languages specific to various ethnic groups. Surinamers take pride in their country for its cultural tolerance. Javanese, Hindustanis, Creoles, and others live as neighbours, socialize, and work together. One street block may feature a Christian church, a Jewish synagogue, and a Muslim mosque. Ethnic conflicts are rare and strongly disapproved of. Holi Pagwa (Hindustani feast), the abolition of slavery (on 1 July), the International day of Indigenous Peoples and many other days that can be traced back to Suriname's rich cultural heritage are national holidays and celebrated by people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds.
  10. See the documentary 'La loi de la jungle. Chronique d'une zone de non-droit' by Philippe Lafaix (2003, Paris: Un Coproduction Eldorado Films-Samarka Productions).

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