

## Is Surinam a Carribean Island like the others ?

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## Is Suriname a Caribbean Island like the others ?

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Suriname is the smallest country in South America. However, in regional academic literature, it has been repeatedly considered one of the largest Caribbean territories for many years (Best 1967; Granger 2008). This territory is generally included in the socio-historical group of the three Guianas (Lézy 2000), or the bio-geographical group of the Guiana Plateau. Additionally, Suriname is frequently considered part of the insular Caribbean (Girvan 2005). The latter consideration implies a geographical paradox that is twofold. In fact, Suriname, French Guiana and Guyana are not directly bordered by the Caribbean Sea. Moreover, like Belize, which is also commonly included in the Caribbean island group, Suriname is not an island in the strict sense of the word, i.e. land surrounded by water, based on the restricted definition of the term. Nevertheless, the Caribbean cannot be defined today on the sole basis of a deterministic relationship with the sea bearing the same name. Further, research conducted on insularity increasingly demonstrates the limitations of the physical nature of the island, in favour of feelings of belonging, alienation, etc. (Taglioni 2003).



### > "CARIBBEANNESS" AT THE GATES OF AMAZONIA

According to L. Best (1967), the Caribbean is defined within the wider "Plantation America", by the unique heritage of the sugar cane plantations at the economic, social, cultural and political levels. Suriname, which, during the 18th century competed with the colonies of Jamaica or Santo Domingo in terms of wealth produced, has long been one of the gems of European sugar cane production in the West Indies (Price 2011).

For Puerto Rican historian A. Gaztambide-Geigel (1996), as a result of the sugar cane heritage, the Caribbean is defined as a "Central Afro-America", the part of Central America where slaves were imported and, as a result, there is an Afro-American and/or mixed-race population. It is noteworthy that it was in Suriname (and not Haiti), a Dutch colony into which least 300,000 slaves were brought, that the first true "black nations<sup>1</sup>" of the Americas were established, settling in territories conceded by the colons since the 18th century (Price 2001). Moreover, the history of Suriname is very similar to that of the islands of the Caribbean Basin (Célimène and Cruse 2012).

## > A GREEN INSULARITY

We know (Taglioni, 2006) that it is difficult to measure phenomena as complex and relative as those derived from isolation, using indicators. The islands are no exception to this rule and it is true that strong geographical barriers (waterways, mountain chains, deserts, ice zones, etc.) can produce effects of isolation and spatial discontinuity that are much clearer than the sea. Thus, some continental areas of Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Amazonia, or the plains of Central Asia are much more isolated than the islands of the Caribbean or the Mediterranean, for example. The coast of an island should be given its rightful place among a series of factors that contribute to isolation. It is perhaps more accurate to consider isolation today in terms of degree of enclosure. The notion of enclosure allows us to abolish linear distance, which would represent remoteness, and replace it, to our advantage, with notions of distance-time, with particular regard to the transportation of individuals by plane, and distance-cost with regard to the transportation of goods by sea. These two indicators, distance-time and distance-cost, will make it possible to more objectively measure the human and commercial accessibility of the islands. They are also key indicators to appreciating the insularity that is, or was, closely linked to accessibility. Insularity may also be approached by giving it a strong symbolic meaning to make it a generic term, namely the one that suggests that the world is an archipelago or the planet an island. As early as the first century of our era, geographer Strabon spoke of the world as an island. "We may learn both from the evidence of our senses and from experience that the inhabited world is an island; for wherever it has been possible for man to reach the limits of the earth, sea has been found, and this sea we call 'Oceanus': where it is not given to the senses to make us admit it, it is demonstrated by reason" (Strabon, quoted by Létoublon, 1996, p. 10). For Joël Bonnemaïson (1997), the world "may be viewed not as a single space but as an archipelago". Hérodote, in the 5th century B.C. viewed the five oases of the Libyan Desert (Baharia, Dakhla, Farafra, Kharga, Siwa) as an archipelago of the blessed.

In light of the foregoing, Suriname may be viewed as an insular space that is not only surrounded by sea, but also by large rivers and forest (more than 90 % of the territory). It is therefore accessible primarily by plane or boat, like an island, to the detriment of ground transport. In fact, notwithstanding the size of the country (163,270 km<sup>2</sup>), a vast majority of the population is concentrated on the coasts, where approximately 90% of the 490,000 habitants reside (ABS 2005), particularly in three coastal towns, by order of importance, the capital Paramaribo, Neuw Nickerie and Albina. Thus, the Surinamese are in a situation of quasi-insularity, landlocked by the Atlantic Ocean, which covers a coastline of 386 km, large rivers each extending more than 500 km at the borders with Guyana and French Guiana, and the vast forest that separates them from Brazil. The fact that the forest in the south of Suriname is not crossed by a road, and the two border rivers, which extend longitudinally (Maroni in the east, Courantyne in the west), are not currently traversed by a bridge and are thus not easily navigable, inevitably creates discontinuity and isolation, which are quite insular in nature.

Understanding the grounds for including Suriname in the insular Caribbean space leads us to suggest that the same is true of other non-insular territories (e.g. Belize), and territories situated outside of the Caribbean Sea (e.g. Guyana). This reminds us that the Caribbean is not defined solely by a deterministic relationship to the sea bearing the same name. In our view, Caribbeanness is born at the crossroads between a Central-American coastal area and a cultural matrix linked to a common socio-historical heritage. Caribbeanness is therefore the fruit of geography and history: it is what allows us to envisage both the differences and similarities between these spaces and islands that are similar in many regards, such as the South-West Indian Ocean or the Pacific Islands.

1. Nation is understood here in the objective sense as "a population defined by common objective criteria: language, religion, territory (...)". See Rosière S. (2008). *Dictionnaire de l'espace politique*. Paris Armand Colin.

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