

# Spirits, history, and colonialism in Guyana <sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Through a dialogue with the anthropology of history, in this article I analyze how spirits of Dutch colonizers in Guyana (formerly British Guiana), act as agents, actors, and narrators of the historical process. I argue that spirits participate in the formation, (re)creation and circulation of knowledge, facts, and experiences that are associated, by humans and spirits, to the colonial period of Guyana.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to a recent edited book on death in the Caribbean, Maarit Forde evokes several orders of remembrances of massacres in a region dominated by what she calls ‘inaugural events,’ namely, the genocide of indigenous populations, slavery and indentured labour. Far from being casual episodes, such events founded plantation colonial societies, basing them on coercion, violence, and forced displacement (Forde, 2018). Emphasizing the need to carefully examine the socio-political contexts in which Caribbean populations communicate with (and remember) the dead, Forde urges scholars to analyse the impacts of social, cultural, political and economic transformations on the very conceptualization of death. This implies, to evoke Brown’s (2008) fascinating work on mortuary politics in Jamaica, rescaling issues around death in societies built over the ruins of collective losses (Brown 2010).

Such approaches seem valuable to me as they point to the deep historical dimensions of the relationships to death in contexts, like the Caribbean, where violent, brutal and disquieting deaths have not only produced metaphors and allegories alluding to past losses, but also gave rise to beings who, notwithstanding their presumably spectral character, exist empirically in the world (Kwon, 2008). In this article, I set the spotlight on spirits whose very attributes and historical existences are inseparable both from the establishment of colonial rule and from the lasting effects of inaugural events in the present. More particularly, I am interested in analysing how the spirits of Dutch colonizers participate in the creation, circulation, transmission, and storage of knowledge about the colonial past of Guyana (formerly British Guiana).

A British colony until 1966, the year of independence, the Co-operative Republic of Guyana is formed by three regions – Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice – originally colonized by the Dutch between 1665 and 1803. In the latter year, the British took formal control of the three colonies, unifying them in 1831 and giving rise to British Guiana. While the transition from Dutch to British rule is depicted by official and professional historiography as relatively peaceful, without any tumult, contemporary residents of the coastal region of Guyana present a different image, highlighting the occurrence of a massacre.

According to a narrative found throughout the country, during the transition from Dutch to British rule, hundreds of Dutch were brutally murdered by the British, while entire families committed suicide to avoid murder, rape, raids and other forms of violence. Dispossessed of wealth, land, goods, and property, the Dutch also failed to receive proper funeral services. Considered the *masters of the land, or boundary masters*,<sup>2</sup> today the spirits of these dead seek to retain control over properties owned by Dutch settlers in the past, particularly in areas where sugar plantations still exist or once operated.<sup>3</sup>

Dutch spirits carry memories of violent acts, inflicting attacks on the living.

1 | I would like to express my gratitude to Omar Thomaz, Brackette Williams, Cristiana Bastos, Luis Nicolau Parés, Rodrigo Bulamah, Moisés Lino e Silva, Guillermo Vega Sanabria and Maria Elvira Diaz-Benitez for their valuable comments, dialogue and encouragement. Anonymous reviewers, to whom I also express my gratitude, helped to qualify this piece. David Rodgers revised this translated version.

2 | In this article, native expressions, terms, and categories are highlighted in italics the first time they occur only.

3 | I stress from the outset that this perspective is hegemonic in the coastal region of Guyana. It does not necessarily reflect the perceptions of Amerindians, who mostly live in forest areas of the country’s interior. On Amerindian concepts of dominance, power, and mastery in the Guianas, see, among others, Mentore (2018), Rivière (1981), Vidal and Whitehead (2004) and Whitehead (2002).

Immersed in quotidian life, they contribute to inexplicable feelings and sensations, erratic and self-destructive behaviour, as well as stimulating suicidal ideations.<sup>4</sup> Spirits (of both men and women) often have sexual relations with humans during dreams, in addition to causing illness, mental confusion and excessive desires – the compulsion to consume drugs or alcohol, heightened libido, obsessive thoughts, and so on. In short – and to use a term widely employed among my main interlocutors – Dutch spirits *affect* and produce *affections*, forcing their victims to enter into direct contact with the legacies of the colonial past.

I learnt about the existence of Dutch spirits in Guyana quite spontaneously on my very first weekend in the country, during exploratory fieldwork.<sup>5</sup> At this early stage of my research, references to spirits of the dead abounded, in part because I was living, unbeknown to me at first, in a house that was considered haunted. As I became familiar with the country, I met dozens of people who suffered from spiritual attacks, especially after I began my research with descendants of Indian indentured labourers, members of a heterodox Hindu sect who worship the goddess Kali. I extensively documented eight cases, obtaining information about their relationships with spirits over time, usually at the Hindu temple, Blairmont, where I concentrated my observations, and sometimes at the residences of these Indo-Guyanese.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the specificities of each particular relationship, it gradually became clear that the biographies of many Guyanese men and women are not dissociated from spiritual agency, nor from the *inheritances* of the spirits.

As I shall show in the following pages, the reverberations of the colonial past are evaluated by many Guyanese through the effects produced by spirits in the present. Spirits of the dead not only describe and re-enact the past; they also affect the present as immanent co-presences to the living (Wirtz, 2016). I argue that in contemporary Guyana, Dutch spirits are agents, actors and narrators of the historical process (Cf. Trouillot, 1995). Their stories entail historical knowledge about the colonial past, which is bodily experienced by living humans. In parallel, the latter tell their own stories, including those of territorial dominion, and reflect upon them in light of the effects generated by spirits in the world.

Despite the impact of the work of Sahlins (1985) and the various attempts made by anthropological studies in recent decades to intersect with history in general, the focus on the historical dimensions of any society has not always been accompanied by a close examination of what scholars understand by history in the first place (Stewart & Hirsch, 2005). It is beyond my interest here to explore this path or to challenge, based on spiritual agency in the world, how professional historiography ‘historicizes’ the past (Palmié, 2002; 2013). Rather, based on a dialogue with Palmié and Stewart’s proposal of an anthropology of history (Palmié and Stewart, 2016), my aim is to describe practices through which knowledge about the past is produced and acquired, as well as to investigate actions, techniques and sensations through which

4 | Guyana has one of the highest per capita suicide rates in the world. See Edwards (2016) for a recent assessment. Elsewhere, I analyse a suicide case influenced by Dutch spirits (Mello, forthcoming). For an analysis of the relationship between spirits and suicides in Amerindian socialities, see Matos (2017) and Pechincha (2018).

5 | I carried out ten months of fieldwork in Guyana between 2010 and 2012. My initial contact with worshippers of the goddess Kali occurred during the final part of my exploratory field research, conducted between January and April 2010. After this first experience, I conducted eight months of fieldwork among Kali worshippers. In 2018, I briefly returned to Guyana for about 40 days.

6 | Descendants of Indian indentured labourers who arrived in (then) British Guiana between 1838 and 1917. Indo-Guyanese – who call themselves Indians – form the largest demographic group in Guyana.

people feel that they are in touch, or in direct contact, with the past (see also Lambek, 2016; Palmié & Stewart, 2019; Stewart, 2016).

To develop my analysis, the article is structured as follows. Firstly, I show how the Dutch colonial past remains significant for contemporary Guyanese, whose narratives about this period are informed by heterogeneous accounts of historical events, by the materiality of colonial interventions in the landscape, and the past actions of European colonizers. Next, I turn my attention to the stories that the descendants of Indian indentured labourers – more specifically, worshippers of the Hindu goddess Kali – tell about the spirits, in order to explore the topics of spirits and territorial dominion. Finally, my concluding remarks are preceded by a more nuanced analysis of the embodied forms of communication between spirits and humans.

### THE DUTCH HERITAGE

Physical traces of Dutch colonization in Guyana abound throughout the country's coastal region, taking the form of a complex hydraulic system composed by sluices (*kokers*), dams, canals and a sea wall erected both to avoid inundation by the tides – Guyana is situated below sea level – and to prevent water accumulation in inhabited and cultivated areas. Water control has structured the very patterns of settlement in the country and the distribution of its population (Smith, 1956), which is concentrated in a narrow and fertile coastal strip,<sup>7</sup> where large agro-industrial enterprises, the plantations, were established in the past. Given these ecological conditions, the large-scale cultivation of agricultural products required the introduction of engineering techniques from the Netherlands. In the process of 'humanization' of Guyana's coastal region, to quote here the apt terminology of Rodney (1981: 3), the foundational work of enslaved people proved fundamental.<sup>8</sup>

This elaborate hydraulic infrastructure, which remains working still today, is attacked by other forces and forms – of nature, as Simmel would say (1958 [1912]) – that corrode all sorts of buildings: *kokers* constantly need repairs; the sea wall is cracked at several points; the canals are seldom operational during the season of torrential rains; and, with the exception of some tourist spaces, few buildings from the Dutch era remain standing today. Likewise, and despite the constant reference to the 'Dutch heritage' in government booklets, school textbooks and tourist guides, it is a public secret that a considerable proportion of the historical sources from the Dutch period have either been consumed by insects, or are unavailable for research in the Walter Rodney National Archives.

The National Archives is located near the Square of the Revolution, one of the main public areas of the capital Georgetown. Looming over the square is a large statue of Cuffy (Coffij, in Dutch sources), one of the leaders of the Berbice Slave Rebellion, which took place between 1763 and 1764.

7 | More than 95% of the Guyanese population, approximately 800,000 people in total, lives in 4% of the country's territory, specifically in the coastal region. The establishment of plantations confined the life of most of the Guyanese population in a boundary zone between the ocean and the country's inland forests.

8 | Under such conditions, the work involved in creating arable land was enormous. Millions of tons of clay, mud, and other residues were extracted from the ground. In building this infrastructure, Rodney (1981:3) reminds us, "slaves moved 100 million tons of heavy, waterlogged clay with shovel in hand, while enduring conditions of perpetual mud and water." Later, indentured labourers from India also worked in the maintenance of dams and canals, confronting the "steady work diet of mud and water" (ibid).

This monument, built by the African-Guyanese artist Philip Moore (1921-2012), depicts, in a non-naturalistic way, an African warrior with a knife strapped to his waist, whose corrugated body is carved with masks. The plaques located around the plinth represent, among other things, the African spiritual world, the greed of Dutch planters, and the resistance of the enslaved. The monument was commissioned by the controversial President and Prime Minister Forbes Burnham<sup>11</sup> (1923-1985), whose nationalist propaganda, in the aftermath of the troubled process of independence from the United Kingdom in 1966,<sup>12</sup> involved the retrospective reframing of several historical events, such as those associated with the African struggle for freedom in the past. It is not fortuitous, then, that the Proclamation of the Republic, declared on February 23, 1970, took place on the same day that the rebellion had allegedly started in 1763 (Thompson, 2006). Not by chance, both Burnham and other independence leaders produced writings on the Rebellion to draw lessons for the present and, by extension, for the future of a newly sovereign nation (Williams, 1990).

The almost-successful Berbice rebellion lasted more than a year and involved virtually the entire enslaved population, approximately 4000 people, living in the Dutch colony. Within weeks of the initial uprising, the rebels had gained territorial control of Berbice, forcing Dutch soldiers and planters to abandon dozens of plantations and two military forts. Besieged in Dageraad, a plantation located upstream from the Berbice River, Dutch troops anxiously waited for military support.

Meanwhile, Simon van Hoogenheim, the Governor of the colony, exchanged letters with Cuffy and Accabre, the leaders of the rebellion, who initially demanded the immediate departure of the Dutch from the colony, and later proposed the creation of two sovereign states: one ruled by Africans, the other by whites.<sup>13</sup> Although no treaties were signed, van Hoogenheim deliberately kept the exchange of letters with Cuffy, while requesting and waiting for additional military support.

In the end, the Berbice Rebellion was unsuccessful and the revolutionary forces were gruesomely repressed by the colonial troops, reinforced by soldiers from neighbouring colonies, the Netherlands, and Amerindians.<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that only



Koker (sluice) on the west bank of the Berbice River. June 2018.<sup>9</sup>



Map of the colony of Berbice, a permanent fixture in the research room of the Walter Rodney Archives (Georgetown, Guyana). June 2018.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> | All photos included here were taken by me.

<sup>10</sup> | The map is by Jan Daniel Knapp from 1720.

<sup>11</sup> | Burnham's regime is considered responsible for the murder, in a bomb attack, of the eminent Guyanese historian Walter Rodney (1942-1980), whose political activity was primarily directed towards uniting the working class beyond the country's ethnic-racial divisions. Rodney was an outspoken critic of Burnham's dictatorial regime. For a recent assessment, see Taylor (2020).

<sup>12</sup> | The joint mobilization of the African and the Indo-Guyanese, the two largest demographic groups in the country, in the anti-colonial struggle arose in the 1950s. Over the years, though, this anti-colonial assembly became fragmented. Its main leaders, the African-Guyanese lawyer Forbes Burnham and the Indo-Guyanese dentist Cheddi Jagan, became rivals and the independence party, the PPP (People's Progressive Party), split along ethnic lines. The rise of hostilities between Indo-Guyanese and African-Guyanese resulted in conflicts throughout the country, leading to the killing of hundreds of people. A mutual animosity persists between the two groups still today (see, among others, Hintzen 1989; Smith, 1995; Trotz, 2003; Williams, 1991).

between one third and one fifth of the enslaved population survived the rebellion and its aftermath, while one third of plantations were abandoned by the colonizers, whose population, numbering approximately 350 people, was reduced by half (Kars 2020: 254; 260). After the defeat of the remaining groups of insurgents, hundreds of rebels and others suspected of participating in the rebellion were interrogated and tried. In addition to the physical punishment inflicted on hundreds of people, 120 men and 4 women were convicted and sentenced to death (Kars, 2020: 254).

In the “bloody months during and after the rebellion,” Brackette Williams (1990: 141) remind us, African men and women were “boiled, burned to a crisp, cooked over slow fires, or decapitated, their other severed remains flung asunder.” Their heads “were placed on poles” and other parts of their bodies “were ripped to pieces,” to set an example – and deliver a warning. Ordinarily, humans treated so unjustly at the end of their existence would not rest peacefully in the world of the dead, Williams suggests. However, she adds, “It is not [...] these men and women who have become ghosts seeking redress or sympathy from the living.” Instead, it is the spirits of Dutch men and women who died during the rebellion who “have [...] roamed the land, seeking ways to reclaim their property, to vindicate their untimely deaths, and/or to gain a proper funeral” (Williams 1990: 142). According to Williams, while many of these spirits resulted directly from the immediate events of the 1763 rebellion, others stemmed from its long-term (economic) consequences. Their stories, retold through individuals who the spirits possessed, “contrast the power and social position they had in Berbice prior to the rebellion to their ultimate social, political and economic ‘place’ in the social world that followed it” (ibid: 138).

Indeed, the Berbice Rebellion further weakened Dutch rule in the region, which had never been fully consolidated (Klooster & Oostindie, 2018; Williams, 2020). Between 1781 and 1803, Berbice, as well as Essequibo and Demerara, changed hands constantly between the Dutch, the French and the British, until the latter formalized their dominion over the three colonies in 1803, consolidating their political and financial ascendancy over the region, which had already been apparent in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Oostindie 2012). In the decades following the Berbice Rebellion, the massive influx of British financial capital and the introduction of enslaved labour transformed the three colonies into substantial producers of coffee, cotton and sugar, in a period in which two apparently opposing forces developed concomitantly: the expansion of British colonialism in the southern Caribbean and the progressive dismantling of slavery (Browne, 2017).<sup>15</sup>

Despite the maintenance of the Dutch legal system, which was based on Roman legal traditions, and the presence of some Dutch planters in the region after the British established their dominion over the region, Dutch influence in the three colonies waned considerably. Dutch and two creole languages, Dutch Berbice and Skepi, quickly fell into disuse, becoming spoken by a few small communities only (Robertson 1989).<sup>16</sup>

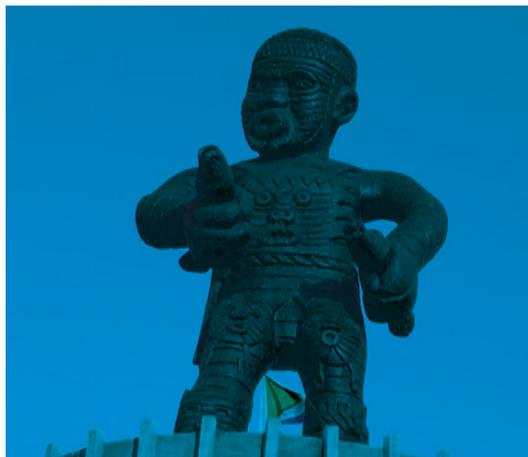
13 | Leaders of the rebellion were probably aware of the treaties signed by the colonial governments of Jamaica and Suriname with Maroons – treaties that secured some territorial autonomy to Maroon communities (Kars, 2020).

14 | On the historical networks of Amerindians across the Guianas, see Farage (1991) and Whitaker (2016).

The population of Dutch origin, already scarce in the eighteenth century, practically disappeared.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, British cultural values took root and had lasting effects (Smith, 1956; 1962; Drummond, 1980; Jayawardena, 1968; Williams, 1991). But while Dutch power and hegemony faded over a few decades, it is remarkable that non-living representatives of the colonizers have managed to remain in the land, as if they were immune to the transition from Dutch to British sovereignty and, later, to the establishment of an independent government.

In her aforementioned article, Williams (1990)<sup>18</sup> skilfully demonstrates how the images of the colonial past of subordinated Guyanese groups were conveyed (and stored) through rituals in which spirits took part. To explain the attributes of Dutch spirits, Williams's interlocutors drew parallels between the behaviour of the spirits and the characteristics that they stereotypically associated with Dutch colonizers, referring not only to colonizers in living memory but also to episodes that took place during the Berbice Rebellion.<sup>19</sup> In other words, by assuming a homology between colonizers and ethnically identified spirits, Guyanese conceive spirits as agents of history (Trouillot 1995) – that is, as members of a social stratum that determines, to a large extent, the behaviour and ways of being of the spirits.

Williams threads together several temporal and historical strands, developing thoughtful insights on the relationships between ritual and history, symbolic interpretations, and the social identity of producers of historical accounts. Given the objectives of the present article, I argue that we can also explore other dimensions of the production, creation and recreation of historical knowledge by and with spirits. As I became acquainted with people afflicted by Dutch spirits at the Kali temple, located in the region of Berbice, where I conducted most of my investigations, I encouraged my interlocutors to tell me about the Dutch period. Invariably, people referred to the country's hydraulic infrastructure, to the Berbice Rebellion, and to the cruel and greedy nature of Dutch colonizers, alluding to episodes from the rebellion. In turn, my main interlocutors – Indo-Guyanese members of the Kali sect – not only referred to the same things, but also possessed first-hand knowledge of the Dutch spirits. As I show below, plantation life left its legacies to the Indo-Guyanese in general and to Kali worshippers in particular.



The 1763 Monument, by Philip Moore (1970). Square of the Revolution, Georgetown, October 2018.

15 | In a short period between 1796 and 1807, more enslaved Africans were deported to Berbice, Essequibo and Demerara by British merchants than the total number of enslaved Africans deported by the Dutch over the previous one hundred years (Browne, 2017; Thompson, 1987).

16 | Today there are no speakers of Skepi or Dutch Berbice Creole.

17 | As in other Dutch colonies, Dutch settlers were supplemented by significant contingents of German, Swiss, French, Scandinavian and British settlers (Oostindie, 2012).

18 | With the exception of Williams's fascinating article (1990), few studies have focused on Dutch spirits in Guyana. General remarks can be found in Stephanides & Singh (2000); Younger (2010); Kloß (2016a); and Singer, Aaron & Araneta (1961).

19 | Stories about treasures buried by the Dutch in the past are particularly illustrative. Williams's informants reported that when alerted to the intention of enslaved people to plunder the plantations, "Dutch men and women took time to bury their valuables before running for their lives. Who except those blinded by greed, informants ask, would take the time to bury valuables under such conditions?" (Williams, 1990: 145). I heard similar stories – and moral lessons – during my field research. See also Kars (2020:7-8) and her account of treasures buried by the Dutch around Fort Nassau, in Berbice, the site of several skirmishes during the Berbice Rebellion.

## SUGAR'S BITTER LEGACY

Indians arrived in a land where many wars and murders happened.

The Dutch were bad people, and they did many cruel things [...] they [the spirits] were here before us. We inherited them.

In evoking episodes that preceded the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in British Guiana between 1838 and 1917, the priest (pujarie) Bayo, quoted above, articulated different temporal nexuses that overlap each other. Prompted by my own interest in Dutch spirits – and, of course, by his own reflections – Bayo explained to me the reasons for the tenacious presence of these beings in the Guyanese landscape. Like several other interlocutors, at the beginning of our conversation, Bayo alluded to the massacre of the Dutch by the British, to the collective suicides, and to the lack of proper funeral rituals. In the remarks transcribed above, an excerpt from a lengthy conversation,<sup>20</sup> Bayo established a temporal nexus (Hirsch & Stewart, 2005) between the spirits existence in the present and the arrival of Indian immigrants to British Guiana in the past. Newly arrived in a colony overwhelmed by violent deaths, Indian immigrants came to live in a land inhabited by the spirits of the predecessors of the British.

The arrival in British Guiana of nearly 240,000 labourers from India was a consequence of the attempts by the colonial administration and planters to guarantee a supply of cheap labour for agricultural work following the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean.<sup>21</sup> The living conditions of Indian immigrants were precarious, and have been equated to slavery (Tinker, 1974). After crossing the *kala pani* (the dark waters) on a journey that lasted approximately 100 days, men and women from India were housed in the barracks formerly occupied by the enslaved Africans. These barracoons had deplorable sanitary conditions. The labour contracts – which lasted for five years<sup>22</sup> – determined strenuous working routines, contained various mechanisms of repression, and set low payment rates. Immigrants also had restrictions imposed on their circulation within the colony (Bahadur, 2013). Likewise, customs, languages,<sup>23</sup> sartorial practices, eating and cooking habits, bodily marks (such as tattoos) and other practices were widely stigmatized, including by Africans.

In a colony whose Anglo-European values were hegemonic (Drummond 1980; Smith 1967; Williams 1991), religion became an important marker of distinction. Indeed, the Victorian tendency to conceive religion as a metonym of culture and civilization (Khan, 2012) contributed to the racialization of Indians, who were assigned in a peripheral position within colonial society. Hindu and Muslim religious practices<sup>24</sup> were labelled as pagan, barbarian and savage. Public religious festivals, customary weddings, and other rituals were forbidden for a long period (Jayawardena 1966), while Christian missions were established as early as the 1850s, although the

20 | Only on rare occasions did I take fieldnotes in front of my interlocutors. During all my field research, I used my mobile phone to make notes, record dialogues, jot down phrases and keywords, draft systematizations, describe the contexts of interaction, and so on. This raw material, stored on an electronic device, served as a fundamental complement to my diary, written every single day.

21 | Under the indentured labour system, around 340,000 people from Madeira Island, neighbouring Caribbean colonies, Africa, Europe and Asia migrated to British Guiana between 1835 and 1917 (Adamson 1972).

missionaries had little success in converting souls (Look Lai, 1993).

Specialized scholarship on Hinduism in Guyana focuses on two major topics: the impacts of the indenture system on immigrants' religious and cultural practices; and the process of institutionalization of religious organizations, which aimed to be more inclusive and universalized among the Indian population, such as *Sanatan Dharma*, the eternal truth, in literal translation (Jayawardena, 1966; Look Lai, 1993; McNeal, 2010; Younger, 2010). This Hindu sect emerged in British Guiana at the end of the nineteenth century and within a few decades had become the hegemonic Hindu sect within the colony, one of the main "ideological bases" of the "Indian group conscience" (Jayawardena 1966: 232-233). In parallel, the rise of Sanatan Dharma was accompanied by the stigmatization of religious practices deemed morally suspect, such as animal sacrifices, the direct verbal interaction between devotees and Hindu deities, and the role of the latter in performing healing treatments. Claiming orthodox and Brahmanical, Sanskrit and North Indian origins, Sanatan Dharma's members imputed these suspect practices to lower-caste Hindus and, in particular, South Indian immigrants, the so-called *Madrasis*.<sup>25</sup> Thus, various Hindu religious practices were pushed to the margins of official Hinduism (McNeal 2016; Kloß, 2016b; Younger, 2010).

Studies of heterodox Hindu sects, including Kali worship, pay little attention to the some of the narratives of their own members and tend to limit their observations to temples and religious festivals (Bassier, 1977; McNeal, 2010; Singh, 1978; Younger, 2010 but see Kloß, 2016a and Stephanides and Singh, 2000). As a consequence, various other practices were ignored, such as domestic ritual offerings (*pujas*) for spirits and for the deities worshipped by families. Similarly, the role of religious experts and Hindu deities in arbitrating the territorial claims of spirits has received little attention.

According to Bayo, during the indenture system – also referred to by the Indo-Guyanese as *bound time* – several religious practices were harshly reprimanded by the British in the name of the Christian faith and morality. Nevertheless, the *traditions* were kept, largely thanks to the performance, in the domestic domain, of *pujas* (ritual offerings) to deities worshiped by ancestors, both in India and in British Guiana. The so-called *family pujas* (also known as *ground pujas*) are part of what Kali devotees call *inheritance*. Although inheritance refers to a regime of descent, it is not fixed in time since new inheritances have been incorporated by Hindus: during the indenture period, several generations of Indians lived in or near the dwellings of Dutch spirits – namely, the sugar plantations.

As a consequence, the Indian labourers working in sugar plantations were not only subjected to exhausting work routines, but were also constantly threatened by the spirits of colonizers who, unhappy about receiving no compensation for their past losses, threatened the lives of sugarcane cutters. Unable to freely conduct rituals for Hindu deities in public spaces, immigrants began to make offers to the masters of the

22 | At the end of this period, the labour contracts could be renewed for another five years. In this case, a return ticket to India was provided. In total, around 32% of all immigrants returned to India (Look Lai 1993).

23 | The vast majority of immigrants – around 90% – came from the Northwest Provinces (modern-day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar). They were shipped to the Caribbean from the port of Calcutta (Kolkatta), while the rest of the immigrants came from the south (Look Lai 1993; Smith, 1959).

24 | According to Smith (1959), more than 80% of the Indian immigrants were Hindus, while about 15% were Muslims and only 1% were Christians.

25 | Immigrants from South India departed from Madras (present-day Chennai) having originated from two provinces with large territorial extensions: Madras (now Tamil Nadu) and Andhra Pradesh. Although rivalries and distinctions between North and South Indians already existed on the subcontinent, in Caribbean plantations, the diversity of the subcontinent was reduced to a handful of contrasting and identifying categories, such as North-Indians and Madrasis (Khan 2004: 41; 2012: 36).

land, protecting themselves from potentially nefarious actions. Thus, the repetition of offerings and items such as alcoholic beverages and sacrificed animals resulted in the incorporation of spirits into family pujas.

Analysing the relationships between dead human ancestors and the spirits that inhabit the land in Haiti, Dalmaso (2018) demonstrated that certain places, such as the *habitation* and the *lakou*, “incorporate experiences linked simultaneously to the past and to the present.” Such places are fundamental to understanding the idea of inheritance (see also Bulamah, 2015; Richman, 2014). Setting aside the specificities of each context, I would suggest that in Kali worship the category of inheritance points both to the dynamism of ritual practices and to conceptions of power and rights over the land. If, in other ethnographic contexts, the spirits of Amerindians are considered autochthonous to the land (Bettelheim, 2005; Rabelo & Aragão, 2018; Santos, 1995; Strange, 2019), in the Guyanese case, the spirits of colonizers embody this condition, at least when seen from the perspective of coastal Guyanese.

According to Bayo and to the descendants of Blairmont temple's founders, the constant threat posed by the spirits convinced plantation managers of the need to protect Indian labourers from spiritual attacks. Managers and oversees allowed the organization of yearly Hindu festivals, temporarily releasing labourers from their work tasks, and even offering monetary donations to the festivals. By glorifying deities transplanted from India to a society founded on sugar plantations, the ancestors came under the protection of Hindu gods and goddesses. As a consequence, they guaranteed the sugar harvest. A curious and symptomatic situation: the planting and harvesting of sugarcane depended on the occurrence of Hindu religious festivals.<sup>26</sup>

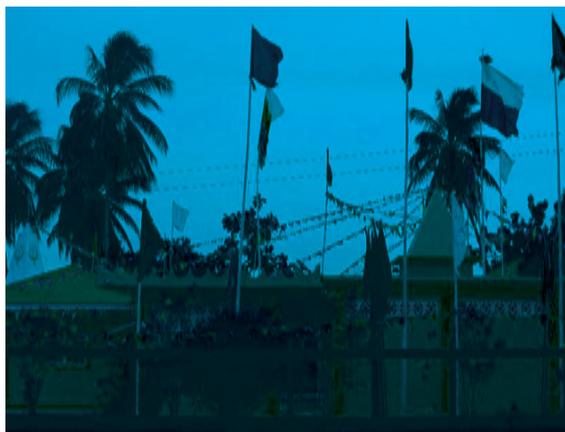
Stories about life and settlement on the plantations point, therefore, to the relationships between violence and loss, domination, possession and exploitation, including in the domain of territorial sovereignty (see Crosson, 2019; Johnson, 2011; 2019; Strange, 2019). Living in areas surrounded by sugarcane fields implies living in a landscape inhabited by spiritual beings attached to what is missing: the possession of goods and wealth produced by sugar. The sweetness of sugar carries with it the bitterness of domination, to paraphrase, rather wildly, Sidney Mintz (1985).

In Blairmont's case, the relationships with Dutch spirits are foundational as the temple was built in the 1940s on a *Dutch spot*, near the Blairmont Sugar Factory, one of the few sugarcane factories still operating in the country, where several temple attendees are employed. As pujas for the Hindu deities became performed more frequently, altars were built and trees – from which fruits, plants and flowers for the pujas are extracted –<sup>27</sup> planted. Hindu deities settled at the temple. They *replaced* the spirits, as people say.

Nevertheless, the manifestation of Dutch spirits is common in Blairmont. They often possess devotees during religious ceremonies. They also mimic Hindu deities (Mello 2020a). To understand how the ‘embodied communication’ with

26 | This conception relates to a perception common among the Indo-Guyanese, according to which by replacing enslaved people in agricultural work, Indian immigrants saved the sugar plantations – and, by extension, the country itself – from economic ruin.

spirits unfolds (Richman, 2014), a more nuanced description is required of the way in which communication takes place between spirits and humans, the contexts in which these encounters are experienced (Blanes & Espírito Santo 2013), the diverse ways of incorporating spirits into human daily lives (Espírito Santo & Tassi 2013) and the stories told by spirits about themselves and humans, and vice-versa (Cardoso 2007). Local systems of inference that track, recognize and create spiritual entities (Blanes & Espírito Santo, 2013; Palmié, 2013; Wirtz, 2016) are based, in this case, on narratives concerning the circumstances of the spirits' emergence. This historically-informed knowledge about the agency and the ways of being of spirits thus refers not only to ontological issues (what they are) and epistemological issues (what is known), but also to pragmatic questions (what to do in response). After all, the spiritual presence on land requires rituals manipulations and negotiations.



Lateral view of the Blairmont temple. October 2018.

27 | Elsewhere, I explore in more length human and spiritual projects of territorial sovereignty, paying attention to the role of plants and trees in this process (Mello, forthcoming).

### HINDUS DEITIES, DUTCH SPIRITS AND COMPENSATION

At Blairmont's Kali temple, located on the west bank of the Berbice river, devotees gather weekly to do puja (offering, praying and worshiping) to a set of Hindu deities. The deities, who *manifest* themselves in the bodies of certain religious specialists, the *marlos* ('mediums'), deliver oracular messages and perform healing treatments on people afflicted by diseases, domestic issues, bad luck, witchcraft and spiritual attacks. On some occasions, rituals are performed by priests at the home of devotees, as in the case of localities inhabited by spirits.

The participation of Hindu deities in healing treatments is inseparable from oracular activity. Each person who seeks to be *looked after* by the Hindu deities must stand before the divine manifestations, bow to them, and listen to their revelations. Divination becomes a referential node for actions (Panagiotopoulos, 2018) in Kali worship. Oracular messages not only offer new elements about past and present events—and thus influence the future (Lambek, 1981; Boddy, 1989)—, they also produce transformations in the very conceptions that humans make of themselves (Mello, 2020b; Ishii, 2016).<sup>28</sup>

Attendees and devotees normally interact with the deities as listeners initially to discover the origins and causes of their problems and afflictions. As a rule, the

deities prescribe a *devotion* period to humans. In other words, over a number of weeks, the person in question must attend the temple, participate in the rites, make offerings, and eventually start their *training* to manifest Hindu deities with the aim of incorporating the divine power (*shakti*) into their corporal and moral essences (Mello 2020c; Busby, 1997; Ishii, 2016; Marriott, 1976; Nabokov, 2001). Ideally, as the deities begin to manifest themselves in humans, the bodies of the latter become healthier and stronger, less susceptible to malevolent forces. Alternatively, specific ritual procedures may be performed, such as the so-called *boundary work* – that is, a ritual focused on the land, which aims to compensate Dutch spirits for their losses in the past, appease their desire for revenge, prevent spiritual attacks, and, at least partially, recognize their land rights. I briefly discuss details from two such cases.

Aisha is Guyanese in her mid-forties who migrated to Canada more than thirty years ago, where she lives with her daughter and son, both in their twenties. Like thousands of her fellow compatriots, Aisha left Guyana during Burnham's regime, looking for better living conditions. When she left the country, I came to learn, she already had no intention of returning. Not everything was left behind, however. Bodily pains and health issues, which had plagued her since adolescence, persisted, as did a series of unstable marital relationships. From an early age, Aisha knew that a Dutch spirit lived at her parents' home in Guyana and was responsible in large part for the misfortunes that befell her family. The latter's patriarch, however, was a devout Muslim and resisted any attempt to make offerings to Kali. Fears also existed concerning the family reputation, given that members of the village mosque were unlikely to approve the involvement of one of its members with 'Kali people.'

Aisha had her children very young and was obliged to abandon her husband (a cheater and aggressive man addicted to gambling) even before the birth of her first child. In Canada, she remarried, but again her partner brought her more sorrow than joy. Her daughter had been sick for years and neither the numerous medical appointments nor exams were able to identify any disease. Her son, for his part, was unemployed, despite all his qualifications. Aisha visited her parents in Guyana whenever possible, among other reasons because she was concerned with the health of her father who had been sick for many years. Against all expectations, though, it was her mother, who had been in excellent health, who died suddenly. Thirty years of troubled life prompted Aisha to seek assistance elsewhere. Through an old friend, Aisha decided to visit Blairmont some weeks after her mother's passing. In addition to being in mourning, her dreams began to be assaulted by the spirit, something that resulted in bodily pains and mental torpor.<sup>29</sup> Yes, she confided to me, she had reservations about the Hindu sect due to her Muslim background. However, her *despair* was so great that she decided to *ignore* her own *prejudices*.

On one of her visits to Blairmont, Aisha burst into tears when she was confronted by the goddess Mariamma, shortly after the latter preemptorily stated that Aisha's

28 | It does not follow from this that these divine verdicts are readily and uncritically accepted. Doubt, hesitation and scepticism are important components in the process of validating these verdicts (Mello, 2020c).

situation was extremely serious, requiring a *boundary work*. After some days, Aisha received priests from Blairmont at her father's residence with his consent. Although I did not attend the domestic *work*, I later learnt from Blairmont's members that Aisha's life had failed to prosper precisely because the *master of the land* (i.e., the spirit) had not received any compensation for years. By incorporating itself into a religious specialist, the spirit indeed made this clear, complaining about having been forgotten. Aisha went back to Canada shortly afterwards and

I lost contact with her. Months later, I received news about her when the temple's treasurer informed everyone, laughing, that the life of the *fulah gal*<sup>30</sup> had progressed so much, her problems left behind, that Aisha had decided to make a generous financial donation to the temple.

José, for his part, had enjoyed an extremely peaceful life until the moment he was attacked by a Dutch spirit, something that completely changed his mood. A man esteemed for his affability, José became aggressive and incessantly consumed the stocks of beer and rum that supplied his bar. A frequent visitor to Blairmont, José was absent from the rituals, not least because he was always *impure*, which prevented him from participating in them.<sup>31</sup> His situation deteriorated so much, however, that the priest authorized his presence at the temple when his family forcibly dragged him to the site. On that Sunday in September 2011, José, clearly drunk, was possessed by the spirit, which began to mimic the Hindu deities as if it was one of them.

The god who performed a healing treatment in José was so infuriated by the spirit's conduct that he struck José's body violently, using a bundle of leaves from the sacred *neem* tree, until the latter came back to his senses. Still reeling, José was immediately taken to the goddess Mariamma, who prescribed a boundary work for him to perform. A few days later, six members of Blairmont gathered at José's home. As recommended by the priest, the host had arranged a small table in the middle of his room on which several items, such as food, alcohol and cigarettes, were laid out. Ricky, a young *marlo* ('medium') from Blairmont, was responsible for manifesting the spirit (*call up the Dutch upon himself*)<sup>32</sup> so that everyone could listen to what he had to say.

I shall not reconstruct this story in detail here, nor the interaction between José, his family, Blairmont's members and the spirit on the evening in question (see Mello 2020a). It suffices to draw attention to three aspects. First, the reasons for the spiritual attacks were soon revealed by the spirit himself, who alluded to José's bad habit, when drunk, of making libations for all sorts of spiritual beings except for the *true master* of

29 | During her conversations with me, Aisha was reticent about the occurrence of sexual attacks from the spirit when she was dreaming. I have documented sexual attacks by spirits elsewhere (Mello, 2022).

30 | An offensive term used by Hindus in reference to Indian Muslims. The identification of Muslims with an African ethnicity suggests to Hindus that Indo-Guyanese Muslims do not profess the traditional religion of India, Hinduism. *Gal* is the phonetic equivalent of the word *girl* in the Creole language of Guyana, Creolese.



A Dutch spirit manifests during a Kali ritual. November 2018.

the land – not by chance, the spirit present there. Secondly, this conduct was compounded by a long-term forgetfulness: neither José nor his family had *rewarded the master* of the land for many years. Finally, the spirit had a strong accent as he was not very fluent in English. The guttural tone of his words evoked a historical depth, not always echoed among his interlocutors, who gradually gave up trying to understand everything said, limiting themselves to following the general course of the conversation. After performing this ritual, in which the spirit took part for more than an hour, the hostility of the master of the land towards José ceased and the latter stopped drinking, regaining his original state of soul.

The cases of Aisha and José show that expression of the viewpoints of the spirits depends on a series of mediations, even when channelled directly, through spiritual possession. On the dream plane, spiritual revelations have spectral and diffuse contours; in Kali temples, the strength of their messages depends on the oracular activity of deities; and in domestic rituals, religious specialists play a decisive role in recognizing the territorial autochthony of the spirits. Unable to communicate fully in their own language, Dutch spirits engage directly in the creation of alternative means of conveying and storing their stories.

#### FINAL REMARKS

The reverberations of a distant yet so intimate past seem to take inextricable paths when these are plagued by violent acts embedded in the land. As I have shown, Guyanese themselves associate the ways of being and origins of Dutch spirits with the colonial past, with episodes of Guyanese national history, and with the country's sugarcane plantations. Informed by the stories of spirits, by the history of cohabitation with them, by oracular messages delivered by Hindu deities, by experiences on the oneiric plane, and by narratives about the occupation of the land, male and female Kali worshippers produce reflections and acquire first-hand knowledge of episodes immersed in Guyana's colonial past.

According to my interlocutors, spiritual attacks replicate the violent, greedy and treacherous behaviour of colonizers who, in life, were brutalized by an exogenous colonial power – the British. As Williams (1990) remarked, the suffering, loss and pain experienced by Dutch colonizers seem to motivate the spirits to intensely assert the reality of their existences. Claims of territorial sovereignty demand recognition from humans of the traces of the effects produced by spirits in the world, particularly those inscribed in the landscape (Brown, 2008; Mueggler 2001; Shaw, 2002).

The Guyanese hydraulic system seems to be a very eloquent testimony to the Dutch heritage, insofar as, to evoke Trouillot (1995), the materiality of the historical process (historicity<sub>1</sub>) sets the stage for future historical narratives (historicity<sub>2</sub>). Thus, “what happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete – buildings, dead

31 | Kali devotees and members of the sect must abstain from consuming alcohol, eating meat and engaging in sexual intercourse for three days before the religious ceremonies.

32 | As far as I know, the manifestation of Dutch spirits is restricted to men and involves a series of ritual procedures, often secret. For Kali worshippers, whoever manifests a Dutch spirit must necessarily manifest Hindu deities, as the power (shakti) of the deities not only strengthens human bodies, but also prevents attacks from evil beings.

bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative” (Trouillot 1995: 29). However, such material forms do not by themselves give strength to historical narratives, the production of which involves the “uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production” (Trouillot, 1995: xxiii). For Trouillot, the materiality of the historical process does not imply that the ‘facts’ are already constituted, waiting to be discovered; rather, “history begins with bodies and artifacts: living brains, fossils, texts, buildings” (Trouillot 1995: 29). Oral history does not escape this law, since “the moment of fact creation is continuously carried over in the very bodies of the individuals who partake in that transmission. The source is alive” (Trouillot, 1995: 162, note 33, original emphasis).

This latter insight can be adapted to the case in question here, as spirits are living sources not so much because they present ready-made testimonies about past events, but because they inscribe, through several orders of mediation, the legacies and inheritances of the colonial past, in buildings and ruins,<sup>33</sup> in the landscape and in the bodies of the Guyanese. In this way, the immediacy of the spirits’ original sensorial experiences (Palmié & Stewart, 2019) is viscerally experienced, often coercively, by Guyanese people in the present. Spirits use human bodies to express their points of views and desires, as well as to tell their stories. They establish channels of communication in different domains of experience, even diffuse realms such as dreams. They intoxicate their victims to leave them confused. By claiming the status of masters of the land, they turn human bodies into a locus of replication, reproduction and transmission of their stories, transforming them into repositories (archives, so to speak) of colonial legacies.

It does not follow that spirits act with impunity, or that their stories are simply reproduced by humans. In Kali rituals, religious experts and deities challenge the spirits, seeking to mitigate the effects of their actions and to restrict their range of influence. In the narratives about the transplantation of Kali worship to Guyana, the prior existence of the spirits is highlighted, as well as other central dimensions of the lives of Kali devotees, such as the history of occupation and dominion of the land and the creation of sacred religious places. Spirits are not just evocations of painful memories of past events. In Guyana, their influences and extensions in the world (Blanes & Espírito Santo, 2013) take material and immaterial forms. If the narratives that associate the birth of the country with Dutch colonial intervention in the landscape are signalled by the surviving colonial infrastructure, it is the non-living representatives of colonizers who turn the past imperfect, grammatically and ontologically (Lambek, 1996; 2016). Judging by the narratives widespread in coastal Guyana, massacres and suicides have not prevented the Dutch presence in the country. By becoming intimate with sugarcane workers and their descendants, the disembodied survivors of Dutch colonizers, with no graves in which to rest, continue to erupt the legacies,

33 | For an analysis of the relationships between ruins and native historical meanings, see Bulamah (2018); Collins (2015) and Gordillo (2014).

inheritances and burdens of the colonial past.

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