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Migration and identities of “indigenous” socio-cultural groups in French Guiana: a case study of students along the Oyapock and Maroni Rivers

Isabelle HIDAIR^{a1}, Rodica AILINCAI^b

^aEA (4095), Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Languages, Literature, Arts and Human Sciences (CRILASH), French Guiana School of Teaching and Education (ESPE), BP 54, 97333 Cayenne, French Guiana

^bEA (4241), Traditional and Contemporary Societies in Oceania (EASTCO), University Institute for Teacher Training (IUFM), University of French Polynesia, BP 6570, 98702 Faa'a, Tahiti, French Polynesia

Abstract

This article focuses on the contemporary identity of young people living in French Guiana qualified as “indigenous”, pupils of Amerindian and Maroon origin. First, we describe the historical context that led to the emergence of this identity and the research methods we employed. In our longitudinal study, 65 semi-structured interviews and 105 questionnaires were conducted over a period of three years. In the second section, we present a comprehensive analysis of this corpus allowed us to model these young people’s representations (based on their migratory trajectories, family organization, schooling, attitudes towards multilingualism and visions of the future). In the conclusion section, we propose a model of the interactive dynamics of identity which best characterizes these young people. Finally, in the discussion, we highlight the contradictions of a concept of “indigenouness” constructed from a Western viewpoint that no longer corresponds to the reality of these peoples, whose lifestyles are as modern, dynamic and influenced by interactions as those of any other population.

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* Corresponding author. Phone: + 594 694 23 73 56

E-mail address: isabelle.hidair@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Like many other Western countries, French Guiana regularly receives migrants from all over the world. Today, French Guiana’s population is made up of the following nationalities and socio-cultural groups. Under the influence of these migratory flows, the population doubles every 20 years. The foreign population represents 29.7% of the total population and 45.63% of inhabitants were not born in French Guiana (Insee -French National Institute for Statistics and Economic). That population growth has numerous economic, health and social consequences, but we will not address those subjects here, since what interests us in the present article are the assertions of identity that emerge from those socio-cultural contacts. Over time, a characterized French Guianese society has developed in which each socio-cultural group is convinced of its internal homogeneity. And yet, at the same time, the presentation of those designations or ideological discourses on the representations of Self and Other highlight identity issues between groups, but also within groups. In order to clarify the subject, surveys were carried out in several towns located on the Surinamese and Brazilian borders. Over a period of three years, 65 semi-directed interviews in elementary schools, and 105 questionnaires in middle schools were carried out in order to complete the analysis. The aim of these surveys was to retrace the subjects’ migratory trajectories, describe their family organization, give an account of their schooling, understand their attitudes towards multilingualism and describe their visions of the future. The study presented here focuses on the identity of students of Amerindian and Maroon descent. They alone are qualified as “indigenous”. The purpose of this work is not to retrace the genesis of that designation, but rather to understand the historical context that promoted the emergence of those identities and how the students view them and lay claim to them. But before presenting the results of those surveys, it seems important to provide a brief summary of the history of these socio-cultural groups in order to examine their political claims.

2. History and Identities

Currently, there are six Amerindian groups whose distribution according to linguistic affiliation and geographic location is shown below (Table 1). According to estimates, they currently represent 4% of the total population of the department, or roughly 6000 individuals.

Table 1: Amerindian Sociocultural Groups

Names	Lokono Palikuyene	Kali’na (Tilewuyu) Wayana	Teko Wayãpi
Language family	Arawak	Karib	Tupi-Guarani

Table 2: Maroon Sociocultural Groups

Names	Aluku / Ndyuka / Paramaka	Saamaka
Language Designated by Linguists	<i>Nenge tongo</i> : English-based language	<i>Saamacan</i> : Anglo- Portuguese-based language

There are four groups of Maroons living on French Guianese territory (Table 2). Today there are 37,200 Maroons in French Guiana: “roughly 14,500 Saamaka, 14,000 Ndyuka, 5,900 Aluku and 2,800 Paamaka” (Price, 2003, p. 69). These four groups “formed in Dutch Guiana (Suriname) in the 17th and 18th centuries. In that French colony, “bands of Maroons did not form long-lasting communities”. Some of them mixed with the general population and others fled to Brazil (Price, 2003, p. 15). The first Maroons, the Aluku, who escaped from Dutch plantations to settle on French soil, sought political affiliation with the colonial government and, as of the late 19th century, all the main Aluku villages were located in French Guiana and not in Suriname.

2.1. The Inini Territory

In 1931, the French created the Inini territory and transferred the management of land in the interior of the country to local authorities: On the coast, municipalities were managed by a Creole elite according to the rules of the colonial administration; in the interior, the “native” or “tribal” populations, according to the terminology of the time, found themselves in the situation of a protectorate. They were not obliged to declare births nor subject to civil law, and they were not required to prove their nationality in order to circulate from one end to the other of the territories of French Guiana, Dutch Guiana or Brazil. They were governed by customary laws, in particular with regard to

marriages, the occupation and sharing of land and the settling of private disputes. They were only subject to penal law if a crime was committed. (Réginensi, 1996, p. 15). It was in this context, inherited mainly from the colonial period, that French Guiana's status was changed by the Law of March 19, 1946, voted by Parliament, and it became a French department. Becoming a department strengthened the patriotism of the inhabitants on the coast: they were French citizens who belonged to French culture, and in their schools, they learned that their ancestors were the Gauls (Hidair, 2003). Consequently, the Amerindians and descendants of the Maroons in the interior were presented as populations "to civilize". Thus the Amerindian and Maroon populations (like the Creoles before them) were affected by the assimilationist policies adopted by France. Referred to as "savages" or "primitive", the prefect Vignon (in office from 1947/1955) declared in 1985 that "these populations must be brought out of their dangerous isolation, led, of course very gradually and with great care, to integrate and participate in economic and social life" (p. 215). In this vast integration campaign, Vignon undertook to group, sometimes under pressure, several Amerindian families in order to form large villages near towns and facilitate the setting up of health and social facilities.

2.2. *The end of the Inini Territory*

The decree of March 17, 1969 (n°69-261) marked the end of the Inini territory. The former "ethnic" villages now shared the legal status of French municipalities, which meant that the populations of the interior also had to choose a nationality and an official place of residence. Little by little, the Amerindians and the Maroons acquired the attributes of French citizenship and became subject to its obligations, but the choice of whether or not to perform military service was left up to the men (Mam-Lam-Fouck, 1992). While certain Amerindians such as the Wayana refused French citizenship, others accepted it or submitted to it (*ibid.*). Decree n° 1845/c of October 3, 1977 issued by the prefecture of French Guiana concerns regulations pertaining to expeditions within the department. More recently, the decree of February 27, 2006 (277-266) pertaining to the creation of the French Guiana National Park, known as the "Amazonian Park" (which covers a total area of 3.39 million hectares), restates regulations concerning access for tourism activities or scientific research by nonresidents. Thus once again, a cultural relativist approach presents indigenous ways of life in living museums that must remain unchanged. However, we should point out that most of the Amerindians we met in the park's territory expressed the wish to be employed by this public establishment. They adopted the Western lifestyle long ago and dream of becoming civil servants, just like many inhabitants of the coast. Price & Price (2003) recall that "Invoking constitutional reasons, France has never signed Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (UN, 1989) pertaining to "the protection of indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries [...]." That position goes against the European parliamentary resolution adopted in 1994, which recognizes the right of indigenous [and Maroon] peoples to be masters of their own fate (...)" (p. 93). To complete this analysis, it can be observed that Amerindian populations borrow from the conventions, resolutions and declarations that correspond to their interests, since they themselves have never demanded the independence of the country where they were colonized, whereas in Resolution n° 1514 drafted following the general assembly of December 14, 1960, the UN declared that "the subjugation of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights, is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations". As for the Maroons, until the 1970s, Ndjuka and Paramaka villages were only found on Surinamese soil. "Around 1970, French Guiana only [had] 7500 Maroons, roughly 3000 Saamaka (men who [work] there for several years) and 2000 Aluku (...) as well as 2000 Ndyuka and 500 Paramaka who [have] agricultural plots on the French." (Price & Price, 2003, pp. 65-69). In 1986, "three districts in Eastern Suriname witnessed a rebellion that would rapidly destabilize the national economy" (Bougarel, 1990, p. 43). In December, after a massacre of civilians, the exodus of the population began in earnest. At this time, the migrants were absorbed into the Maroon population of the area, taken in by relatives or friends who had been living in French Guiana for several years. Since then, demographic growth has continued. In 1999, Insee revealed that in French Guiana, "24% of births (in French Guiana) are to Surinamese women" (Charrier, 2002, p. 16).

2.3. Amerindian and Maroon Political Emergence

Collomb et Tiouka (2000) state that the changes experienced by Kali'na society during the 1960s and 1970s were destabilizing for the men and women who underwent them but “in return, they gave rise among younger generations to new questions about their cultural roots and to the expression of a strong feeling of identity, which led to the development of the Amerindian movement in French Guiana” (p. 117). Thus, in the mid-1970s, the Mana Association of Amerindian Families began reflecting on such issues and then, in 1981, the “Association of French Guianese Amerindians” (A.A.G.F.) was created by the youth of Awala-Yalimapo. On December 8 and 9, 1984, they organized the first Gathering of Amerindians. The president of the AAGF vigorously criticized French policy pertaining to Amerindian communities (p. 115). The French Guiana Federation of Amerindian Organizations (FOAG), which replaced the AAGF in 1992, has since become a fixture of French Guiana's political landscape. It is also very present in the working group on indigenous peoples at the United Nations and in the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), which is one of the major indigenous organizations in Latin America.” However, “beyond the official organization chart of the FOAG, the Amerindian movement remains weakly institutionalized and only involves a minority of players within a group which is itself a small minority. Moreover, since 2001, the FOAG has been weakened by numerous disaffections and divisions” (Guyon, 2009).

Analysis of designations of Amerindian and Maroon populations shows that the vocabulary has changed over time. First “savages” then “primitive populations”, the term went on to change from “tribal populations” to “forest-dwelling populations” (Jolivet, 1997). Paradoxically, the latter term was also used for coastal Amerindian populations who subsisted mainly on marine products, then the term “ethnic group” gained ground. Jolivet highlights the fact that “ethnic group”, a term used by anthropologists, was first used to qualify the Maroons and Amerindians of French Guiana and was then adopted by the general population, so that all the groups present in French Guiana became “ethnic” (p. 819). Currently, in French Guiana, as a result of the process of revalorization, the descendants of runaway slaves are designated by the terms “Noirs Marrons” (Maroons) or “Businenge”² or more recently, “indigenous people”. Businenge, which was first highlighted by researchers, is a generic term by which these populations refer to themselves and is currently being adopted by the entire population. As for the designation “indigenous”, it can be observed that, paradoxically, whereas the formation of Maroon groups resulted from creolization, they are presented as indigenous people alongside the Amerindians. Moreover, we should point out that the French Guianese Creoles and continental French have always refused to grant such recognition (as indigenous) to Haitian Creoles, who arrived in the early 1960s, although they are descendants of slaves. Chalifoux (1989) points out that the stereotypes surrounding Maroons make them “living symbols of the original resistance and of ancestral magical power, they [represent] the ‘other possible civilization’ since ‘they know where they come from’ (...)”. Maroons, through their past as runaway slaves, are the living symbol of anticolonial pride (p. 22). Still, the place of Maroons remains spiritual. It is idealized during commemorations of the abolition of slavery, in the speeches of politicians or intellectuals, but in concrete terms, they have not been fully integrated into French Guianese society. Their status as foreign immigrants, black-skinned, poor, polygamous, at the head of large families, and who in many cases entered French territory illegally, confers to the descendants of Maroons quite a negative image in French Guianese society, which inherited the socio-racial classifications of the colonial period. Thus, despite the development of the afro-centrist school of thought in the 1970s initiated by the Creoles (Hidair, 2003), today valorization of Maroon populations remains symbolic, since it is restricted to cultural aspects.

3. The “Indigenous” Identity in the European Psyche

It is important to show that the ideology of indigenous roots originated in the European psyche which, since the discovery of the Amerindian populations, has viewed the latter as having the natural qualities that Europeans supposedly have lost (Chalifoux, 1989, p.19). In French Guiana, in the early 1970s, the Amerindian way of life was idealized, non-Western cultures were valued. Thus, the “good Amerindian”, the model Amerindian, was one who

² Businenge is derived from the English Bush Negroes or the Dutch Bos Negers.

showed signs of being integrated in nature. If an Amerindian was in step with modernity, or integrated the elements of Creole culture, they were perceived as being the victim of a scheme and as being acculturated (Chalifoux, pp. 18-19). The presence of Amerindians in the city was viewed as incongruous. On that theme, the anthropologist Vincke (1995) developed the concept of “rate of incongruity” by studying urban iconic signs, whose ideology assigns precise places to non-whites in several Western cities. Thus, by swapping the figures present in public spaces (monuments, place names, posters, graffiti, stickers, etc.), if it appears that individuals are in the wrong spot, it is because ideology has assigned them a specific place (p. 253). Although there has been considerable progress made in recognizing “indigenous” populations, their being locked into tourist attraction stereotypes and the use of their cultural specificities to serve electoral ends hamper their full integration into French Guianese society. These “indigenous” populations are associated with images of “biological and cultural purity” that they struggle to rid themselves of (Chalifoux, 1989, p. 12). Moreover, young Amerindians and Maroons themselves have integrated these evolutionist ideologies that originated in the colonial period. Thus, they in turn dream of leaving for Europe or the United States and overvalue the Western lifestyle. Towards a Tri-Dimensional Approach to Identity Among Amerindian and Maroon Adolescents.

4. Towards a Tri-Dimensional Approach to Identity Among Amerindian and Maroon Adolescents

Adolescents are influenced by a tri-dimensional identity and juggle with socio-cultural contributions which we will call “traditional”, “French Guianese” and “European, according to circumstances. This approach to identity is demonstrated, for example, by the Wayana singer David Khana. Born in 1980 in Aloïke (on the banks of the Maroni river), he presents himself as “an original Wayana, a genuine one”. Still, he has just recorded a reggae album which includes six songs sung in French as well as in Nenge Tongo and Wayana. Similarly, the Maroon singer Léon Tooy, from Grand-Santi, has also recorded songs whose music was influenced by Haitian Kompa and French West Indian Zouk, with words written in the Nenge language. “Traditional” influences are the idealized ancestral origins, the “French Guianese” contributions relate to the stereotypes constructed through interactions with other socio-cultural groups and the “European” influence shows itself through the Western values interiorized by every generation of Amerindians and Maroons and transmitted in particular through schooling and the media. The statements of the students we met were revelatory of this triptych that constitutes the “indigenous French Guianese identity”. These adolescents integrated the stances of their elders, which they later adapted to meet the expectations of the contemporary world. Thus, among many of them, contradictory views emerge:

- On the one hand, they value “indigenous culture” while at the same time adopting Western values (50% would like to leave French Guiana to go and live in continental France); for the majority of young people, the definition of “indigenous culture” is limited to its “folkloric” aspects: The surveys carried out in Maripasoula, Grand-Santi, and Saint-Georges-de-l’Oyapock revealed that for 80% of the students questioned about their cultural and family environment, their knowledge was limited to tourist clichés (in decreasing order: hunting, canoe, art).

- On the other hand, they seek to differentiate themselves from foreign indigenous people, as in the case of the Maroons, for example, where the difference will be emphasized between people of Surinamese nationality and French citizens (In keeping with the rejection-integration dialectic of identity construction, within the community designated as being indigenous, different types of relationships exist between the groups that make it up: conflicts, cooperation, competition, exclusion).

Similarly, they will claim that ancestry while refusing the color of their skin, which they consider to be too dark—an attitude observed among Maroons— or while preferring to transmit the French language to the detriment of their mother tongue— as we observed among the Amerindians we met. All of these paradoxes emerged after analysis of the field data. A summary of the results confirmed, for more than half the young people interviewed, a contradictory stance concerning *the question of the future*: while wanting to continue living in their village (89%), these students want to live in Saint-Georges or in Cayenne (87%); also, while they like the daily way of life in the village, they also consider living *in the city*. Similarly, some will emphasize the positive aspects of the Amerindian or Businenge way of life at the same time as they want to see artifacts of “*the other civilization*” in the village (television, MP3 player, Western clothing) – an attitude most often observed among Maroons but also among Amerindians. 83% of the young people are attached to the concerns of the community (helping their parents, going to work in their

agricultural plot, fishing, hunting - even girls listed these same concerns). Analyses revealed certain factors that seemed decisive in their choice to leave the village: the opinion of the mother regarding the future of the child, the departure and “success” in the city of a family member, or the status of employee within the village (for example, the Amerindians or Maroons who worked for the school or the health center or the Amazonian Park, etc.). With regard to *the linguistic question*, the survey found that all the students interviewed are bilingual (mother tongue/French). In addition, a large majority of them (87%) mentioned a third language (some of them say “they know it”, others just that “they understand it”); the students were referring to other languages spoken in their village. The languages mentioned, depending on where their village is located, were: Brazilian Portuguese, French Guianese Creole, or another English-based Creole language or another Amerindian language. We observed that the young people did not refer to the foreign language studied at school. That language is considered by the majority of them (85%) “as a school subject”. Concerning *the notion of indigeness*, 33/35 Amerindian students stated that they had never heard the word “indigenous” and 23/27 Maroon students mentioned local handicraft items.

For the middle school students, aged 14-16, returning to the village after schooling and/or a fairly successful integration in “modern” society has consequences on identity construction and promotes the appearance of a negative image of the Amerindian: “*You feel that there’s no pride in being Amerindian*” (David, a young Teko). “*Anyway, our life is ruined, soon we won’t exist anymore*” (René, a young Wayāpi). On this subject, in recent research, Ailincăi et al. observed that “a large proportion of the young people questioned seem disenchanted by the contrast between the promises displayed in the showcase of Western society and the harsh realities of purchasing power that in this case is truly ‘symbolic’. So they return to the traditional way of life and are taken care of by the community. This return is often difficult, as many of them refuse in general to learn how to draw their subsistence from the forest (hunting, gathering, fishing, slash-and-burn agriculture) and especially everything that makes up the actual material culture, like basket weaving for the boys. They cannot see the benefits of this way of life in terms of quality and independence, it even seems shameful to them” (Ailincăi, Jung, Ali, 2012).

According to recent studies, the number of suicides has risen in the past few years (Léna, 2000; Godon, 2008); these suicides, of which 48% occur among young people aged 16 to 25, and 22% among children between 10 and 15, and which are recurrent both among Amerindians and Maroons, do not appear to be linked to culture (as these two populations have different cultures and worldviews). In her work, the psychologist Godon suggests that the problem seems to be linked to divergences between certain traditional practices and French law; the introduction of new social and cultural “reference points”, such as school and financial resources, in particular the RMI³ (minimum guaranteed income) welfare scheme. When questioned on this subject, Ti’Iwan, a Wayana painter, gave her personal interpretation. For her, the problem seems deeper: “Aside from problems due to alcohol consumption, drugs, illegal gold mining, problems which didn’t exist before contact with modernity and which often generate violence and despair,” it is linked to the appearance of the concept of suicide in Wayana culture. According to the Amerindian artist, the Wayana did not have any experience of that problem before the visit of a pastor who spoke about the suicide of Judas – thus the first Wayana suicide probably took place in the 1940s-1950s (Ailincăi et al. 2012). Moreover, the young people who attend school in coastal cities return to the village with new knowledge, new know-how, a new worldview, which they share with others, more or less intentionally. Based on ecosystemic theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Valsiner, 1987), these young people constitute an important vector in the identity dynamics of the village within the interactive context of inter-systems. The examples presented confirm the hypothesis of a tridimensional identity pattern for the young people interviewed. This pattern varies from one person to the next, according to “the share” of traditional, French Guianese and European socio-cultural contributions. But it also varies according to the influence of the young person’s close environment (in particular the microsystems that the young person is in contact with), as well as other “systems” (cf. the “Dynamic Model of the Systems That Structure the Environment of the Amerindian Child” Ailincăi et al. 2012), for example: the family’s values (in particular, the importance accorded by their family to the above-mentioned contributions); the family’s experience (members of the family who have lived elsewhere and who either live or do not live in the village); the geographic

³ In 1988, France was one of the first country to implement a minimum income, called the “*revenu minimum d’insertion*” (RMI). In 2009, it was turned into “*revenu de solidarité active*” (RSA)

location (the isolation of the village, the contacts of the family with the outside world); or the family's socio-economic situation (the share of modernity – electricity, television, etc. – and of traditional culture that characterizes the daily way of life of the families, also, the concordance of “this daily life” with “the aspirations” of the family) (Ailincăi & Jund, 2012). In Figure 1 we propose a model of the interactive identity pattern of the young Amerindians and Maroons of present day French Guianese society.

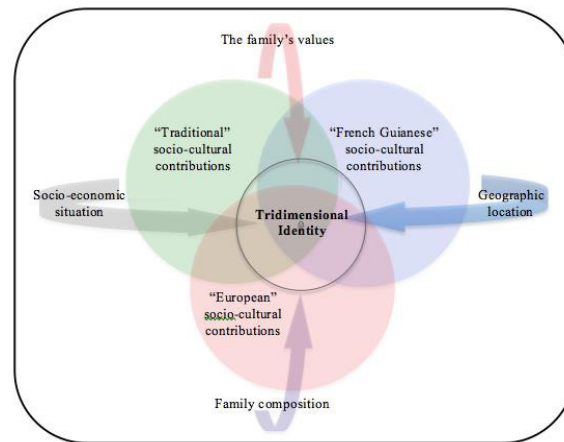


Fig. 1: Identity Dynamics of Young People of Amerindian and Maroon Descent. Model proposed by the authors

Other recent studies on the educational practices of Amerindian populations state that, in spite of the geographic isolation of these populations, the interactional dynamics of the different socio-political systems (school, government agencies, other socio-cultural groups, languages, etc.) influence traditional functioning, producing a dynamic identity process (Ailincăi & al., 2012; Ailincăi & Jund, 2012; Ali & Ailincăi, 2013). The study by Ailincăi et al. (2012) highlights the gap between actual parental educational practices (observed by researchers) and their expectations in terms of the social success of their child (expectations stated during interviews). This contradiction supports our findings relating to the contradictory attitudes observed among the young people interviewed.

5. Discussion: The Question of the Future

The main objective of this article was to present the historical context that fostered the emergence of a tridimensional identity dynamic among young people of Amerindian and Maroon descent. Secondly, based on our analysis of the interviews and questionnaires carried out among middle and elementary school students, we proposed a model of that identity. The examples presented revealed an evolving identity, open to the dynamics of change and the acceptance of novelty. This research shows the permeability of “ethnic boundaries” (Barth, 1969) and highlights the contradictions of an “indigenoussness” constructed from a Western viewpoint, which attempts to classify it in pre-established categories. However, the latter do not correspond to the reality of these peoples, whose ways of life are as modern, dynamic and influenced by interactions as those of any other population. Moreover, the growing “indigenous” share of the population strongly suggests that they will not remain on the sidelines for long, locked into clichés about “traditionally rural populations”, but that the question of their integration will have to be addressed. On that subject, Price & Price (2003) state that: “*The fact of being Aluku, Ndyuka, Saamaka or Paamaka determines, for every Maroon in French Guiana, not only an identity linked to the history and culture of their people, but also the ambitions that they can reasonably cherish for their future. A young Aluku can dream of a job in a government agency or a seat on the Regional Council, whereas a Saamaka of the same age is most often reduced to the eventuality of obtaining a residency permit that will allow them to look, for example, for a salaried job in construction*” (p. 93). To complete our analysis, we should point out that Price & Price’s observation is also valid for Amerindian populations. The Kali’na and Lokono enjoy a privileged political situation compared to the Wayãpi or Teko of the interior. Aware of the impossibility for them to singlehandedly wage, with assurance, a battle over economic and political issues, “indigenous” populations are forced to group together in order to demand recognition

of their existence before the French government, while at the same time ensuring that they remain in the Republic. Thus, the decree of October 14, 2008 established the list of organizations and non-profit groups representative of the Amerindian and Maroon populations, who were expected to designate their representatives to an advisory council, and appointed the qualified public figures chosen to be members of that council. However, we have to ask ourselves whether these requests for protection, these demands for legal advantages, these claims to receive recognition of their specificity and these arbitrarily applied postulations of exceptionality will solve the issue of the discrimination targeting these peoples. Won't recommendations to grant privileges based on ethnic criteria widen the gap separating French Guianese socio-cultural groups? On this point, Laplantine and Nouss (1997) emphasize the fact that “*the unkept promises of abstract universalism have led to particularist tensions (...): the absoluteness of religious purity, exclusive cultural affirmation through restrictive rootedness in the land or in memory, the thesis of ethnicity which often covertly vehicles racism*” (p. 74). Multiculturalism, as it is viewed in our societies, “is based on the cohabitation and co-existence of separate and juxtaposed groups resolutely turned towards the past, which should be protected from encounters with others” (p. 75). To pursue that point, we can conclude that most of the perceptions of Amerindians and Maroons in French Guiana ignore the fact that contacts have always existed and will continue, because they contribute to the identity of peoples who construct themselves through exchanges, encounters, sharing, conflicts. That selective blindness lends support to a form of cultural relativism which consists in considering any change as abnormal. Wouldn't it be more fruitful to support these changes, to teach this migratory history which is often taboo (Hidair & Éliville, 2010), to explain how cultural identity is comprehended from a multitude of heritages? It seems that attributing qualities, but also flaws, to cultures masks individual potential and complicates any attempt to develop a concept of a “French Guianese identity” based on territory instead of on racial divisions.

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