

The Tribal Characteristics of the Suriname Society

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Version 2, October 2021

This paper is the result of 40+ years living and working in Suriname and presents a reflective analysis of the functioning of society. My motivation to draft this paper is to shed some light on how our society functions for anyone who might be interested in the development of Suriname.

I could only come to this analysis after working 20+ years with tribal communities in Asia, the USA, and various countries in South America. Now that I have been living abroad for 6 years, I see society from afar and periodically return to Suriname to test the hypothesis that our society currently functions as a large tribe.

This paper might be a bit confrontational, but as a Surinamer, I wrote down my research findings as a way for others to reflect and subsequently, contribute to a more promising future for the country. I hope that you, as the reader, will help me assess the Suriname society and find new ways to promote the positive elements of our society, and let go of those elements that are less useful.

Please note that **I am not taking an outsider stance** in this paper. I am an intrinsic part of the “Suriname tribe” and the topics presented in this paper apply to me or are somehow part of my life.

This paper should be read as a **work in process**. It has been put together with insights from colleagues, friends, family, and feedback from those who read the first version of the paper². Citing the paper when you reproduce/build upon the presented ideas, is greatly appreciated.

The Portrait of Suriname

With descendants from India, Africa, Indonesia, China, Europe, and Indigenous peoples, Suriname has a cultural diversity unmatched by any other country in South America. A conglomerate of approximately 600.000 people, Suriname is bound to maintain peace among its citizens through a process of tolerance and balance.

Suriname has also been characterized as the black duckling in South America and the Caribbean with its European-oriented administrative and legal system, Caribbean-like cultural values and expression, plus the country physically lies within the South American continent without embedding any of the Spanish conquistador histories. A dominant orientation is absent.

Suriname has been developing its own identity, one that is unique and representative of the expression of the various cultures since the country’s independence in 1975. In its decolonizing

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² Version 1 was published on LinkedIn in July 2020

process, Suriname has been making new models for development by learning from the mistakes and successes of others.

However you look at Suriname, it is a society with unique characteristics. The existing characteristics remind me of a tribe: a homogenous society with a sense of identity, its own culture, and a common goal for survival. Respect, dignity, and honor are very important in maintaining the personal connections between members of the tribe. Tribes are usually more isolated from the world compared to mainstream society³.

In this paper, I purposefully choose the word “tribe” to indicate a specific model of social organization. Although there lacks unanimity among scholars on the concept of a tribe, one definition holds to “a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader”⁴. Yet, scholars agree a tribe is a group with distinct features different from any other known western social organization model.

Until I can better describe Suriname society, I will identify the characteristics that currently exist. I have found 10 tribally-oriented features which are evident in Suriname society. This means that each person living in Suriname is highly likely to face and take part in several activities which are of tribal origin. This doesn’t mean that Surinamers are completely tribal in behavior, but they are challenged with situations where tribal ways are more appropriate and effective than more western-oriented methodologies.

Characteristic 1: Collectivity

According to the cultural scientist, Geert Hofstede and his colleagues⁵, “collectivity pertain to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout the people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty”. Suriname possesses many in-groups where individual members strongly adhere to collective values rather than presenting themselves as unique individuals with their preferences and ideas.

Indicators for Suriname’s collectivity are found in many parts of society, as discussed below.

First, a person in Suriname should only socialize within the groups to which he/she belongs. For example, parents encourage their children to make friendships within the group instead of giving them full freedom to find friends on their own. This ingroup-bonding practice has a substantial personal benefit: the person is respected in their group and can count on the unconditional support of group members in all aspects of life. As a result, groups are constantly adding members and growing in size and strength. Cross-pollination between groups is rather an exception than a rule, making society stand with strong in-groups.

Second, group members promote their own customary rules and practices. At the same time, the group members praise their members while alienating others by spreading gossip and complaints. For example, when Cindy publicly speaks out against actions taken by her established group, most likely she will be labeled by her group as aggressive, weird, or just plain non-compliant.

³ United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. 2007

⁴ Oxford Dictionary

⁵ Hofstede, G. Hofstede, G.J. and Minkow, M. 2010. Cultures and Organizations: Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival. 3rd Ed. New York: McGraw Hill, p.92

Cindy's behavior will be secretly discussed with all other group members to gain a common understanding of the problem and how to handle it to keep up with the group's collective values. Cindy's challenge to the group's values - obedience, respect for tradition - is a punishable act in Suriname society.

Third, in a collective society, people have a different sense of accountability than in individually-oriented societies. Accountability means that one should be held responsible for he/her actions in a manner that is mutually accepted and thus according to the rules⁶. People are embedded in a group and their social behavior is determined by the group⁷. This results in a situation where the individual sees accountability as a group action: accountability is transferred to other members in the group. From my own experience with tribes, this accountability transfer is common practice. Accountability only becomes a priority issue when the collective image of the group is in jeopardy.

When looking at a global scale, the most individualistic country, the USA, ranks number one in a hallmark study of 76 countries that were researched on their collectivity. The Netherlands follows closely by ranking number four. This research teaches us that Suriname leans towards a more collective orientation by ranking as number 34. Yet, the "we-mindset" Suriname holds is weaker than other South American countries that promote strong family values and rank in the 70s on the collectivity scale.

Characteristic 2: Low Hierarchy

When looking at the whole of Suriname society, I see different groups operating in a horizontal arrangement of power. There is a limited distance between the most powerful and least powerful groups, which is culturally designated as "low hierarchy".

On a global scale, Suriname scores low (9th) on the hierarchy scale which means that everyone is almost equally important. Countries in South America registered a medium hierarchy (rank in the 30s). High hierarchy can be seen in the Netherlands (ranks 63) and the USA (ranks 60). The latter have well-designed societal systems with clear hierarchical divisions.

Low hierarchy is noticeable in Suriname society, as shown below.

First, Suriname citizens have easy access to high-power individuals. In comparison to societies with a large power distance such as the USA and the Netherlands, people in Suriname can easily make an appointment with a high-level politician or can have a chat with a celebrity in a supermarket. The short power distance is also seen when people, who are undertaking a project, want to speak directly with the country's President, Vice President or Minister to gather support for the project, rather than any lower-ranked government official.

Second, societies with a low hierarchy tend to admire people who are better than average and put them on a pedestal. Surinamers constantly identify heroes and idolize them. Although heroes are present in all societies, in low hierarchy societies like Suriname, they are constantly talked about. Heroes then become popular and this will keep them in favor of important people in society. They earn respect and may even get financial opportunities or benefits.

⁶ Gelfand, M. and Realo, A. 1999. Individualism-collectivism and accountability in intergroup negotiations Journal of Applied Psychology 84(5):721-736

⁷ Triandis, H. 1995. Individualism and Collectivism. New York: Routledge

Third, each group is constantly striving to get a better societal position. The elevation of one group can only occur when others are lifted simultaneously. In case one group acquires too much power, the other groups will attack this injustice by applying the general rule of coexistence: “if I can’t have it, neither can you”. Popularly known as “crab mentality”, this concept represents the various groups as crabs in a bucket where one wants to be on top while crawling on the others.

Fourth, the low hierarchy between groups pushes each citizen to navigate through society with tact and patience. Once confronted with an unknown person, a Surinamer will explore the situation first, usually by asking a popular question: who is your father and who is your mother? Although often categorized as a joke, this exploratory question gives a better understanding of two crucial pieces of information that anyone who engages with someone else wants to know: the status and power of the group to which the other person belongs.

Characteristic 3: Negative Identity

According to Tjafel and Turner⁸, one group can put itself either up or down another group, and this societal ranking gives the existing groups a sense of identity. Groups that rank themselves below other groups tend to have a negative identity. Negative identity often explains the group’s behavior toward other groups.

When assessing the country as a whole, I notice an overall negative identity. Quite often, Surinamers see themselves as inferior to outsiders. I found the following example to demonstrate this negative identity.

In July 2021, the national soccer team “Natio” lost in their first match in Gold Cup history against a team of Jamaica. The Suriname media had quite a negative stance (supporting the negative identity), as seen in the table below.

Coverage of Event in Suriname media	Coverage of Event in International media
Natio is making a false start in Gold Cup (De Ware Tijd)	Suriname fought hard for what it is worth, but loses from Jamaica in Gold Cup debut (Dutch media sportnieuws.nl)
Handful of Suriname fans see Natio lose against Reggae Boyz (QN Sports)	Suriname needs to go on after Gold Cup loss against Jamaica (Dutch media nu.nl)
Natio loses against Jamaica (Starnieuws)	Suriname played their first match in Gold Cup history and gave it their all on the field (Gold Cup)
Suriname loses first Gold Cup game with 2-0 against Jamaica (Waterkant)	Jamaica defeats a though Suriname side (Caribbean Football Union)
Gold-cup: Natio loses to Jamaica (Herald)	Jamaica stutters past resilient Suriname to kick-off Gold Cup campaign (UK press The Voice)

Several tactics are used by people to overcome negative identity, as described below.

⁸ Tjafel, H. and Turner, J. 1979. An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. New York: Oxford University Press.

First, Surinamers increase their self-esteem by constantly making an “us versus them” comparison. For example, when Surinamers meet people from abroad, they like to explain their actions by saying “this is how we do it here, you don’t understand” or “it just works differently here”. This perception is also reinforced by the relatively low exposure of the majority of Surinamers to other countries and cultures.

Second, Surinamers like to categorize themselves as special. They enhance their self-image, often as compensation for a (hidden) inferior feeling. Evidence for this inferior feeling can be found in people’s easy satisfaction with new things brought from outside, a phenomenon which is comparable with the “beads and mirrors” given to remotely living tribes during colonization. Sometimes, Surinamers’ inferior feeling is also expressed when they are confronted with countrymen/women who have moved abroad: someone who lives abroad and visits Suriname can easily be called a “know it all”, with the potential consequence of him/her being alienated from the “Suriname tribe”.

Third, the general practice for people is to copy from others. This practice is done everywhere - in family settings, work settings, in recreational settings- and implies a limiting belief in the self. Copying others gives a sense of security. Going against the general norm requires lots of courage in the relatively small Suriname society. The insurmountable result is that only a few Surinamers are brave enough to challenge the status quo and engage in new ideas and innovative practice.

Characteristic 4: Culture of Being

Suriname makes up a “culture of being” which means that the citizens believe that having a good relationship with others is the most important goal of their existence⁹. Surinamers like pursuing a good time with family members, co-workers, or friends, thereby emphasizing the important values such as being together in peace and harmony. Values related to work and accomplishments are less important. Such values are being expressed in more developed nations from Europe and North America, which are both adhering to a “culture of doing”.

The “being-culture” is incorporated in our everyday way of life, as I discuss here.

First, generally, Surinamers are incredibly relaxed and take their time, even if it means being late for an appointment. Time is experienced as a fluid concept and if too much time is lost, it can easily be compensated another time. Rushing from appointment to appointment is not common practice in Suriname.

Second, people in Suriname are easy-going and don’t like any unnecessary disturbance in their quiet lifestyle. Stability and balance are values that are favored above anything else. I have noticed over the last two decades that Surinamers are quite uncomfortable with people who refrain from this “slow and quiet” mode and choose a more risky and aggressive approach that potentially may disturb the quiet lifestyle.

Third, people in Suriname engage in long prefaces and greetings before anything else can happen. Politeness is defined as taking the time to talk with one another before going forward to more serious tasks or endeavors. I see this practice actively implemented on the streets, in

⁹ Kluckhohn, F. and Strodtbeck, F. 1961. Variations in Value Orientations. Evanston, Illinois: Row, Peterson.

professional or business settings, and in gatherings with friends and family. Violating this practice can easily end up in a conflict.

Fourth, as a being-culture, Surinamers prefer to identify themselves with the role they have in upholding a “being” value. One example of a “being” value is to take care of each other. I have identified the following case to explain this phenomenon: John is an engineer with a 20-people business. John’s character as a good person who provides loans to his employees would be categorized as more important than his profession as an engineer. John’s profession would only be mentioned if it reinforces his action towards the shared value of caretaking, for example, if John also helps with building houses for his employees.

Characteristic 5: Femininity

Feminine characteristics are expressed in the softness of dealing with everyday issues¹⁰. Suriname society favors modesty and shows a tender approach towards dealing with issues. This is the opposite of masculine societies, which are more assertive, tough, and concentrated on material success instead of the quality of life. Examples of societies that have more masculine values are countries in Europe and North America.

Indicators for femininity in Suriname are described below.

First, Surinamers promote emotional ways of discussing topics which is very well noticed in the way politicians hold speeches in parliament, how journalists write articles in the newspaper, or just how citizens complain about everyday issues using the expressive lingua franca Sranan Tongo. Emotions are best expressed through storytelling, a soft and indirect way of conversation compared to a direct and assertive way of expressing opinions, which is how rational-oriented societies communicate.

Second, in feminine societies, solutions to problems can only be sought in a non-painful manner. Solutions are preferably chosen when there is no risk for tumult. The consequence is that solutions are only found after there is consultation with a large number of groups. This phenomenon is obvious in Government: a decision can take several years and sometimes can be even postponed because it is better to maintain the status quo and keep the healthy balance between the groups in society.

Third, Surinamers let things proceed organically and refrain from defining a process (with hard deadlines) for reaching a specific goal. The result is people have no clue what is going to happen next. People can easily start blaming the responsible person/organization for the lack of progression. Having an undefined process also comes in handy for a person who wants to change direction when he/she is off-course or just doesn't know which direction to choose.

¹⁰ Hofstede, G. 2001. Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations. 2nd Ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage

Characteristic 6: Discourse

In a small society like Suriname, discourse plays a more important role than the presentation or discussion of facts. The discourse represents the most important storylines in Suriname. Discourses come and go, and from my research, I noticed that the discourse with the most powerful-citizen-support stays active the longest e.g., the discourse about corruption and exchange rate was dominant during the 2020 elections because the majority of Surinamers kept it alive on social media.

There are several indicators found to argue Suriname's discourse-dependence, discussed here.

First, the majority of Surinamers doesn't like to read the literature but predominantly rely on television, social media, and newspapers for information. Surinamers tend to shy away from writing articles or books, and this has led "outside authors" to take up this task. Most literature about Suriname is generated by people living outside the country, and fortunately, this is gradually changing.

Second, the daily media produces stories based on what people say (story) rather than searching for facts. The moment a story is picked up by a newspaper or any other acceptable medium it becomes a mutually accepted fact. Because Surinamers prefer to give lengthy stories (sometimes full of multiple synonyms), it is very difficult to distinguish what belongs to "own interpretation" and what belongs to factual information.

Third, the stories that run through society are often linked to a person due to the relatively small society. If something new launches, Surinamers will first ask: Who is behind it? This information is necessary to give the activity a seal of approval or just dismiss it depending on the fact that you like this person or not. In my research I tried to keep one work activity - awareness campaign – hidden for one year. Several people reached out on social media to get a sense of who is behind the campaign.

Fourth, there is a lot of effort on referring friends and family for jobs and other benefits. This referencing rests on the stories of people. The resume or curriculum vitae becomes only important after the person is referred by someone else. In some cases, the resume is not even considered when someone is applying for a job.

Fifth, once someone is negatively discussed in discourse and this discourse has limited public support, the person is likely to lose face in society. For example, Lucy has been associated with a corruption case in the company where she works as a manager. Lucy may be discussed in the newspaper, in social media, or as part of juicy gossip in the different groups. The drawback of this practice is that Lucy has no way of restoring her face, even if the facts are in her favor. She can only reinstate her standing with the release of a new personal success story, for example as a sportswoman or philanthropist. The result of this blacklisting is that conflicts remain unresolved.

Characteristic 7: Conflict Management

In my research, I have found that when six or more Surinamers come together in a work setting, at least two are related, know each other somehow, or have a mutual friend or experience in common. With such short social connections, face-saving and reputation management has always been the most important strategy for one to survive in society.

Consequently, Surinamers tend to negotiate in a manner that aims at keeping face and relationships intact¹¹. For example, when Jim negotiates with Albert, the outcome of the negotiation is primarily centered on upholding the relationship between them. It is less important who gets what in terms of profit. Keeping relationships intact is one of the most important assets in a negotiation in a small society like Suriname.

In case there is a conflict, Surinamers have several strategies.

First, Surinamers either go into hiding or avoid conflict. In either way, the communication between the conflicting parties stops and each of them starts creating their own story. For example, Rudi is in conflict with John over an issue and then Rudi withdraws and starts spreading his version of the conflict to mutual friends, knowing that John will also hear it. A confrontation between Rudi and John is not a common practice.

Second, another preferred strategy for managing conflict is to form a coalition. A profound example of such coalition-forming is when staff, management, and retirees stood together outside the office of Surinam Airways, the national airline, to protest against the slow approval of flight certification for a Boeing-777 aircraft in July 2020¹².

Third, Surinamers also like to suddenly change the rules when it does not work in their favor, a practice that is seen across all of Suriname. For instance, a recent case that caught my attention was the change of statutes to accommodate the First lady and brother of the Vice President into the Board of State Oil Company in September 2020¹³. Another example is when labor unions have agreed on something and then come back on the agreement by changing the rules of negotiation.

Fourth, people like to resolve conflicts with the help of someone with authority. This authority can be a government official or an official leader. The unfortunate consequence of having conflict resolved by someone with a higher power is that it often ends in a win-lose decision: one person wins and the other loses (face). Because of this type of conflict strategy, society embeds countless such unresolved conflicts which re-emerge at times when it is least expected.

Characteristic 8: Past Orientation

Societies with a past orientation tend to value traditional ways of doing things. Suriname focuses a lot on the past and this fits the definition of a society with a past orientation¹⁴. Think about how past experiences shape Surinamers' motivations, inspirations, substance, and direction, for example, how they like to emphasize certain past events as being "perfect". For example, a lifetime job at an extractive company is still the preferred way of going through life because it was experienced as perfect before.

The past orientation originates from the fact that Surinamers are largely uncomfortable with change¹⁵. On a global scale, Suriname ranks 11th place in countries that like to avoid uncertainty,

¹¹ Bonta, B. 2001. Conflict Resolution among Peaceful Societies: The Culture of Peacefulness. In Chew, P. The Conflict and Culture Readers. New York: New York University Press

¹² <https://www.starnieuws.com/index.php/welcome/index/nieuwsitem/59825>

¹³ <https://www.starnieuws.com/index.php/welcome/index/nieuwsitem/60695>

¹⁴ Ibid Hofstede, 2001

¹⁵ Ibid Hofstede et al. 2010

while South American countries are ranked in the 30s. The Netherlands can deal quite well with uncertainty and ranks 55th, and the same counts for the USA that ranks 64th. In the latter countries, people are generally more confronted with changing circumstances than in Suriname.

I see several characteristics of a past orientation in society, which are discussed here.

First, Surinamers like the way things were in the good old times. When I listen to politicians or other decision-makers, they are usually referring to an image from the past. They then build on the past image and start creating something new. For example, a district commissioner will refer to a project about upgrading the main community square by saying that it will be the same as before or even better, for example, by adding some new infrastructure like vendor tents to the way the square was in the past.

Second, it is a big task for Surinamers to look into the future. Plans about the future exist on paper but in practice, they are rarely followed e.g., the multi-year development plan. Another example is that discussions about the future, usually end up in a list of activities (what needs to be done). Sometimes time is brought in (what needs to be done by when). But the “how” question is always last to be answered and unfortunately, less important in the planning process, resulting in incomplete plans that hamper further development of the country. Only few Surinamers can address the “how” question.

Characteristic 9: Traditional Decision-making

Traditional decision-making is usually practiced in communities or tight groups. The practice is based on collective discussion and consultation, resulting in consensus decision-making. Consensus means that a group or community agrees by listening to the opinions and concerns of others and then working towards a suitable decision. Not everyone would be pleased by the outcome of the decision, but at best they can live with it¹⁶. Traditional decision-making is a non-structured, flexible process, without being strictly bound by time.

Traditional leadership is observed in Suriname, as described below.

First, Surinamers seldom make decisions purely based on rationalism (knowledge and facts). There is always some kind of “feel factor” involved¹⁷. Decision-making is more like an art, for which one takes into account the balance between the various groups in society. There is physical evidence all around Suriname of this type of balanced decision making – look at the naming of streets, bridges, and buildings after the leaders from different groups. And the statues of leaders from two important groups standing side by side in front of the Presidential palace.

Second, traditional decision-making is a non-structured process in which people refer back to decisions from the past. Instead of seeing the situation as a novelty and assessing it objectively, Surinamers like to find solutions by scanning what decisions have worked in the past. The danger of this past-oriented practice is that people can become paralyzed in a situation they have never

¹⁶ Barnaby, J. 2009. Indigenous decision-making processes: What can we learn from traditional governance?

¹⁷ Inglehart, R. and Baker, W. 2000. Modernization, Cultural Change and the Persistence of Traditional Values. *American Sociological Review* 65, 19-51

experienced before e.g., Covid-19 outbreak. Another danger is that society becomes apprehensive of innovative ideas because decisions are centered on the past.

Third, Surinamers tend to exclude science from decision-making. People like to refer to the early years after independence (the 70s) when Surinamers were working with Dutch rules, principles, and practices from the former motherland (Netherlands). This “perfect time” can be recreated with the right mix of circumstances and mindset, according to Surinamers I had discussions with during the last 15 years. Unfortunately, in these discussions, science is not being listed as one of the main pillars for decision-making.

Characteristic 10: Symbolic Leadership

Leaders are mostly chosen based on “expressive values” such as the ritual, ceremony, or story. These expressive cultural elements are creating meaning to Surinamers and this meaning seems more important than the actual results leaders produce. Leaders in the so-called “symbolic” leadership¹⁸[19] are managers of the culture that binds the followers. Such leaders are only respected when they adequately represent the thoughts and cultural practices of the followers.

Symbolic leadership is the preferred type of leadership in Suriname. The leader is chosen from the “Suriname tribe”, so all other nine characteristics described above will apply to the way he/she runs the country, the business, or the government office. In comparison, in more rational societies like in Europe, leadership is founded on values such as structure, dialogue, and due process.

Symbolic leadership is observed in Suriname as described below.

First, symbolic leaders are found everywhere in Suriname: in politics, in business, and civil society organizations. They are often charismatic and master in linking ideology and meaning. In contrast to leaders in rational societies who rely on structure and goals, leaders in Suriname like to highlight events and rituals to keep intact the cultural bond between people. Profound examples are the rituals held - slogans and entertainment - during the political meetings.

Second, the followers see the symbolic leader as either good or bad. Followers usually can't take an in-between stance because they are either attracted to the leader's cultural expression or not. Leaders need to stay close to their followers and will do almost everything to keep a good standing. The leader's political program becomes less important as followers have a full belief in the leader.

¹⁸ Bolman, L, and Deal, T. 2003. Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.