

A ROLE FOR THE GUYANA DIASPORA – A POSSIBLE FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION

by Desmond Roberts

You would have noted my tentativeness in altering just so slightly the moot for our discussion today by using the indefinite article ‘a’ as against the definite ‘the’ role for the Diaspora. And also stating that it is the uniquely Guyana, and no other, Diaspora on which I want to lay my presumption. And finally, not to be *too* presumptuous I have suggested that this is a *possible* framework, since our friends in Guyana South might take unkindly to our usual attempts to talk down to them; seeming to know more than they do on what should be done in the country where our collective navel strings are buried.

Diaspora was a term originally applied to the Jewish nation because, for many centuries they seemed to have been the only large group wandering around the world being persecuted by all. It has been argued that it was the Ottoman Empire (some give it the dubious distinction of being the best colonial administration ever), with its Islamic concerns over usury and exploitation, that gave the Jews financial stewardship over and deep wealth from the Caliphate’s widely dispersed holdings. The only other (and more recent) exiled groups were those from Ireland in Australia, Barbados and the United States.

However since World War 1, and accelerating after World War 2, there has been tremendous movement of peoples away from their accustomed habitats to far away or different lands. Apart from the callous redrawing of national borders by departing colonial powers,

which created ongoing strife and dislocation, there has been a restructuring of the global order of production and an ease of communication generally. It is reported that over 244 million people in 2015 are living in countries other than their place of birth. That is an increase of over 39% from 175 million in 2002. (The Times of India, 1/14/2016, *India has largest diaspora population in world, UN report says*).

Diasporal populations are mainly created by movement as a result of disease or famine; economic or colonial relationships; economic dislocation; or violence and war which can encompass all of the above. We are looking at the creation of Diasporas before our very eyes, unnecessarily perhaps, of tens of millions of people in the Middle East, Central America and Africa scurrying to find shelter and safety from persecution, violence, starvation and a low tolerance for perceived lack of opportunity.

Once movement begins and some foothold is gained in another more favorable country, the inexorable movement of family, relatives and loved ones creates Diasporas of different levels of entrenchment. With modern and quick means of travel, instant electronic communication, easy financial transfers and an ability to maintain cultural ties of music, food and ceremony, the concept of immigration is changing to one of transnationalism. Assimilation is now conditional and it is possible to live in one country and love another; or live in, love and invest in both countries. With different levels of contact and relationships by first, second and third generation immigrants, the entire concept of Diaspora is undergoing serious political, economic, financial, social and cultural examination. “ While many observers see globalization as positive, promoting economic development and intercultural exchanges, there

are also corrosive developments such as globalization's threats to century-long traditions, religious identities, authority structures, values and worldviews (Suarez-Orozco, Qin-Hilliard, eds; *Globalization, Culture and Education in the New Millennium*; U California Press 2004, P7).

THE GUYANA DIASPORA

The Guyana movement away from the 83,000 square miles began with plantation owners' and colonial machinations against former slaves in their villages, demanding fair wages. Movement into the interior of Guyana, to Cuba and Panama and as 'guest workers', created a dynamic of uprooting, which ended in the metropolises of the North. Political and economic hardships and instability were a catalyst driving some 88,405 Guyanese (Africans, Indians, Chinese and Portuguese), mainly from the middle and business class (but also domestic workers and clerks), into Canada alone between 1966 and 1996. (Roberts: *Indo and Afro Guyanese in NYC*, ed, Matthews, University Press, 2014).

The oil shocks, neoliberal financial paradigms and political turmoil in Guyana drove as many as 200,000 Guyanese (there are estimates of 85,000 in the Venezuelan border area alone –see Ishmael, *Stabroek News*, March 11, 2007, with significant numbers of rice farmers in the Nickerie region of Suriname) into neighboring Suriname, Venezuela, Brazil. Guyanese are well represented also in the English speaking Caribbean. It would be interesting to see the numbers established in the Caribbean by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Guyana Bureau of Statistics and the International Organization for Migration.

Indians in Guyana who, for over 100 years, showed a greater desire to remain close to home and family, finally began to move: first into

Suriname to plant rice; then as cane cutters in the Caribbean in the turbulent 1980s to work less for more pay (Ferguson T. *“To survive sensibly or to court heroic death; Management of Guyana’s Political Economy”*, Georgetown 1999, p 346) then to follow opportunity into Canada and finally into the United States of America.

Since the passage of the Hart-Cellar 1965 Immigration Act, the United States has been the preferred destination for Guyanese migration. This timely legislation changed migration patterns for Guyanese who had formerly been welcomed into the United Kingdom after World War 2, but had seen work permits (1962 Immigration Act) instituted to reduce the number of colonial subjects entering Great Britain.

Where we Are

Guyanese settled mainly in New York, the main port of entry, and had the highest proclivity of any immigrant group to remain in New York City (some 50% shown in 2010 census: Newest New Yorkers, Dept. of City Planning 2013). The Migration Policy Institute suggests we have 273,000 Guyanese in the United States in 2014 (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/south-american-immigrants-united-states>) and the New York City Department of Planning (2011 population) counts 140,000 in New York City. However, it is estimated that, with non-permanent residents and those here illegally, there might be some 400,000 Guyanese living in North America. If we include Guyanese living in the Caribbean; in countries neighboring Guyana; in Europe, Great Britain and other parts of the world, we can safely say that we have over 700,000 Guyanese living outside of Guyana. If we include Second and Third generation Guyanese-identifying, we may have close to one million Guyanese residing abroad by 2050. Guyana,

however, has the shocking distinction of having 89% of its tertiary educated graduates migrate (Migration and Remittances Handbook 2011). The UN Population Prospects Demographic Profiles report has concerns over Guyana's viability as a state by the end of the century. Guyana is projected to have a lower population in 2100 than it had in 1970, if migration trends continue.

Guyanese have begun an internal migration in the USA, away from New York to find greater opportunity or more attractive climates in Florida, Georgia, Texas, California, Massachusetts and Washington DC metro area as well as to the neighboring states of Connecticut, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

There is a popular saying that wherever you go in this world you will find a Guyanese. And the anecdotal experience of travelers seems to find these truths self-evident.

So, we all well dispersed but what do we do about it?

Our Transnationalism

Globalization has created much movement, decentralized production and facilitated speedy communication which has in turn made travel, cultural products, funds transfers, electronic and other instant cheap communication readily available.

Guyana has a plethora of Home Town Associations (HTAs) which have kept the spirit and social interaction of the home country alive, and also have supplied assistance to their representative villages and communities; educational institutions at all levels; places of worship; former places of employment and professional organizations. In many instances the assistance is in the form of equipment; as supplies –

clothing, backpacks; school supplies; as payment of topped up salaries of staff and in the form of scholarships and bursaries.

Money is transferred to the home country by direct payment into bank accounts, through money transfer agencies, by cash with trusted travelers, in the mail and of course through illegal means by sea, air and over our porous land borders. The World Bank estimated that Guyana received remittances of over \$280 million, (17% of GDP) in 2010.

There are several organizations of professionals who provide valuable services to underserved communities and persons needing medical, dental, surgical, social and engineering services. Often, these visits are accompanied by counterpart professional, cultural and scholarly exchanges.

And of course there are the traditional barrels where, normally, substantial items are shipped by sea for a family's sustenance; for special occasions; a community project; construction materials or even replacement parts for a piece of equipment.

Not all of the transfers are north to south. As Lear Matthews pointed out (see Stabroek News Diaspora column of January 4, 2016) some of the cultural maintenance is done by visitors bringing items which remind transnationals of home: casareep, handicraft, bitters cup; wild meat; fried fish and even the pre-Viagra capadulla.

Prejudices

Some of the difficulties with harmonizing relations between Guyanese at home and those abroad are long-held and deep seated prejudices.

Lear Mathews refers to some of those in a Stabroek News Diaspora column article of April 4, 2016. On the Guyana side, there is lack of

appreciation of the sincere desire by nationals abroad to assist in the ways mentioned under *Our Transnationalism* above; those actions are taken for granted or not known outside the ambit of, or the impact on the actual recipients.

Guyanese feel and speak openly about those who “ran away” and now want to return and “reap the benefits.” “Where were they when we were suffering or getting killed or during the flood or....?” There is a feeling also that ‘comebackees’ want to return and take their jobs; and only want high positions and high salaries. “We don’t get that kind of salary. Why should they get those American salaries?” Even when those living abroad offer to perform services for free, there is a feeling that “they want to come and tell us what to do, as if we are stupid.” And those who have benefitted from the underground economy or the higher purchasing power in Guyana (or even from the relatives who were sending them barrels), but have visited North American apartments, consider the ‘foreigners’ as “not doing so well overseas anyway.”

‘Overseas Guyanese’ often have their own complaints and frustrations when they interact with Guyanese officials on business matters. They often feel that, although they are well treated on meeting government functionaries, it is a case of ‘out of sight, out of mind’. There is generally no follow up and promised action is not taken either directly or in answering email and phone calls. Political figures, who were anxious to collect funds or be well treated abroad, are suddenly unavailable or not able to be reached. In some instances, there is poor access to decision makers, even if invited to travel into the country. Invariably, there is too much bribery required in a system now corrupt at several levels. Often the wild driving and reports of violent crime are enough to deter

Guyanese from returning home. Most of the time, it is claimed that simple tasks that could be accomplished by filling a form online require several hours of time-wasting and even restrictions based on unaccustomed dress codes.

Clearly, we have two ships, without lights, passing each other in the night. We need a structural solution to this communication deficit.

THE POSSIBLE COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORK

Notwithstanding the promise made by all the political parties in Guyana to include the Diaspora in the development of the country, there is a feeling that nothing concrete has been done to operationalize these clearly strong commitments.

- Government needs to present, for discussion earliest in the Parliament and by the people, a White Paper on the Diaspora.
- Guyana needs to identify the overall needs of the country – projects, materiel, technical and administrative skills at all levels. Members of the Diaspora can assist in this exercise if needed.
- Guyanese at home should have first call on all jobs and contracts. Diasporal companies, or companies in which members of the Diaspora have major shares or leadership, should be given preference next, if the needed skills and expertise can be supplied.
- Guyana's staff at embassies, consulates and honorary consuls must be selected for and made to appreciate their important coordinating roles with the Diaspora as well as with international organizations.

- The arduous task of preparing a registry of all Guyanese resident abroad must be undertaken by the government and its foreign missions, with the assistance of host countries, researchers, HTAs, international organizations and our Statistical Bureau. Recent efforts of the international office of Migration (IOM) must be assessed.
- Reflective Think Tanks must be established in Guyana and abroad with a common agenda. These groups should meet annually or as often as necessary to suggest action and document both the suggestions and results.
- A Diasporal organization like the Jamaica Diaspora Foundation and Diaspora Institute needs to be established with the blessing of the Guyana government. Thereafter, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Institute as well as a Not for Profit Foundation needs to be established. This organization, along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, should coordinate the efforts of the Think Tanks as well as the major fund raising ventures undertaken.
- **Benchmarking should be done to see what other strong Diasporas have already done to build mutually advantageous structures to benefit both members of the Diaspora as well as the government and the people of the home country.** China, India, Malaysia, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic are good starting points.

We have a lot of talent that could be deployed for the benefit of the people of Guyana. Let us make better use of our Diaspora.