

Narrative for Guyana Heritage Night 2016 (Rev 2F)

In the Beginning

In the beginning there was this land with green, green, green hills; nuff, nuff, nuff rivers, Plenty, plenty, plenty fish, birds, animals, insects – all dem tings that like to live in trees, and tings like dat. And this place was put in charge of a God named **Makonaima** and he called it Guiana – **Land of many waters** because where ever you went – there was a river, a lake, a creek, a water fall, so he told his people – this land here – we have to take care of it and you have to help me and they agreed – so **Makonaima** sent his largest group the **Caribs** who were sent to care for the lower and right banks of the Orinoco the Essequibo the Mazaruni, the Cuyuni, the Pomeroon and the Barima Rivers and some of the forests that came down to the river.

Next he sent **the Akawois** he gave them responsibility to care for the lower Essequibo the Upper Cuyuni parts of the Demerara and Pomeroon Rivers. Then he sent the **Arawaks** this group were seen as the elite of all the tribes and they had responsibility for the **Courentyne and Waini Rivers, Warrous** to another part of the Orinoco and the Cuyuni – this was good for them because among other skills they were good boat builders and fisherman.

The next groups – they sort of lived between two lands **The Macushi and Wapishiana** the story goes that these two groups lived together on the dry grasslands– the lands without trees – the savannahs and later the Wapishianas moved to the Kanuku Mountains – because there was conflict between them.

Then there were **the Arecunas** - these people originally came from the Caroni and Paragua river region of the land we now call Venezuela and were driven across the border and Makonaima said – you can settle and care for some of **the Mazaruni and the Cuyuni Rivers. The Patamona** - Makonaima does not say much about this group other than he sent them to various parts of the Pakaraima mountain and if you see those mountains – caring for them was no easy task.

The last group was **the Wai – Wai's** - we say the last group because like the Arecunas they crossed into this land from another land the land we know as Brazil.

For a time all was well with their world – each of Makonaima's people cared for the land; they planted their food, hunted, fished, and moved between each other's areas without strife. But that would all change with the arrival of the Settlers – **the Colonizers**.

The Arrival of The Settlers

In a land far, far, far away there was another set of people who were very curious about the unknown world – these people were called Europeans – who liked to say they “discovered” many inhabited lands like the Guianas. This first group were Dutch. And in 1581 the Dutch built their first settlement, **Fort Kykeoverall** (See over all) was established at the junction of three rivers – the Essequibo, the Cuyuni and the Mazaruni – territory entrusted to the care of the **Arecuna tribe**.

Fast forward to 1627 to Berbice where their second fort, Fort Nassau was erected and became the Country that was actually settled and developed by the Dutch and over time, that development meant a need for increased labourers for their plantations of cotton , sugar and rice because the Amerindians soon realized their true intent and by virtue of their hinterland dwellings they became very difficult to corral into labour forces. Where better to augment your labour needs than through the burgeoning and profitable slaving – the capture and sale of another set of indigenous peoples

in Africa.

History records the first arrival of slaves in 1650 – they came mainly from West Africa, the Congo and Angola, where the European explorers were very busy expropriating land, enslaving the inhabitants and selling them for profit to other “explorers” who then shipped them off in chains to foreign lands. This continued with the French and later the British. The impact of this is reflected in words/place names Guyanese will recognise, such as Seawall, Koker, New Amsterdam, Vreed En Hoop, Wakenaam, Ruimveldt, Georgetown, Fairfield Good Hope, La Bonne Intension, Fyrish, Vilvoorden, Hampton Court, Winsor Castle.

1831 unification of all three colonies under the British - Berbice, Demerary, Essequibo.

1834 Abolition of slavery

As a result “by the time post-emancipation apprenticeship ended in **1838**, an estimated 154,000 slaves remained in the colony’. Freed slaves still had to give their former slave owners several (7) days free labour before working for themselves under the terms of apprenticeship.

Throughout the period of transshipment to the “colonies” the slaves were not sent as groups to any one place, instead it was expedient to make sure they could not communicate with each other; **Slaves when** transported as tribal groups to the colonies were separated, that is, they were formed into groups that did not share a common language, religion or culture – the only commonality was that they were from the Continent of Africa.

This was seen as a means of defence against revolt which was inevitable because of the harsh treatment, living and working conditions and because they were not seen as human; log books on slave ships attest to this – they are listed along with the animals as “**live cargo**” .

With Emancipation came the need for new sources of labour, since that labour could no longer be “**FREE**”

We entered the phase of **Indentureship** - A new way of describing almost **SLAVERY**.

Between the years 1835 and 1882, 30,645 Portuguese from Madeira came to the colony of British Guiana – they tended to come as families but were found to be unsuitable for field work and could only work as shop keepers or other menial jobs eg. Shoe makers. This failure by the Portuguese to adapt to field work meant that the need for labour was now more critical than ever, because the plantations were flourishing, hence between 1823 and 1917, **238,979 East Indians** mostly from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh - India arrived on 5 year **Indentureship** contracts with the right of return. Here again, this group often came as **families** and included were a number of single women.

Nevertheless they too suffered many indignities living in ranges called “ **lowgees**” but by virtue of the fact that they were able to exist as family units, with language, culture and religious beliefs protected by law. the things that bind as a community-they were able to survive the harsh rule of **Indentureship**.

So successful was their transition many re-indentured and because they were people who were **paid** for their labour many were able to leave the estates and become independent by starting small businesses. Labour was an ever pressing need and despite the various people brought in to feed the needs of the plantations, there seemed to be never enough labour.

Colonization was a global movement and the colonizers had access to resources to feed their needs Enter the Chinese – as early as **1853** and **1870 14,000 Chinese** were brought in as contract labourers of that number 2000 odd were female and between 1880 and 1915 an additional 1,845 men and women came to the colony having paid their own passage there and once there, they very quickly established “laundry facilities” & Cook shops – everybody needed

clean clothes and later on they too became shop keepers.

There was even a small number of Germans and Irish who were allowed to work as overseers.

By the year 1891 the total population was 278,328 and of those the Amerindians numbered approximately 7,463.

In the End

In the end the three different settlers who colonized **Guiana** – transformed most of the costal land into sugar, rice and cotton plantations – all had to fight for their existence – **Kykeoveral** the first Dutch settlement was captured by the British and retaken by the Dutch – What we now know as Berbice was captured from the Dutch by the French –

Then there was the Berbice slave rebellion **1763** led by CUFFY which ended with the execution of 32 slaves. In 1781 the three colonies known as Berbice, Demerary and Essequibo were captured by the British a year later they were captured by the French and then back to the Dutch in 1784 and named the Capital Stabroek – meanwhile – in another part of the Americas the British and the Dutch were still at it and finally the Dutch ceded the colonies back to the British in exchange for what is now New York finally in 1831 the back and forth ended – the three colonies became one under the name British Guiana and by an act of Abolition in 1833 Slavery was abolished.

The abolition of slavery marked the beginning of the period of **Indentureship**, private enterprise and the village Movement among the freed slaves – the first purchase of a village by Africans was in **1839 Victoria Village** – formerly **Plantation Northbrook**.