

The land of many waters, the land of many people

Guyana is located on the north side of South America, but its soul has always been looking inward and outward. We are a Caribbean-rhythm-thinking Amazon nation whose name comes from an Indigenous term, meaning “land of many waters”. But, wait one week in Georgetown or New Amsterdam or any village along the Essequibo, and you will soon discover that the waters are not the only ones that flow in many directions here. We are a plural people, and our heritage has been designed to be plural, with the threads of six peoples, who came with different paths and somehow knitted themselves into one.

Six People, One Nation.

Guyana's national motto, ‘One People, One Nation, One Destiny’, is no slogan for tourism brochures. It's a day-to-day discussion. This land was originally owned and cared for by the indigenous people, including the Lokono, Kalina, Patamona, Wapishana and Macushi, and their knowledge of the rainforest, rivers and seasons continue to influence the understanding of the environment in rural Guyana. Those who were brought to work the sugar plantations of the coastland endured unimaginable hardship and suffering, and continue to live in our music, our spirituality and our celebrations of Emancipation Day each August first. When the British abolished slavery, indentured servants from India were imported, along with Hindu and Muslim customs, farming techniques and a cuisine that is the hallmark of Guyanese cooking. Portuguese, Chinese and a smaller European population rounded out the demographic mosaic, bringing in their own trading networks, festivals and family names which are now Guyanese.

The fact that this plurality exists is not of interest, but the fact that it has formed a "culture" instead of six separate cultures, living side by side. On a Sunday a Hindu family may offer up a curry and cook up rice. A Christian household may still take some time to hold their head in their hands during Phagwah as a gesture of respect. This process, known as “creolization,” is a continuous, unpublicized endeavour of Guyanese identity.

A Calendar of Celebration and joy.

To learn about a people study their celebration. Guyana has a very abundant festival calendar and each one is a reflection of the national experience. Celebrated every February, this Mashramani inspired by the Caribbean carnival tradition, but with a distinctly Guyanese patriotic touch, is a riot of costume, soca and steel pan in the streets of the city, commemorating the anniversary of the republic. The Hindu festival of colours, Phagwah, doesn't discriminate against people, and is not a ritual, it is an open invitation to spill coloured powder and abir over entire neighbourhoods. It makes the coastland a string of lights with clay diy's lit on porches from Georgetown to Berbice during Diwali. Eid al-Fitr is the festival that is celebrated after the fasting of Ramadan and a time when the people gather for prayer and joy. This celebration of Emancipation Day with African attire, drumming, and contemplation celebrates the ancestors who suffered the Middle Passage and plantation life. Christmas in Guyana has its own accent as well, as the black cake is rum-soaked for months prior to the holiday, and the aroma of pepperpot is sure to permeate in the kitchen. All these festivals don't stay limited to the people who started them. Guyanese from all walks of life turn up for Phagwah, participate in Diwali motorcades and dance at Mashramani. The festivals serve somewhat like portal events, rather than demarcating boundaries, they are open doors.

The Taste of Heritage

Guyanese food could be the best example of the blending of our histories. Pepperpot was

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prepared with cassareep, a dark, smoky extract made from cassava, and its history is rooted in Indigenous cuisine, and is the highlight of Christmas morning all over the country. Cook up rice is a one-pot dish of rice, peas, coconut milk, and the memory of Africa is in the comfort and method of cooking. Curry and roti are of the indentureship era, localised to the point where Guyanese roti, dhalpuri or paratha, has its own identity from its South Asian origins. Portuguese influence can be seen in garlic pork and the omnipresent Chinese restaurant on most of China's commercial streets, while Chinese influence is evident in chow mein, and in the Christmas-time association of the dish with pepperpot. There is a history lesson in every bite you take in Guyana!

A paper on language, music, and the Guyanese voice. Paper on Language, Music and Guyanese Voice.

The English-based creole language of the whole country is perhaps our most unique cultural imprint Creolese. It is packed with African syntax, Indian words and Indigenous place names, as well as the colonial residues of the Dutch and English languages, depending on the tone. The visitor will often mistake it for broken English, but it is a fully developed language, with its own grammar and rhythm, known to Guyanese as such.

Musically, Guyana is influenced by chutney, soca, reggae, dancehall and Afrobeats and other traditional sounds such as queh queh, an African-inspired pre-wedding dance and song, are being recorded and reintroduced by a group of cultural researchers not about to let them die. Local artists, ranging from the world-famous E.R. Burrowes to the artists of the present day who are exhibiting at Castellani House, continue to use this hybrid identity for their own creative work, engaging directly with the issues of plurality, land and belonging.

Heritage as a Living Practice

The term Guyanese heritage is easy to use as a noun, a thing that stands in a fixed position in time and space and can be looked at and researched. Heritage is more a verb than a noun, however, here. It is used whenever the grandmother teaches the granddaughter how to wrap a roti, and every time a queh queh group of friends get together before a wedding ceremony, and every time a Hindu, Christian, Muslim family sits at the same table at a national holiday. Indeed, as we enter a new era defined by oil wealth, accelerated growth, and a surge of migration in and out of this nation, it is not the issue of whether our heritage will live on, but how we choose to pass it on. For me, in the world of media and communication, that responsibility is even more palpable; what stories we tell, and how we tell them, will impact the next generation's perception of what it is to be Guyanese.