GUYANA- THE LAND OF MANY WATERS AND FISH

BY DMITRI ALLICOCK – for GUYANESE ONLINE

A WAI-WAI SHOOTING FISH IN UPPER DEMERARA CIRCA EARLY 1900s {Photo from British Empire Wimberley -Guiana exhibition 1924}

GUIANA is the Amerindian word for the Country between the two rivers Orinoco and Amazon and derived from the root word” Winna” meaning “water or watery country” and to all Guyanese it known as “the land of many waters”.

Approximately 90% of Guyana’s population, affected by history, still lives along the coastal plains. An exceptionally large portion of this sparsely populated vast country’s interior is uninhabited or lightly populated. It boasts four mountain ranges including Mount Roraima 9,304 feet, over 270 Waterfalls, 18 lakes and dense equatorial and largely virgin tropical rainforest covering over 80% of this country. The area sustains over 1000 tree species, 1,200 mammals, birds and 1800 species of fish.
Guyana has an elaborate system of rivers and creeks. Most of these rivers have their sources in the great mountain ranges of the south and west, and flow northerly and easterly, reaching the Atlantic Ocean after meandering through pristine forest. These life giving natural highways have been providing valuable fresh water, food and protein since the first native inhabitants set foot into Guyana over 11,000 years ago. The color of the water is dependant of the species of trees growing at its source. Clear water creeks are determined by the population of Greenheart trees present. However, most of Guyana’s waterways are stained by tannins of the vegetation to a rich brown hue.

**HUT ON THE ESSEQUIBO**

Fish is still the cheapest form of protein available in Guyana and for those who live in the interior; it is literally free, except for having to catch it. Sport Fishing is a new area of tourism attraction in Guyana with many unchartered river terrains virgin to man.

Guyana has two very productive fresh water fishing seasons. Mid February to late April and late August to late November are very good time of the year to go up river. During this time, the rains would have stopped and the water receded from the savannas and forest floors. By the middle of the dry season, the rivers usually become narrow as the water recedes. This makes fishing more exciting as less water means less space per fish and more competition to feed and to survive predators of the river.

Guyana’s prime sporting fishing locations are up the Essequibo River and along its tributaries below river rapids and waterfalls such as Rockstone and the Gluck Island, the New River Area, Kurupukari River and the Rupununi Burro - Burro River. Fishing is however done throughout all the waterways of Guyana with catch dependant on location.

Many of the ingenious techniques and systems of catching fish used by the Amerindians have survived and still used today by interior dwellers. The simple method of line and hook is augmented with a number of very interesting ways which not only peaks curiosity but has attracted attention for centuries.

The most interesting contribution by the indigenous people of Guyana is the various ethobotanical uses of various plants and roots in securing fish. Though fish poisoning is technically illegal, it was and is still practiced. The famous Haiari {Hiarri} fish poison has been researched and has been found to possessed enormous pharmacological applications.
Haiari belongs to the family of the Fabaceae and species of the Lanchocarpus plant. It comes in at least four different forms, black, white, the fine kind and red haiari.

**BLACK HAIARI**, sometimes called Tiger Tail, is considered the strongest of the stem of the large canopy liana {bush rope} or woody climber has darker twigs and leaves with fine golden hair. Both stem and leaves are used.

**WHITE HAIARI** or Sandmora has glabrous, lighter colored twigs and leaves- only its roots contains the poisonous substance

**FINE KIND HAIARI** is less known and comes from a shrubbery plant.

**THE RED HAIARI** is also quite rare and not used often.

The roots stem or leaves of the Haiari are pounded with a wooden club at water’s edge, preferable at the head of a forest creek or a more stationary and better controlled body of water. After a while a white milky juice is released from the roots. The shredded fibers are then soaked in the water and the creek bottom is stirred with the feet in order to mix the mud with the poison. The Haiari is numbing to the tongue or lips when juices are inadvertently splashed as the material is crushed. It feels close to having a dose of Novocaine at the Dentist. The stupefied fish floats to the surface where they can easily be collected by hands or shot by bow and arrow.

Local fishermen advised washing the fish well and carefully removing the gill because that is what sucks up the poison. Poisoning implies the killing of many small fishes but was often seen as an emergency method to relieve hunger. Poisoning is considered to be productive and more effective than hooks or other fish traps. The fish is safe to eat but is not recommended to mother’s breastfeeding a less than 9 day old baby. The feared illness called *Surima occurs* with both mother and baby if haiari tainted fish is eaten.

Haiari pharmacological uses ranges from open cuts and lesions to treatment of Aids and Cancer. Its active component of Rotenone is also added the extract of bitter cassava juice which contains hydrogen cyanide called prussic acid, a deadly poison, and used in the manufacture of the paralytic **Curare** {Ourari}. Curare is applied to the tip of darts or arrows and is a major method of hunting large game. Curare causes immediate skeletal muscle paralysis and kills by actual suffocation instead of poisoning. Curare comes from the word ourare or woorari and is only hazardous in the bloodstream directly. There are other fish poisons used by the native people of Guyana.

The popular **KUNAMI** belongs to the family of Asteraceae plant is another effective method of catching fish. The leaf of the plant is crushed and mixed with flour into many small balls. These balls are thrown into preferable slow moving waterways. It is advised that at least two or more light moving crafts like the corial or canoe be in position and ready for immediate recovery of assorted intoxicated fishes. The fish, surface after eating the Kunami and convulsed, some may jump right into your boat as they are scooped up with a net or wicker basket.

**THE WOOD CHIP OF THE MORA** tree thrown in the water, apparently turn it pitch black and is toxic to fish. This method is rarely used due to its inherent danger. The guts, scales and skin of the fish must be removed as quickly as possible and the flesh thoroughly cleaned with lime to avoid poisoning of the consumer.
In Gold Mining areas where land dredges and hydraulic pumps have disrupted the riverbeds and increased water turbidity and pollution. Fish in large rivers have become scarce and people are forced to revert to poisoning of forest creeks. The historical disaster of 1995 occurred with the massive spill of cyanide into Guyana's main river, the Essequibo, by the Canadian mining consortium Omai Gold Mines. Over a million cubic metres of highly poisonous residues poured through breaches in the mine's waste pond killing off the river and posing serious health risks to the communities downstream. The remarkable ability of nature and the river to correct itself is seen as better news is coming out of the area today.

The caustic spillage into the Demerara River from the Alumina Plant in Upper Demerara, killed many fishes at various times. Many bauxite ships washed oil and tar into the river, affecting the river and the lives of the people. The river is recovering since the major decline of bauxite in Guyana and the closure of the Alumina Plant. Crocodiles are making a comeback in the Demerara River and more fish has returned to the area.

Other popular methods of trapping fish by the wicker crafted Massawa and Paree {Pawee}. THE MASSAWA is a simple conical trap made with access only to get in. The Massawa is about 6 to 9 feet long and tapered to almost a point. It is baited and placed at a location believed to be suitable for fishing. Common bait use is the Crabwood seed or other wild fruits of the forest. Cataback loves the Crabwood seed and is targeted. The bait is taken by the fish and the entry doorway is triggered and closed. The Massawa is a simple, environmentally a safe trap and is used regularly.

I was intrigued by the PAREE TRAP. This is a wicker weaved gate of the Mokru {Ischnosiphon} which is used in blocking creeks. A creek is selected base on the tide system. A creek which empties completely with low tide is chosen. The creek is feed for months with an assorted amount of bush seeds, fruits and termite nest. Trees that are dropping fruits directly into the creek like the Malacka, Hattie or Kaitree are added bonus. This well made gate is carefully woven using the Mokru and latched closely together. When completed this Mokru gate now called Paree gate is installed in high tide at the mouth of the creek. Prior preparation is done in low tide with the construction of the framework that will hold the gate. One special day or night the gate is closed and the wait for the tide to change begins. When most of the water drains from the creek, the recovery begins. The larger fishes that could not escape the gate are now picked up by spearing. It is with great excitement that this is done. Balancing on muddy dead logs, the search for the fish begins. Residual water mixed with dead vegetation, adds to the anxiety, as the ugly Waridero scaly eel like fish is mistaken for the feared reptiles whose presence is part of the natural reflex.

The tell tale signs of the natural world read like a book and is used by expert fishermen. The Houha fungus located on the rocky foreshores tells the weather. The subtle changes in its growth pattern may tell the tale of rain ahead. The Humming Bird or Bimetti builds their nest at water’s edge. Their nest hangs from the foliage over the water and will always be built to accommodate high tide. The humming bird nest is used by fishermen to understand the water level and tide in setting traps.
THE SPRING ROD is another trap use for larger fish. The Haimara is targeted by this device. A bayou or inlet is chosen and this large hook and line trap is baited at water’s edge and set in high tide. An actual rod may be planted or opportune foliage alongside the water way used. Many Spring Rod type traps are set at a time. The trap should be checked early and with the tide change. The ravenous Perai is always ready and willing to eat your catch. The jumping fish alert this large version of the Piranha who will only leave the fish head of your catch as his calling card.

THE SEINE is a very effective manner of fishing. Corkwood from the water’s edge is fashioned as small floats that hold the seine in place. The eye of the seine will determine the size of the fish caught. The Seine is set in high tide at a creek’s mouth or inlet. Several of these net traps care placed at one time with the hope of a successful harvest in mind. The Seine must be searched with the change of the tide. The Seine is slowly and carefully hauled into the boat as the movement of the tell tale corkwood float promise something. The Perai once again is looked for and carefully extracted. His razor saw tooth would take fingers off in one chomp. The Perai is quickly separated and dispatched with a sharp cutlass behind his head and placed separately in the boat. A half dead Perai is just as dangerous.

The Seine methods have been expanded and used to drag the entire width of the river. With one boat on each side, the seine is slowly dragged with the tide. A fast boat of canoe is used to frequently check the catch. This method is credited with severely reducing the fish population and is generally used by new residents of the interior.

THE CAST NET is very common and used throughout Guyana. The Fisherman expertly cast this net is a wide arch over the unsuspecting shallow fish. He slowly pulled in this net, removing his catch and ready to cast again.

SPEARING OF FISH is another intense and exciting manner of fishing. Fish generally retired after dark and are found snoozing at the shallow water’s edge. Dressed in suitable attire to avoid mosquito bite, the fisherman and another, leaves in pitch darkness armed with flash lights, spears and other supplies. He quietly drifts with the tide near the shore, illuminating his prey. The spear is expertly used since only one chance is allowed. An expert fisherman may use his spear in the same spot repeatedly without disturbing the nearby fish which he also seeks.

THE TRADITIONAL FISHING ROD AND HOOK AND LINE is still the most popular. It is probably the most personally gratifying way to catch a fish. The weight of a 30 pond Leukanani on a line will give any man or woman a life lasting thrill and most definitely a taste of Guyana to remember.

Among some of the fish on the menu are the Haimara, Leukanani, Arowana, Payara, Hyera, Mullet, Cat fish, Gilbaker, Tiger fish, Lau-lau, Pacu, Tibacuri, Darree, Cabedel, Bashaw, Cartabac {Cataback}. They are several Game Fish Species such as the Payara, Arowana, Haimara, and what is considered by professional anglers worldwide as the world’s most popular Fresh Water Game Fish, the Peacock Bass (Leukanani).
Fish, when properly filet, marinated in the juices of lemon, peppers, seasonings and prepared to likeness including smoked, salted, barbequed, fried, pepperpot or curried, makes capital eating.

Taste, belongs to the individual but The Tibacuri, Leukanani and the Cataback ranks high on the list and makes excellent cuisines.

FISH THE PERFECT FOOD

The very popular and tasty LEUKANANI {Cichla Ocellaris} or Bass of Guyana
Sea foods from coastal Guyana have been plentiful in the interior for a number of years due to improve trade and transportation. Some fishing trawlers sell directly to the people at the former steamer stelling at Mackenzie, Upper Demerara. Fish trucks from Georgetown can be heard daily blowing their horn and providing a variety of seafood’s like Red Snapper, Grey Snapper, Butter Fish, Trout, Queriman, Herring, Grouper, Flounder, Mullet, Shrimp, Crab and many others for reasonable prices. Fish is still relatively cheap in comparison to other meats and a lot healthier when baked, broil, steamed or barbequed. Despite the full availability of refrigeration, Smoke Herring, Mackerel or Saltfish is still a very big favorite taste of many Guyanese at home and abroad. I consider Saltfish and Bake a Sunday morning treat.

*There is nothing more exciting than the aroma of Salt fish Choka and Fry Bake to greet you on a special Sunday morning when you “sleep in a little.”*

Fish and sea foods are used extensively in Guyana. Fish patties, which are made from cooked fish, yams, celery and butter, appear on family dinner tables regularly. Salted Whitefish, Trout, Shrimp, Crab and Catfish also feature prominently in the Guyanese cuisine. Fish and seafood are typically lower in saturated fats than red meats; however, many typically fry them in butter or margarine, which are high in saturated fats and not the recommended way.

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