The Berbice River: The River that Bears Witness

by

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“I’ve known rivers:
ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I have known rivers:
ancient dusky rivers
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”

Langston Hughes
(1902-1967)

Introduction

Guyana has 14 major drainage basins and four principal rivers – the Corentyne River bordering Suriname, the Berbice River, the Demerara River, and the Essequibo River. This article on the Berbice River follows those on The Magnificent Essequibo River (2012) and The Wonderful Demerara River (2013) in the Series: FASCINATING RIVERS OF GUYANA.

Geologically, Guyana falls within that part of South America lying between the Atlantic Ocean, the Orinoco and Amazon Rivers, referred to by scientists as the Guiana Shield, a region which is built around a central core of very ancient rocks, the origin of which predates the existence of life on earth.

Hydrologic History

The Berbice River System is the 20th of the thirty largest watersheds in exporting water from the Guiana Shield into the Amazon or the Atlantic Ocean1. Its estimated surface area is 16,600 km² as compared with the Essequibo (3rd) – 157,000 km², and the Demerara River (27th) with a surface area of 8,200 km². The Berbice River rises in the highlands of southern Guyana and its source springs are in the formation east of the Kanukus with altitude approximately 350 m. It flows for 595 km through dense forests and scrub savannahs to the coastal plain and enters the Atlantic Ocean at New Amsterdam. The Berbice river is navigable for approximately 160 km. Its name is that of the Dutch Colony of Berbice, which in 1831

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The Berbice River

became part of British Guiana (now Guyana). The modern Berbice River is a vestige of the Proto-Berbice, one of the largest drainages of the central Guiana Shield that existed 70 million years ago – the age of mammals (Sinha 1968; C. Shaefer; and, do Vale 1997). Evidence of the hydrographic connectivity to the Amazon River system can be found in the fish species and the presence of large concentrations in the upper Berbice River of the Victoria Regia (*Victoria Amazonica*) found by Sir Robert Herman Schomburgk on 1st January, 1837 above Christmas Falls.

Travels in the Berbice River

Navigation is restricted upriver beyond Kwakwani to smaller vessels. Matthew French Young, surveying for diamonds, wrote of his boat journey through Marlissa Falls – a narrow channel between two rocks; the Gate; the Big Itabru Falls; Little Itabru; Umbrella Falls; Savannah Falls; Winters Fall; Long Liquor Rapids; Tramway Rapids; Lindo Rapids; and the Horse-shoe shaped Christmas Falls\(^2\). (see Map below)

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UPPER BERBICE RIVER – FALLS AND RAPIDS

CHRISTMAS FALLS

PHOTOGRAPH OF CHRISTMAS FALLS

(Painting by Schomburgk’s Artist

Edward Goodall - 1844)
**Lokono (Arawak) Settled Occupation and Mound Agriculture**

The Berbice River has been witness to many significant events commencing with the large influx of Lokonos (Arawaks) in the Intermediate savannahs, as evidenced by archaeological work done by University of Florida’s Professor Michael Heckenberger, Guyanese Archaeologist and Artist George Simon, et al. In 1992, the preliminary field investigations of cultural and geological remains uncovered a “vast complex of agricultural mounds in the area” and a large *terra preta* site named Hitia. Initial radiocarbon tests of samples taken from the site, places the construction of the agricultural mounds at approximately 1800 B.P. In 2009, a pilot archaeological study of four occupation sites along the Berbice River was conducted and a testing of ceramic and organic materials from the sites gave a radiocarbon date of ca. 5000 B.P. The agricultural mounds are thought to have been the Lokonos’ adaptation to climate events so they planted above the flood plain on soil enriched by their organic compost and alluvial soil scraped from the river banks and Ité swamps. The volume of food produced was such that the Lokonos carried on a trade with the Island of Margarita (off Venezuela) transporting tons of cassava flour in large canoes from the Berbice River to exchange for dried and salted Morocot and Queriman from the fisheries operations on that island\(^3\).

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\(^3\)Simon, G (2011) The Berbice Archaeology Project, (from Presentation) Walter Roth Museum
Dutch Occupation and Plantation Agriculture (Sugar)

When in 1627, the Netherlands granted a Charter to Abraham van Peere to colonise the Berbice River, a post was established 80 km upriver at Fort Nassau. By 1674, Berbice had 5 sugar plantations. In November 1712, the Berbice River would have experienced the actions of French Privateer Jacques Cassard, who with three large vessels and two smaller ones bombarded Fort Nassau for three days throwing 150 bombs. In 1732, a Charter was given to the Berbice Association which brought in 250 Angolan slaves to increase the slave population to 895. A Lutheran Ministry was established at the Wiruni Creek in 1735.
The Slave Uprising 1763/1764

The revolt of slaves on two plantations in the Canje triggered events which culminated in the Berbice Slave Rebellion of 1763, the seizure, destruction and killing of mostly Private Plantation owners who had a reputation of meting out cruel punishments to their slaves, the siege of Fort Nassau, and eventual abandonment of the Fort by the Governor Wolfert Simon van Hoogenheim and withdrawal to Fort St Andries at the mouth of the Canje River. The mobilization of nearly 2,000 slaves under the leadership of Cuffy ensured control of the upper Berbice River above Plantation Vigilante. Subsequent events involved vanHoogenheim’s return with reinforcements to the Company plantation at Dageraad; an attack by 700 slaves on Dageraad on 7th April, 1763 being repulsed; arrival of further reinforcements in two vessels for Dageraad; and a second attack on 13th May, 1763 by three columns of 600 slaves which was only repulsed after fire from the ships. In November 1763, additional ships with reinforcements left Holland for Berbice arriving on 1st January, 1764. By then, dissension among the leadership of the slave army led to fragmentation, defeat, arrest of 2,600 prisoners, and the trial of 100 of whom 53 were put to death in cruel fashion. The Berbice River would have been stained with the blood of slaves and plantation owners. The Company plantations lost 379 of 1,451 slaves while the Private Planters lost 1,408 of 2,800 slaves. At the end of the slave uprising, the Fort was rebuilt and some plantations re-established.

5 Netscher, P.M., (1888) Berbice, from 1732 to the first occasion of its being taken possession of by the English in 1781.
combination of War among European Nations in 1780, illness among the population in the Berbice River, poor returns from crops because of impoverished soil and costly logistics, prompted a move to establish plantations along the Coast. By 1802, there were reportedly 300 plantations in Berbice. The upper Berbice River became very much the preserve of the Arawaks. The abolition of the Slave Trade in 1802 resulted in a drastic decline in labour.

FORT NASSAU, BERBICE RIVER

Other Economic and Development Activities in the Berbice River

As time passed, the Berbice River would have seen significant shifts from plantation agriculture to subsistence farming, logging and ranching. The Rupununi Development Company organized great cattle drives from Dadanawa in the south Rupununi to Waranama in the Berbice Savannahs where the longhorns were rejuvenated before being shipped by steamer from the Terminal at Takama to Rosignol for movement by rail to Georgetown’s abattoir.

The establishment of the Bauxite Industry by ALCOA/ALCAN and the development of infrastructure at Kwakwani, saw an increase in mining activity for bauxite and inflow of coastlanders through Makenzie (Linden) and Ituni into the upper Berbice River – workers, traders and artisans. The establishment of the Ebini Agriculture (Crops and Livestock) Research Station, the Guyana Defence Force Training School at Takama, the establishment of the Guyana National Service at Kimbia, large scale mechanized agriculture and training of thousands of youths in the 1970s and 1980s, provided the impetus for activities that led to settled communities of Amerindians and descendants of the Dutch Planters, whose names are still evident among families in the middle and upper Berbice River.

6 Kramer, K., (1991) Plantation Development in Berbice from 1753 to 1779: The Shift from the Interior to the Coast
The establishment of the Floating Pontoon Bridge connecting the left and right banks of the Berbice River at the mouth of the river, has been a catalyst for economic development along the Coast. Roads and bridges connecting the upper Berbice River to communities in Regions 6 and 10 will have a transformational impact on livelihoods and development of enterprises based on agriculture, agro-processing, energy services, manufacturing and tourism. The vast amount of research to interpret and document the history, archaeology and anthropology, biodiversity and ecosystems of the Berbice River will provide the current and future generations with lessons learnt and open windows of opportunity.
Conclusion

The Berbice River has been silent witness for over 5,000 years to the activities of exploration, occupation, settlement, exploitation and trade, man’s inhumanity to man, revolution, and economic, social and infra-structural development. As the evidence of climate change points to vulnerability of coastal infrastructure and settlement, the Berbice River and its savannahs, seem destined to play a significant role in ensuring food security for Guyana, import substitution, export-oriented production, through investments in large-scale mechanized agriculture, livestock breeding , and climate-smart small-scale farming, agro-processing, competitiveness in trade, energy services, and sustainable enterprises such as nature, heritage and adventure tourism.

*Rivers are the arteries of the world that keep life flowing.*