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The Challenges of Nation-Building and Nation Branding in Multi-Ethnic Suriname

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ABSTRACT

This analysis of nation-building and nation branding in post-colonial, multi-ethnic Suriname builds on the notion that such policies are promising but also difficult to achieve in culturally divided societies. We zoom in on three episodes of nation-building and nation branding in the country and explain why and in what respects they succeeded or failed. We posit that in Suriname's case, nation-building and nation branding are intertwined, because the latter cannot be seen in isolation from nation-building. In the Conclusion, we discuss the effects of colonial legacies in multi-ethnic societies on nation-building and nation branding.

Introduction

“I am certain that Suriname can be a prominent voice on the world stage for cultural diplomacy. We offer a model for how a healthy diversity can bring about a peaceful and accepting society.”¹ These words by Niermala Badrising, Suriname's permanent representative to the Organization of American States, reflect a well-documented shift from material sources of power to nonmaterial means of influence in world politics. Constructivist approaches of international relations highlight the importance of identities, norms, and various forms of “soft” power. Joseph Nye characterizes soft power as a country's “ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others.”² Obviously, this kind of power is closely related to a country's international reputation. In the case of Suriname, the question is whether the country can indeed be the “prominent voice on the world stage” that Badrising envisions.

Nation branding could serve as an asset to this diplomatic strategy. We understand it here as a means to (re)define the nation and national belonging in order to promote the country to foreign parties. We view nation branding as a “logical extension” of nation-building, which refers to the ways in which national identities are constructed and communicated.³ Whereas nation building primarily refers to a domestic process in which political elites (or state agents) attempt to overcome pre-existing cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or religious divisions in order to forge a national identity, nation branding is chiefly an externally oriented commercial enterprise to “sell” the nation by attracting

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foreign investors or tourists. Yet, especially for small states that lack military capacities, nation branding and the projection of specific national identities abroad can also be a fruitful approach to attain certain foreign policy goals or to gain recognition in international organizations.⁴ Nation branding strategies can, however, also have domestic effects, because they can be employed by governments to enhance pride in the nation and thus promote social cohesion.⁵ Seen from a more negative angle, nation branding can be used by governments to stifle domestic criticism and undermine political opponents.⁶ By explicitly linking government policies to national identities and interests, political adversaries can be brushed aside as outsiders who supposedly do not have the nation's best interest at heart.

Though nation-building and nation branding policies are in principle available to all countries, we assert that the *opportunities* and *potential benefits* of such strategies strongly depend on countries' historical, demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions. For countries with colonial legacies, profoundly heterogeneous societies, and weak economic foundations, nation branding can be promising—and perhaps even necessary—to promote not only the country but also political emancipation and the formation of national identities. On the other hand, precisely under such circumstances, the opportunities for nation-building are likely to be restricted, because there may hardly be any (historical) basis for shared national identities and pride. Moreover, nation branding opportunities are also restricted when a country does not have a special appeal to foreign investors or tourists. As a result, such societies can be regarded as “most likely” to engage in nation-building and nation branding but may be “least likely” to successfully implement such policies. The upshot could be that efforts at nation branding may fail to materialize in the face of persistently unfavorable circumstances.

To examine how these challenges and opportunities play out in practice, we zoom in on nation-building and nation-branding policies in a case with unfavorable circumstances: Suriname. In this South American republic with a population of 590,000, various initiatives relating to nation-building and nation branding have been launched in recent decades, but time and again these have been undermined by the country's adversarial economic, social, and political conditions. As a former Dutch plantation colony that achieved independence only in 1975, Suriname's population consists of several sizeable ethnic and cultural groups that at different points in time were brought into the country by Dutch colonizers to work on the plantations. The largest population groups in contemporary Suriname are Afro-Surinamese, (British) Indians or Hindostani, and Javanese.

Following a divide-and-rule strategy, the Dutch stimulated the formation of separate cultural and political associations for each ethnic or cultural group in the colony, thus undermining the building of a unified nation. In the early stages of the Afro-Surinamese urban nationalist movement, some groups retained stronger orientations toward their countries of origin than to Suriname. Moreover, many of these groups in fact favored a continued semi-colonial relationship in order to complete their economic-political and sociocultural emancipation processes. The contested independence in 1975, when a quarter of the population left for The Netherlands and the complicated relationship with The Netherlands—where approximately 350,000 people of Surinamese descent live—as well as frequent economic boom-bust cycles further encumbered attempts at fomenting national Surinamese identities. Our analysis thus highlights the tensions between nation-building

and later nation-branding narratives of successive administrations and Suriname's everyday political and social reality.

To present our arguments, we begin with an overview of the relevant literature on nation-building and nation branding, highlighting the merits and disadvantages of such strategies as well as the conditions under which these initiatives are likely to succeed or fail. Next, we introduce the case of Suriname and motivate our analytical approach and use of source material. Through a chronologically structured analysis, we highlight three episodes in Suriname's history during which nation-building and nation-branding initiatives were launched. We first discuss two critical episodes during which Suriname experimented with nation-building—the late 1950s and the early 1980s—followed by an examination of nation-branding policies in the 21st century. We explore the context and content of these initiatives and explain why and in what respects they succeeded or failed. In the Conclusion, we underscore the relevance of our findings for the broader literature on nation-building and nation branding, emphasizing the broader effects of colonial legacies in multi-ethnic societies on nation-building and nation-branding strategies and the connection between nation-building and nation branding.

Nation-building and nation branding

The process of nation-building refers to the creation of a nation, or a socially constructed or “imagined community,”⁷ that seeks to be politically sovereign. Whereas the population of some states (such as China, Germany) already had strong national identities before the attainment of modern statehood, in others (including France and Italy) the emergence of a centralized state preceded the existence of the nation, compelling political elites to develop nation-building strategies. Seeking to foment national identities, nation-building aims to diminish or eradicate pre-existing ethnic, linguistic, or religious identities that are seen as contradictory to the national identity.⁸ Nation-building can take many forms, including education policies or major infrastructure development to trigger economic growth and political stability. In his seminal work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson underlined the role of print media in creating communities and building nations through spreading images. Thus, not only nationalist sentiments but also growing networks of communication created the nation. The development of visual means of communication, including film and television and the introduction of Internet and social media, such as Facebook, has further expanded the role of media in nation-building and nation branding, as we also will show below.⁹ Here we refer to nation-building as a deliberate state effort to unify the people within a country so that it becomes or remains politically viable and stable over the long term.¹⁰

In their pursuit of nation-building, political elites can explore a variety of strategies. Obvious short-term (and often rather superficial) tactics could be the creation of national flags, anthems, holidays, or sports teams. These objects of identification can certainly strengthen feelings of national identity and unity but are by themselves meaningless if they are devoid of any underlying sense of shared nationhood. If nation-building is, however, regarded as a more long-term and challenging endeavor, a more imposing and structural strategy is needed. Nation-building policies of that kind commonly focus on education as the key mechanism, to make sure that a new generation

speaks the same language, has a similar conception of the national history, and has a shared reverence for national heroes and cultural icons. Though such policies may not have any tangible effects in the short run, the historical experience of countries like France demonstrates that their long-term effects should not be underestimated. Here the political elite largely succeeded in their push to transform ethnically, linguistically, and religiously divided populations into a more or less unified nation.

Nation-building clearly is a more daunting challenge in post-colonial states, especially in territories that were primarily used by the colonial power to extract resources or obtain other economic benefits. In Caribbean colonies, where European colonizers virtually exterminated the indigenous inhabitants and most of the later population consisted of enslaved Africans, the (near) absence of an original population with strong cultural traditions complicated any foundation for the development of national identities. Furthermore, some Caribbean countries, including Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname, contained a profoundly multicultural and multi-ethnic population due to a sequence of (forced) migration movements from different regions of the world. As in many multi-ethnic societies in Africa and Asia, colonial rulers here often stimulated animosity and rivalry between different groups through divide-and-rule policies. As a consequence of their extractive colonial heritage, lack of a substantial indigenous population, and multi-ethnic and culturally heterogeneous populations, these Caribbean countries are probably among the weakest candidates for successful nation-building policies. As the most ethnically heterogeneous state in the Caribbean, Suriname arguably faced the most formidable challenge in this regard. The question of how to reconcile an inclusive Surinamese identity with exclusive ethnic identities has dominated Suriname's nation-building efforts. As will be shown below, the effort to create one identity turned out to be caustic. The alternative is to embrace and even celebrate diversity.¹¹

In contrast to long-existing studies of nation-building, the extant scholarly literature on nation branding is fairly new and varies significantly because of the different approaches to the topic. Nadia Kaneva divided these publications into roughly three categories: technical-economic, political, and cultural.¹² Simon Anholt may be the most well-known author in the first category. He emphasizes the economic and competitive aspects of nation branding. From a political perspective, branding is a promotional tool, especially for small, peripheral nations such as Suriname, to boost their international position, particularly in the field of economics and finance.¹³ Publications using the cultural approach critically assess nation branding's implications for socioeconomic power relations, national identities, and ideas about nationhood.¹⁴

We view nation branding through the lens of all three categories as a "set of discourses and practices located at the intersection of the economy, culture, and politics."¹⁵ As stated above, nations have long expressed themselves through symbols such as flags or anthems, but the use of commercial branding techniques to reach international audiences is a rather new, global phenomenon. According to Sue Curry Jansen, nation branding transforms civic space into a commercial space.¹⁶ The state hires branding experts to advise on how to create and sell an attractive and recognizable image abroad but also at home. In their marketing campaigns, political elites use extant images, products, places, and sometimes internationally famous individuals to sell their

product (country). Thus, governmental and nongovernmental actors work together to (re)shape the image of the country; to (re)charge the economy by promoting tourism, international investments, and trade; and also to establish or enhance the country's profile in international organizations.¹⁷

Equally important, branding is also a tool to mobilize self-respect and national pride in the nation; it thus has a clear domestic component as well.¹⁸ This is where nation branding links up with—or can be seen as an extension of—nation-building, because in both strategies emotions and symbolism are essential parts of the package. In other words, nation branding is not only about marketing but is also an asset used in the political-ideological mission to build a nation. In nation branding such sentiments are, however, tied to commercial interests.

As mentioned earlier, in terms of domestic politics, nation-building and nation-branding strategies can also be employed to silence opponents or quell resistance to the political regime. It is not a coincidence that many post-colonial states had dominant party systems headed by charismatic independence leaders in the immediate post-independence period, whose rule tended to become increasingly authoritarian, and corrupt, as their terms in office became longer. Though these leaders to varying extents succeeded in creating a sense of shared nationhood among their populations, a heavy price was often paid in terms of democratic pluralism. As is the case with nation-building, the line between nation branding and propaganda is very thin as well. For this reason, nation branding can be directed at external audiences for primarily economic purposes but might also be projected domestically in order to shore up support for the ruling elite.

The case of Suriname

As the discussion above reveals, though the global literature on nationalism and nation building is vast, so far these are not prominent issues in publications on Suriname. On the one hand, this reflects a scholarly trend in which small countries tend to be excluded from comparative research.¹⁹ On the other hand, it may also be explained by the country's complex past. Suriname is a colonial creation, built under European hegemony by enslaved Africans and Asian indentured laborers and their descendants. Capitalist exploitation of plantations and natural resources and (forced) labor migration determined the colonial hierarchy and consequently the development of ethnic relations. History plays an important socioeconomic and political role, as described by Bridget Brereton when analyzing the process of creating a “universal” narrative in multi-ethnic Trinidad and Tobago: the past is “a key arena for contestation” in a dynamic and complex society.²⁰ In both Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname, rootedness, economic contributions, past experiences of exclusion and other grievances and traumas, as well as loyalty are arguments to support claims on the nation by different groups.

The Dutch ruled Suriname from the mid-17th century, yet the white population of the colony was mixed, including Germans, Swiss, French, and Scots. The original Amerindian inhabitants nowadays count for approximately 4% of the population.²¹ As in other Caribbean territories, the main labor force consisted of enslaved Africans before the abolition of slavery in 1863. At present, the Afro-Surinamese population can be subdivided into a Creole segment (16%) and a fast-growing Maroon segment (22%).

Maroons are Afro-Surinamese who escaped from slavery and formed autonomous settlements in the interior. There are six different Maroon populations, of which the Saamaka and Ndyuka (or Okanisi) are the largest. After the abolition of slavery, more than 30,000 indentured laborers from British India arrived, and this “Hindustani” group (including Hindus and Muslims) now comprises 27% of the population. At the dawn of the 20th century, a slightly smaller group of indentured laborers arrived from the Dutch East Indies (contemporary Indonesia). At present, the Javanese constitute close to 14% of the population. A third, much smaller, group of indentureds were of Chinese descent. Finally, more recent immigration movements have resulted in smaller Haitian, Brazilian, and (new) Chinese segments, and the group who self-identify as “mixed” was 13% in the 2012 census.²²

As this overview reveals, Suriname always had a diverse population. Yet until World War II, the non-white population of Suriname had very limited political rights, because the country was governed by Dutch officials and a small white or light-colored elite. This changed in the decades between World War II and independence in 1975, which was a time of economic growth and increasing political and cultural awareness.²³ As in most post-colonial societies, the Surinamese state preceded the nation. In the case of Suriname, independence mainly was a constitutional break with the past, because there existed no official conception of how the new republic was to proceed as a nation. In fact, large segments of the Surinamese population opposed independence, and in his dissertation with the English subtitle “Nation Building as a Challenge,” Edwin Marshall concluded that the nationalists had been naïve: “They also had the simple belief that nation building was an autonomous process that would develop itself after independence.”²⁴ But past and later experiences indicate that this was a complex challenge.

We argue that Suriname slowly but surely has adopted an “accommodationalist” approach to nation-building: differences are respected and even authorized by the state as it permits schools, places of worship, sociocultural associations, and holidays of the various ethnic groups on an equal footing. As a result, nation-building in Suriname has not been accompanied by any attempts to weaken cultural and ethnic identities but, in fact, the relatively harmonious relations between different Surinamese groups have served as a source of national pride. Surinamese proudly point to the adjacent synagogue and mosque in central Paramaribo, which is an emblematic symbol of accommodative inter-confessional attitudes. Though Surinamese rulers have therefore certainly allowed different population segments to retain their cultural traditions and autonomy, in return they expect and even demand loyalty to the state, its institutions, and the general law.²⁵

Following this description of the contours of the Surinamese case, in the next sections we explore the nation-building and -branding policies that have been enacted. To develop our arguments, we zoom in on three critical episodes in modern Surinamese history. Whereas the discussion of the 1950s and 1970s–80s will center on nation-building strategies, the discussion of the 21st century will foreground nation branding policies instead.

The 1950s: Nation-building in the context of emancipation

In many African, Asian, and Caribbean colonies, in anticipation of decolonization and the attainment of statehood, independence movements in the 1940s and 1950s transformed into

dominant political parties that claimed to represent the entire population in its struggle against an illegitimate colonial power.²⁶ These parties therefore practically embodied the national interest and had active nation-building strategies, often to the detriment of a vigorous political opposition. The Indian National Congress in India, the Tanganyika African National Union in Tanzania, and the Convention's People's Party in Ghana are just a few examples of such parties, which were all spearheaded by charismatic leaders (Jawaharlal Nehru, Julius Nyerere, and Kwame Nkrumah, respectively) who embodied the struggle for national emancipation. Though perhaps not ideal from a democratic perspective, the absence of a powerful opposition in these countries clearly enabled political parties and their leaders to formulate and implement effective nation-building policies.

Such dynamics could not be witnessed in Suriname. The first movement for autonomy originated in World War II when the urban, light-skinned, educated Creole elite advocated self-governance, not independence, for the colony. This was achieved in 1954, when Suriname obtained the status of an autonomous country in the Kingdom of The Netherlands. Earlier the introduction of universal suffrage in 1948 prompted the organization of the first political parties. Virtually all of the parties (in the 1949 elections, 13 parties and eight individual candidates contested 21 parliamentary seats) represented and catered to specific cultural, religious, and ethnic groups.²⁷ In terms of nation-building, this entailed that no party was able to legitimately present itself as the advocate of the national Surinamese identity or interest, hampering attempts at nation-building. As its name indicates, the only party claiming to represent the national interest was the National Party of Suriname (NPS),²⁸ but in practice it primarily represented the urban Creole elite, which regarded itself as the protagonist of the national struggle for autonomy and (cultural) decolonization.²⁹ Though independence movements that transformed into political parties in most other Caribbean colonies were able to govern alone for a protracted period of time in both the pre-independence and immediate post-independence eras, in Suriname the absence of a national independence party precluded this. Instead, political parties representing different ethnic groups had to cooperate in coalition governments, much along the lines of Arend Lijphart's consociational model.³⁰ From the early 1950s until the late 1960s, the Creole NPS, by that time advocating the emancipation of the dark-skinned Creole working class, the Hindustani VHP,³¹ and the Javanese KTPI³² formed such governments. "Fraternization politics" (*verbroederingspolitiek*) made the focus of political leaders on politically emancipating their own group, ensuring access to state resources, as a result of which Suriname managed to avoid open hostility or violence between ethnic groups.

We have argued elsewhere that this "fraternization" could only take place in economically prosperous times when jobs and resources could be divided between the different partners.³³ In fact, different ethnic groups and their leaders remained suspicious of each other, and both Creole and Hindostani leaders used the fear of political domination of the other group to mobilize their own voters. This practice, known as *apanjaht* politics, or "the practice of voting for your own race, your own kind,"³⁴ effectively cemented ethnic politics in a process known as "ethnic outbidding."³⁵

Fraternization politics was clearly linked to the political emancipation of the urban dark-skinned Creole, Hindostani, and Javanese masses. Another development has been less noted: the almost paradoxical link between fraternization and nationalism. Early nationalism

in Suriname was mainly cultural, but in the early 1960s political nationalism became more prominent. Peter Meel analyzes how the Emanuels administration (1958–61) used fraternization to actively pursue decolonization by stimulating a harmonious development of Suriname and its inhabitants.³⁶ To support this aspiration, a flag, a national anthem, and a national coat of arms were introduced in 1959. These symbols of harmony, unity, and solidarity were seen as a way to overcome ethnic division and competition.

The other, related goal of the Emanuels administration was to change the constitutional ties with The Netherlands in order to gain more freedom to intensify international trade and to pursue a more independent foreign policy but not constitutional independence. When the 1961 conference to revise the constitutional relationship within the Kingdom of The Netherlands failed, it gave the cultural–nationalist movement a new, political boost. Yet this movement did not have a multi-ethnic stamp but rather a Creole stamp. Until that time the largely urban Creole movement had focused on a re-evaluation of Afro-Surinamese culture and a rejection of Dutch linguistic domination and Christian values. In this cultural renaissance, the emancipation of Sranan Tongo, the country's lingua franca, was of utmost importance. Cultural emancipation was seen as a first step toward political emancipation. The Emanuels government supported this aspiration and, for example, included a stanza in Sranan Tongo, written by the well-known poet Trefossa in the national anthem.³⁷ It thus supported cultural nationalism and at the same time weakened its commitment to overcoming ethnic difference.

The failure of the 1961 negotiations jolted the nationalists into politics: the cultural movement morphed into a political party, with the telling name the Party of the Nationalist Republic.³⁸ The new party did not attract a large following. According to Meel: “The mass nationalism the PNR [Party of the Nationalist Republic] favoured remained limited to an elite nationalism.”³⁹ Thus, Creole nationalism did not have a universal appeal and instead led to counterreactions of intensified ethnic consciousness within other ethnic groups that were alarmed by nationalism and nationalist ideas and their possible outcome: independence.⁴⁰

Consequently, Afro-Surinamese nationalism led to rising animosity between ethnic groups, as Hindostani and Javanese suspected the Creole nationalist ambitions and Creole elites feared to lose their prominent position in society to the increasingly assertive and growing Hindostani middle class.⁴¹ Not surprising, independence became a focal point of these antagonisms, and in the late 1960s fraternization policy and the grand coalitions gave way to an Afro-Surinamese-dominated government headed by NPS leader Henck Arron.⁴² Much to the dismay of Hindostani and Javanese voters and politicians, this government paved the way for independence, alienating large segments of the population in the process. In turn, the politicization and polarization of the independence question effectively barred the Arron administration of any opportunities at nation-building. In conclusion, though nationalism and nation-building strategies certainly could be detected in 1950s Suriname, the fact that these were so closely tied to one ethnic group meant that they actually had an adverse effect.

The 1970s and 1980s: From independence to a military regime

As in other Caribbean or African and Pacific small states, Suriname's independence was not the result of a mass independence movement that had wide popular support but

was in fact also strongly driven by the former metropole, The Netherlands, which wanted to cast off its last colonial possessions.⁴³ As in Malta, Seychelles, and most Anglophone Caribbean islands, the question of political independence strongly divided the Surinamese population: many preferred to retain constitutional ties with The Netherlands. In contrast to homogenous small states, however, in Suriname the issue was politicized along ethnic lines, and independence was broadly regarded as a Creole project. Independence was approved only by the smallest parliamentary majority in 1974, and in the period 1970–80, 120,000 Surinamese emigrated to The Netherlands, with a high of almost 40,000 emigrants in 1975 alone, signaling a lack of confidence in an independent Suriname. Losing approximately one quarter of its population, this mass migration movement sapped the newly independent country of much of its human capital. Furthermore, to this day the presence of a sizable diaspora in The Netherlands complicates the nation-building process in Suriname, leading to recurrent questions about belonging, loyalty, and the foundations of Surinamese identity.⁴⁴

Nation-building had not been a major consideration of politicians in Suriname or The Netherlands. As Jan Pronk, one of the main Dutch architects of the decolonization project, admitted 20 years after the fact: nation-building had been neglected to the detriment of Suriname's development.⁴⁵ Perhaps not surprising given the country's history of nationalism, the main efforts at nation-building came from artists.⁴⁶ Probably the most quoted Surinamese poem is *Wan Bon* (One Tree) by Dobru (Robin Raveles): "One tree / So many leaves / One tree [...] One Suriname / So many hair types / So many skin colors / So many tongues / One people."⁴⁷ Another iconic example of cultural nation-building is the 1976 movie *Wan Pipel* (One People) by Pim de la Parra. It tells the story of the Afro-Surinamese Roy who lives in The Netherlands but returns to his homeland to say farewell to his dying mother. Here he falls in love with Rubia, a Hindostani woman, and decides not to return to The Netherlands because he feels a need to discover Suriname.⁴⁸ *Wan Pipel* is the first movie made in the Republic of Suriname and each year on the eve of independence it is shown on Surinamese television.

Instead of nation-building, economic development was the main priority of the Arron administration. Yet economic stagnation, perceived political incompetence, mounting ethnic tensions, and widespread corruption eroded the legitimacy of the democratically elected Arron government. When 16 noncommissioned officers committed a coup d'état in 1980, this was seen as a positive development by many Surinamese people and, incidentally, some politicians in The Netherlands.⁴⁹ They hoped that the military could put an end to the ineffective and corrupt coalition governments. Importantly, the military vowed to bring an end to the "old politics" based on ethnicity, instead signaling its intention to defend the national interests of Suriname and to represent all Surinamese of different ethnic backgrounds. The military allowed the use of Sranan Tongo in parliament for the first time, and as state secretary of culture, the nationalist poet Dobru of *Wan Bon* became one of the defenders of the military regime and its attempts at "Surinamization." Independence Square in Paramaribo featured Cuban-style picture boards showing the heroic history of the Surinamese people in its struggle for freedom. Ironically, this type of propaganda made nation-building and Surinamization after the fall of the military regime a radioactive issue for many years to come. The regime was associated with human rights violations, extensive corruption

and drug trafficking, and economic collapse, resulting in widespread poverty and food shortages. The great majority of the population equated nationalism with this unpopular regime that brought the country to the brink of collapse.⁵⁰ With the return of democracy and the old ethnic parties, in 1987, Dutch—considered to be ethnically neutral—was reaffirmed as Suriname's official language. Sranan Tongo continued to be viewed as principally part of Afro-Surinamese culture.⁵¹

On the international stage, coup leader Desiré Delano (Desi) Bouterse proclaimed his intention to decrease Suriname's dependence on The Netherlands, seeking instead to forge new political alliances in the region and beyond, including Cuba, Libya, and Ghana.⁵² The domestic and international reputation of Bouterse's regime was, however, shattered by the so-called December Murders of 1982, when 15 prominent opponents of the regime were tortured and executed. In response, and under pressure from the Surinamese diaspora, The Netherlands and its Western allies severed ties with the Surinamese government, and the country obtained the status of an international pariah.⁵³ The regime's image was further tarnished when Bouterse and some of his family members were associated with narcotics trafficking with Colombian drug cartels, eventually leading to Bouterse's conviction in absentia to a 15-year prison sentence for cocaine smuggling by a Dutch court. As a result, Suriname's international image reached a nadir, obstructing any attempts at branding or selling the nation abroad.

In terms of nation-building, Bouterse's vow to end ethnic divisions in Suriname was further crushed by the eruption of the so-called Interior War (*Binnenlandse oorlog*), a conflict between the Surinamese military and Maroon insurgency groups, who rallied behind Ronnie Brunswijk's Jungle Commando.⁵⁴ The conflict centered on control over the resources and cocaine trafficking networks in the vast Surinamese interior. Various war crimes were committed by both sides, including the killing of 39 innocent Maroon civilians in the village of Moiwana by the military in 1986. Though Maroons had hitherto not played a significant role in Surinamese politics, the Interior War and the socio-economic, cultural, and physical dislocations caused by the fighting activated this group's political awareness and emancipation, effectively intensifying the political fragmentation and further undermining national unity.

Though nation-building was thus an explicit aim of the military regime, the increasingly negative perceptions of the regime contaminated Surinamese nationalism. The combination of external pressure, enduring economic stagnation, and civil war forced Bouterse to embark on a path toward political liberalization in the late 1980s. Free and fair elections were held in 1987, resulting in a landslide victory for the old ethnic parties (NPS, VHP, and KTPI) united in the Front for Democracy and Development. Subsequent years were characterized by power struggles between the democratically elected government and the military, but the end of the Interior War and a second electoral victory of the Front coalition in 1991 solidified Suriname's democratization process. Relations with The Netherlands were restored and the economy improved, meaning that since the late 1990s opportunities for nation-building and nation branding were decidedly better.

The 21st century: Nation-building and nation branding

In 2013 banners and giant posters congratulated the population of Suriname on the anniversaries of 140 years of Hindostani immigration, 150 years of the abolition of

slavery, and 160 years of Chinese immigration. The heading of the banner read, “As nation ... forward together / However we came together here.” This corresponds to the third line of the national anthem. Two years later, during the 40th anniversary of independence, banners signed by “His Excellency President Desire Delano Bouterse” urging “unity and harmony” bedecked government buildings (Paramaribo 2013, 2015).

Thus, Desi Bouterse returned to the national stage after his disastrous military intervention. He actually never faded from prominence: with the re-democratization of the country he founded the so-called pan-ethnic National Democratic Party.⁵⁵ After a hesitant start, the NDP became a political force to be reckoned with and actually gained the presidency in the person of Jules Wijdenbosch.⁵⁶ In the 21st century the NDP increasingly presents itself as the people’s party, attracting many young voters who have no memories of the events in the 1980s. Bouterse now moved front stage and was elected president in 2010 and again in 2015.⁵⁷

In shows for foreign visitors or at international festivals, the state also prefers to present itself as a diverse but harmonious nation. In the words of theater maker Sharda Ganga: “The central element is the display of our wealth of ethnicities; each ethnic group is depicted separately through a parade of traditional costumes, song and dance—each group gets a chance to demonstrate their culture separate from the rest; in the end there is a coming together in a climax of all ethnic groups—a spectacle of unity.”⁵⁸ In short, these examples show that the state has now embraced Suriname’s diversity and made this a cornerstone of the national identity.

Interestingly, politically this is translated into more general acceptance of the Hindostani VHP’s originally anti-Creole nationalism slogan “unity in diversity.” The Afro-Surinamese NPS also has “adopted cultural pluralism as the sole attainable strategy, balancing the ideal of acculturation with the actuality of ethnocentrism.”⁵⁹ The themes of diversity and harmony also have become important in nation-branding efforts to attract foreign tourists and investors to Suriname. The most visible output is by the Suriname Tourism Foundation, a government–private partnership founded in 1996 by the Ministry of Transport, Communication, and Tourism and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It is in charge of tourism promotion and development by creating “an attractive image” and by “branding Suriname as a tourist destination.”⁶⁰ Given the country’s traditional reliance on natural resource exploitation, tourism is frequently mentioned as an opportunity to diversify Suriname’s economic base.⁶¹ The Foundation’s goal is to make Suriname a global brand to attract tourists from all over the world instead of only visitors “from the diaspora,” who now constitute the majority of tourists. Because they often reside with family, they are not the most commercially attractive group to the local economy.

In recent years, the Tourism Foundation has issued a number of guides with different themes. The 2012 *Official Tourist Destination Guide* was entitled “Green Caribbean.” Despite its title it lauded Suriname’s multiculturalism: “Suriname is also called a large melting pot of different cultures where the roots from their own soil are mixed with those from far away, which have merged to become the harmonious people of Suriname. Indigenous, African, Indian, Chinese, Indonesian and European descendants all live together in peaceful harmony.”⁶²

A later, undated guide, “Suriname, A Colorful Experience ... Exotic beyond Words” promised that a vacation in Suriname would be “an inimitable medley of authenticity,

nature, culture, heritage, and events.” Now the focus was on the natural beauty and authentic traditions of the country: “In Suriname you encounter jungle that has not previously been entered, Amerindian and Maroon populations that have retained their centuries-old traditions.”⁶³ Nature again features prominently in the *Official Tourist Destination Guide* from 2017, titled “Suriname: Earth’s Greenest Treasure.” Even though the “unique people from different origins” are mentioned, the focus is on the “pristine” rainforest and the “magical panorama of the jungle.” The Maroon and Indigenous populations are again exoticized as “tribes with well-kept ancient traditions and habits.”⁶⁴ Such presentations of the authentic “Other” are problematic in terms of nation-building because they tend to keep these groups in their exotic box and thus exclude them from the general population/nation. The Foundation’s website “Discover Suriname” features a sleek, short video “Suriname: A Colorful Experience” promoting highlights in the rainforest and the capital accompanied by an international sound.⁶⁵ Despite the fact that the Tourism Foundation seems to have no consistent message yet, it is obvious that in recent years concepts such as “authentic” and “unspoiled” and its implication of no mass tourism have become more important than unity and diversity.⁶⁶

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided a different message in 2015, an election year, when it proudly presented a new branding campaign, We Are Suriname (or #WEARESURINAME), interestingly without consulting or informing the Tourism Foundation. Foreign Minister Winston Lackin underlined the importance of nation branding: “We want to show the world who we are, why we are as we are, where we want to go, and why we want to do so.” The focus was on New York, as the center of the world, messaging that Suriname’s real asset was “its harmonious and peaceful society” (thus echoing the words of Ambassador Badrising at the beginning of this article) and that during the 40 years of independence “divisions have been transformed into positive energy ... we have to invest in our best resource: the Suriname people.”⁶⁷ Suriname’s embassies around the world were to be pivotal in spreading this message. The campaign was part of the calendar of events celebrating Suriname’s 40th anniversary of independence, because it was supposed to climax on independence day.

The campaign’s main feature was a video featuring Surinamese artists Lakeli, Benaja, and Enver with the song “We Are One” while showing cliché images of the rainforest and the rivers, downtown Paramaribo, flora and fauna, and people in ethnic costumes.⁶⁸ The first part of the song (in English, R&B) mainly celebrates the country’s natural beauty and assets. This is followed by a rap full of optimism regarding the future. The third part, in Dutch, again praises Suriname’s natural qualities and also the different cultures living in peace. The last sentence is inclusive: “My Suriname, your Suriname, our Suriname makes that we are Suriname.” The second rap is in Dutch, English, and Sranan Tongo. Suriname is the best country in the world and the singer is proud to be born and raised there and will never leave. The finale calls for Suriname to be unified as one nation, to build for the future, and it invites others to come and meet.

A few things stand out when watching this video full of emotions. First, the lyrics are universal. Replace “Suriname” and the text could be used by almost any post-colonial country. Second, the use of three languages is puzzling: why the use of Dutch and Sranan Tongo when the video is aimed at an international audience? This leads to a related, final observation: the song seems directed at Surinamese people in Suriname rather than

outsiders, as evidenced by lyrics like “Born and raised / Tied to where I am” and “our” Suriname. “We are One” suggests that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was acting more like a Ministry of Home Affairs or of Culture and Education by engaging in nation-building rather than nation branding. The campaign ultimately did not catch on because of organizational problems. The websites of Surinamese embassies in major countries such as the United States, India, or Indonesia did not mention the campaign, nor did they show a link to the video. Nor did the campaign get the expected (international) media attention. The major problem seems to have been the mixed messages directed at different audiences.⁶⁹

Conclusions

In this article, we have analyzed the trajectory of nation-building and nation branding in Suriname. We underline that in both processes, the political-ideological mission to construct a nation is paramount. As mentioned in our introduction, Suriname can be regarded as both a “most likely” as well as a “least likely” candidate for nation-building policies: most likely because the multi-ethnic population seems to require a clear strategy to legitimize the state and to integrate the various population segments and create some sense of shared nationhood and allegiance but least likely because the combination of a traumatic colonial history, a multi-ethnic population, and economic or political instability encumbers the implementation of successful nation-building policies. Reflecting on this contradiction, we find that Surinamese governments have at different times attempted to engage in nation-building but that the results were mixed at best. In the 1950s, nationalism and nation-building were regarded as an exclusively Creole project and therefore had an adverse effect. In broadly similar fashion, the nation-building strategies of the military regime failed because its advocates came to be seen not as builders but as destroyers, thereby tarnishing Surinamese nationalism for decades to follow.

Our analysis of Suriname therefore confirms that nation-building is more challenging in post-colonial, multi-ethnic societies. In these countries, divide-and-rule policies devised by the colonial power are likely to have created a tense and antagonistic climate between different cultural, ethnic, or religious groups, meaning that shared foundations of nationhood are likely to be absent. If, under such circumstances, one ethnic group—in this case the urban Creoles—expresses a need for nation-building, this is almost automatically regarded with suspicion by other groups and is therefore likely to have the opposite effect by invoking counterreactions. And if concepts like the nation, national identity, or the attainment of independence become politicized along cultural or ethnic lines, the social cohesion and sense of unity among the population will only further erode. As a result, nation-building focusing on a single national identity in multi-ethnic postcolonial societies seems virtually impossible.

On a more societal and cultural level, however, nation-building strategies in Suriname have been more successful. Cultural expressions such as *Wan Bon* and *Wan Pipel* have transformed the ethnic diversity of Suriname into a source of national pride, meaning that the very absence of a dominant nation paradoxically became a key source of the national identity. In this sense, Suriname emulates the example of larger multi-ethnic countries like Brazil or South Africa, where Desmond Tutu’s notion of the “rainbow nation” also takes diversity as a key element of the national identity. As we

have discussed, initial and current attempts at nation branding also highlight Suriname's ethnic and cultural diversity as an asset that can be "sold" to an outside audience. Though nation-building and nation branding are more difficult to materialize in multi-ethnic, post-colonial societies, our article therefore also points to a possible solution of this dilemma. If an accommodationalist approach to nation-building is taken, cultural diversity itself could become the source of national identity and pride.

Yet some questions can be posed about the veracity and legitimacy of such strategies. In the first place, though Suriname's external nation-branding strategies tend to celebrate the country's diversity and present its society as a happy mix of different but seemingly equal cultures, domestically there is still a clearly discernible ethnic hierarchy in which some groups occupy a much more marginal position than others. The Maroons and Amerindians in the interior, for example, tend to be viewed as separate peoples that are not fully included in the nation. Though nature is also part of contemporary nation-branding initiatives, this is also connected to ethnic pluralism: the lush and "unspoiled" Suriname interior is exoticized as the homeland of "unique pre-modern tribes" that have to a certain extent remained "untouched" by Western civilization. Within Suriname, such "pre-modern" groups clearly assume an inferior position vis-à-vis the urbanized Creole, Hindostani, and Javanese groups who live in Paramaribo or the coastal areas or when these underprivileged groups move to the capital they are often ranked as less "civilized." Also excluded from the picture are more recent immigrants from countries such as Haiti, Brazil, and China.

In the second place, as happened in South Africa, the notion of "unity in diversity" can also be criticized for sugar-coating persistent problems like corruption, crime, economic stagnation, or hostile relations between groups.⁷⁰ A similar tendency can be detected in Suriname: though relations between ethnic groups are arguably quite harmonious, this cannot disguise persistent problems regarding economic development, crime, or corruption. Obviously, such problems can be observed in virtually all countries in the Global South, regardless of their levels of cultural and ethnic fragmentation.⁷¹ In addition to ethnic and cultural differences, an ever increasing income inequality—often the result of high levels of un- and underemployment (especially among youth)—undermine solidarity and loyalty, also within ethnic groups, thus even further complicating prospects of nation-building and nation branding.⁷² In the end, therefore, nation-branding strategies that emphasize "unity in diversity" ring hollow or might even sound quite cynical when underlying disparities between and within groups are not adequately addressed.

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