The challenges of nation branding in Suriname, a multi-ethnic, post-colonial country

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Academic perspective

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Have you ever heard of Suriname and can you locate it on a globe? Maybe not, as Suriname is fairly unknown, except in the former colonizer the Netherlands. Since 2000 this small country north of Brazil has made attempts to change this by trying to put itself on the map as a dynamic, multi-ethnic country welcoming trade, foreign investment, and tourists, while mitigating its complex, heterogeneous socio-cultural and political identity. It is our contention that these commercial attempts at nation branding are intertwined with nation building, that is the way in which national identity and belonging are traditionally constructed and communicated (see also Hoefte and Veenendaal, 2019).

Domestically, governments can employ branding as a nation building strategy to stimulate the formation of a nationally shared identity, enhance pride in the nation, and thus promote social cohesion. At the same time, they can use nation branding to suppress domestic criticism and inequalities and undermine political opponents by equating government policies to national identities and commercial interests (Aronczyk, 2007, 2013; Jansen, 2012).

Suriname was built under European domination by enslaved Africans and Asian indentured labourers and their descendants. Exploitation of plantations and natural resources and (forced)

labour migration determined the colonial hierarchy and consequently the development of ethnic and class relations. Rootedness, economic contributions, (past) experiences of oppression and neglect, as well as loyalty are arguments to support claims on the nation by different groups. As in many post-colonial societies, nation building in multi-ethnic Suriname is a complex and ongoing process. Yet, when Suriname became independent in 1975, nation building was not high on the political agenda, as it was considered an 'automatic' outcome of independence (Marshall, 2003, p. 267). Various rather short-lived government attempts at nation building produced mixed results at best.

Suriname slowly but surely has adopted an 'accommodationalist' approach to nation building. In return for loyalty to the republic and the law, the state authorizes schools, places of worship, socio-cultural associations, and holidays of the various ethnic groups. As a result, cultural diversity and harmony have become the main source of national identity and pride.

It is this element that features prominently in Suriname's nation branding strategies. With the slogan 'unity in diversity' Suriname presents itself as a harmonious mix of different but seemingly equal cultures. The most visible output is by the Suriname Tourism Foundation, a government-private partnership founded in 1996. It is in charge of tourism promotion and development by creating 'an attractive image' and by 'branding Suriname as a tourist destination' (Suriname, 'A colorful experience', n.d.). It lauds Suriname as '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' (Suriname, 'The Green Caribbean', 2012).

However, these commercial messages shroud a clearly discernible ethnic hierarchy in which some groups occupy a more marginal position than others. The Maroons and Native inhabitants in the interior, for example, tend to be viewed as separate peoples that are not fully part of the nation. They are exoticized as 'unique pre-modern tribes' living in the 'unspoiled' Suriname jungle. Within Suriname, such 'pre-modern' groups are classified below the urbanized population groups or when these underprivileged groups move to the capital of Paramaribo they are often ranked as less 'civilized.' Also excluded are recent immigrants from countries such as Haiti, Brazil, and China.

Moreover, the notion of 'unity in diversity' cloaks persistent problems regarding economic development, crime, corruption, or nepotism and clientelism. An ever increasing income inequality also undermines solidarity and loyalty, including within ethnic groups, thus complicating prospects of nation building and branding even further.[1] Summing up, civic and commercial processes—building and branding—cannot be separated when discussing the case of Suriname. The optimistic spirit of the branding campaigns presents a picture that many Surinamese will only partially recognize. In the ongoing and complex discussion of who belongs to the nation, commercial elements have now been added to the mix. In the attempts to attract foreign interest, harmony has become the key word.

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[1] In the UNDP development index Suriname is ranked 100th out of 187 countries with a Gini coefficient of 52.9 http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/income-gini-coefficient (accessed 4 March 2019).

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