HEBI SANI: MENTAL WELL BEING AMONG THE WORKING CLASS AFRO-SURINAMESE IN PARAMARIBO, SURINAME

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Aminata Cairo

The Graduate School
University of Kentucky
2007
HEBI SANI:  
MENTAL WELL BEING AMONG THE WORKING CLASS AFRO-SURINAMESE  
IN PARAMARIBO, SURINAME

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Aminata Cairo

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Deborah L. Crooks, Professor of Anthropology

Lexington, Kentucky

2007

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This dissertation describes the results of a two year anthropological investigation into the concept of mental well being among the working class Afro-Surinamese population in Paramaribo, Suriname. More specifically, the research investigated how working class Afro-Surinamese in Paramaribo, Suriname define and maintain their sense of mental well-being, given their unique ethnic identity within a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, and given that their environment is heavily compromised by negative globalizing forces.

Over the course of two years a total of 62 people contributed information through group and individual interviews, which was supplemented by information obtained through participant observation. Findings show a highly complex system of mental well being that consists of a number of interlocking and interdependent factors, which, when kept in a harmonious relationship with each other, are presumed to bring mental well being. There are unique Afro-Surinamese measures available for strengthening mental well being based in rich and historical cultural traditions that are currently under-utilized, but have the potential to be revived and introduced for the benefit of people’s mental well being.

Suriname was selected as a Caribbean country that struggles in a marginalized political and economic position in regards to the rest of the Caribbean, and in relation to the world powers. Suriname is also a Dutch Caribbean country about which little academic information has been published. This research aimed to bring forth a story of a globally marginalized people, and particularly of a population of African descent. It aimed to bring attention to the concept of mental well being among African Diaspora people, and to use the story of a small population as a starting point to connect with and look at other populations, Diaspora based or otherwise.

Theoretical viewpoints of African Diaspora, Globalization, and a combination of Black Feminist/Third World Feminist/Caribbean Feminist theories were used to guide and shape this research. Lastly, an attempt was made to introduce the concept of Spirituality as a new and complementary aspect of ethnographic methodology.
KEYWORDS: Mental Well Being, Afro-Surinamese, Globalization, African Diaspora, Marginalization

Aminata Cairo

May 23, 2007
HEBI SANI:
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IN PARAMARIBO, SURINAME

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2007

Copyright © Aminata Cairo 2007
This work is dedicated to Sanaa, Nasim, Essien, and Samir; the next generation.
May they stand proud in their heritage.
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I first and foremost give thanks to the Creator and my ancestors for guiding me to this place and time. I next would like to honor the Afro-Surinamese people both in Suriname and the Netherlands, who graciously gave of their time to make this work a reality. This work is about you and for you: May we continue to speak for ourselves.

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Chapter 1.

Fosi Sabi: Intro

Map 1.1 Suriname

Suriname 2005. 163820 square kilometers (63,251 square miles) of some of the most fertile soil in the Southern hemisphere, covered for up to 92% with forest. Small and South-American, yet Caribbean, on the coast of South America. Dutch anomaly in this southern hemisphere near the equator. British speaking Guyana to the left, French speaking French Guyana to the right, Portuguese from the Brazilians in the back, and in the front the Atlantic Ocean, the water that connects and divides Suriname from the rest of the world.

It is across these waters that my mother traveled on a ship almost 50 years ago, setting out for a new life in the mother country. With only a fourth grade education she
managed to get enrolled in a nursing education program in the Hague, the Netherlands. Many more would make such journeys over the years, upwards of one third of the population, including other relatives and the man who would become my father.

At first they traveled by boat, later by plane, all looking for better lives in the motherland of opportunities. I remember the first time we went to Suriname as a family in 1970, my brother, my parents and myself. At ages four and two, dressed in new, homemade matching outfits, my brother and I clutched our mother at the Zanderij airport and screamed our heads off, not wanting to set foot on Surinamese soil that appeared to be covered in giant roaches.

A small part of that airport still exists, but most of it has been renovated or is being transformed into a 21st Century, state of the art, international airport, with complementary inspection checks, random searches, interrogations, and x-ray scanning by friendly yet heavily armed agents. The Netherlands, no longer merely the motherland of opportunity, now also serves as a prime destination for drug trafficking from Columbia. So much has changed.

Bathing in the copper-cola colored Marowijne river at the northern Surinamese town of Albina provides a picturesque view of French Guyana across the way, the shortest direct connection to European territory. Strong currents cause alternating flows of cold and warm water, making bathing an exhilarating delight. If you look down the river to the far left, you see the dark water crowned on each side with the most luscious variety of greenery. And you know that all the way at the end, where the river bends around the corner, the Atlantic Ocean begins. You have to use your imagination to envision what that looks like, but you just know that it must be an awesome sight.
But even here there is more than meets the eye. Thousands of Maroons from Suriname now live across the way in French Guyana pushed out by the destruction and violence from the civil war that made it into her territories in the 1980s. Remnant signs along the road to Albina, remind travelers that there are still unrecovered landmines in the area.

For those who did stay “on the Surinamese side”, many still travel regularly to “the French Side” to hustle up a few Euros, which translate into a better income than Surinamese dollars in an inflation stricken and economically ravaged Suriname.

This same road, which holds so many potholes turning an 87 mile (140 km) distance into a journey of at least 3.5 hours, has become a place where multiple forces collide. The potholes and landmines are no longer the only dangers encountered here. Criminal gangs assault and rob unsuspected travelers along this road on a regular basis. As the country’s economic stability has fallen since the 1980s, so has the number of violent crimes risen.

The Marowijne river itself is also no stranger to violence and violation. Idyllic and beautiful it appears, yet upstream, mercury is being dumped illegally by mostly Brazilian gold diggers, and potential robberies of retrieved gold make parts of the interior less safe than any wild animal could. Suriname 2005.

Dutch anomaly and barely known around the world, yet Suriname’s landscape is dotted by events that could easily compete with any major international city or region around the world, quite a feat for a population of less than half a million people. Immigration, illegal industries, drug trafficking, high crime, political corruption,
international playing grounds, economic struggles and a population that lives in harmony, yet is divided by class, gender, and ethnicity.

From Portuguese conquistadors through English and Dutch planters, through imported laborers - stolen and contracted, through colonial and post-colonial European regimes, through political war fields, Suriname has arrived in the 21st Century. Life is interesting, complicated and hard. Globalizing forces shape everyday life in Suriname. Being plugged into the global arena has brought prosperity for some, but their numbers are few in comparison to the masses who struggle daily as a result of globalization.

But as hard as life may be, the people who live here love Suriname. *Mi Switi Sranan*, translated into “My lovely Suriname”, is an expression that is commonly heard across ages, classes and ethnicities. Just about everyone has a relative in the Netherlands. If given the option, many would leave to join their relatives; many already have. Yet there are a great many who would rather live here than anywhere else in the world. And there are many Surinamese ex-patriots in the Netherlands, who if given the means would return in a heartbeat. There are those for whom leaving is not even an issue, and making ends meet on a daily basis is. Suriname means a lot of things to a lot of different people. Suriname means a lot to me.

Both my parents are from Suriname. Most importantly, my grandmother from whose womb I stem, was born, raised, and buried there. As my family has reminded me, “You might have been born in the Netherlands, and live in the United States, but your roots are here.” And with this declaration I am immediately placed within the special realms of native anthropology, “halfie”, crossing the border between ‘I and them’, feminist ethnography, self-reflective voice, black feminist anthropology, and so on. Even
though all of this might be true, my purpose in this writing is not to produce a profoundly self-reflective autobiographic feminist ethnography.

Rather, my main goal in doing this work is to present a story about Suriname, a story written by somebody of Surinamese descent. I want to do so because I think it is important that we tell our own stories. “We” does not just refer to the working-class Afro-Surinamese, although this is an important “we” in this endeavor. On a broader level, “we” refers to the common subjects of anthropology; those in the margins, third world people, people of color, disempowered people, silenced people.

I am one of “those” people, whether I am inside the Academy or out. As such, my story is part of this story, and from time to time, my voice is heard alongside those of the Afro-Surinamese people. As such, I have made a concerted effort to use the “Master’s tools” to create a new space; a space where words are not just spoken about “those” people, but a space of empowerment where “those” people’s voices and experiences are heard, respected, honored, and hopefully eventually included as valid.

From the Academy’s point of view, I never stopped being one of “those” people. Time and time again, the Academy has reminded me that my way of thinking, speaking, writing, feeling, and doing, never quite fit the academic norm. From my own point of view, I have never forgotten that I am one of “those” people either. While abiding by and conforming to Academic standards, I have desperately fought to maintain my identity and sanity, which were always on the verge of being sacrificed. The process of going through my graduate education as reflected in the cumulative work of this dissertation is a testament of a very personal journey. The way this work has been acquired and is
presented in the subsequent chapters is very different from the standard dissertation; and it is a reflection of my own anomalous status within the Academy.

This story then will read as a journey, a journey of learning, growth, and discovery. As with any journey, the projected endpoint differed from the eventual endpoint. Unexpected lessons and people have come across this journey’s path, giving it direction, flavor, and depth, far beyond anything I could have planned for. Furthermore, as I witnessed how working class Afro-Surinamese negotiate the complexities of their lives, so was I forced to negotiate my own life and the lives of my children. The simple insider-outsider dichotomy reserved for native anthropologists, does not begin to delineate the multi-layered complexity of my own identity and relationships with people within this work.

At times judged and kept at arm’s length by my informants because of my accent, educational status, hair style, and or national background, I could just as easily be welcomed with open arms because of my skin color, African dress, or family name. Similarly, my public status as a dancer and scholar in cultural arts in Paramaribo evoked respect in some and suspicion in others. My relationships were further influenced by my roles as a mother, teacher, public speaker, niece, cousin, family semi-elder member, and so on.

I did not only negotiate these roles; the relationships I developed because of these roles strongly shaped my experience in the field. It was my close relationship with a young woman named Florence as a sister, friend, and employer that helped me see that some of the most intriguing and lesson-bearing stories are often right in front of us. By allowing me to use her story to highlight the experiences of the participants in this
research, she made a significant contribution to the creation of this new space of empowerment. Additionally, friends, family members, acquaintances and strangers all shared valuable information with me, which became part of this story. However, the biggest challenge I faced in my research encounters was by far with the elders in my family. Used to approaching them as a niece, I had to overcome my anxiety and engage them on a more egalitarian level. I would like to believe that in my work with my family members, as well as with other informants with whom I had a close connection, like Florence, my anthropological training sufficed me. I feel I was able to remove myself emotionally enough from my informants, to focus on the information they had to offer.

The story you are about to read then follows the course of a journey. This journey set out to investigate mental well being, or what it means to feel good about who one is as a working-class Afro-Surinamese person living in Paramaribo, Suriname under globalizing circumstances that shape and affect one’s life. The concept of “feeling good about oneself” was addressed over the course of two years of research with the help of the questions:

1. What constitutes mental well being?
2. What challenges mental well being?; and
3. How is mental well being maintained?

The journey is approached from a particular viewpoint and is situated within certain bodies of literature. Chapter two, entitled Buku Sabi nanga Denki Fasi, highlights the literature and theoretical viewpoints. First, this study is situated within the body of
literature on mental well being. Afro-Surinamese mental well being is compared and contrasted with (Sub-Saharan West) African, African American, and Caribbean mental well being, and then is approached from its relationship with globalization. The African Diaspora provides a second viewpoint that recognizes the Afro-Surinamese population as a population of African descent, which provides room for contrast and comparison with other African Diaspora populations. It also encourages one to view this particular work as a possible window to understand and connect with other diasporas.

The third theoretical viewpoint of Black Feminist Theory, pays particular attention to the role of a black woman in relation to research participants and in relationship to representation in the Academy. This viewpoint is expanded through concepts from both Third World and Caribbean Feminist Theory, which call for the inclusion of and consideration for nationality, inter-ethnic relations, and the lived experience. Lastly, this chapter calls for attention to the yet underdeveloped concept of Spirituality as a significant theoretical viewpoint and methodology.

Chapter three, entitled *Wrokoape*, highlights the field site. In this chapter Suriname’s social, political, and economic history is laid out. This history explains the Afro-Surinamese’ particular sense of identity within a multi-ethnic society. This chapter also provides information about the state of mental health and mental health care in Paramaribo. In Chapter four, entitled *Wroko Fasi*, I present the research methods used, via a step by step account of the procedures as they unfolded. I also explain personal difficulties encountered during this research and how I dealt with them.

Chapters five through nine are the data chapters. Each data chapter is preceded by a vignette, a short story about Florence that highlights the subsequent aspect of mental
well being as a lived experience. Chapter five, entitled *Yeye Sani*, lays out the basic model of mental well being as I discovered it. In this model, the self stands in relationship with numerous forces. Maintaining balance and harmony with these forces ensures mental well being for the self.

Chapter six, entitled *Fa a go a go*, explores external challenges that destabilize the mental well being model. *Fa a go a go* refers to a lackadaisical attitude that people adopt to cope with these forces. Chapter seven entitled *Mek’ muiti* illustrates some of the extreme decisions people make to improve their lives, in spite of the fact that these actions negatively impact mental well being. In contrast to the *Fa a go a go* attitude, *Mek’ muiti* are conscious decisions, in which people are aware of the high risks involved.

Chapter eight, entitled *Tak’ taki*, explores cultural traditions – some going as far back as pre-slavery – that exist and can benefit mental well being. These traditions are all some form of expression of the Word, meaning a connection to language and energy. Unfortunately, many of these traditions have not and are not systematically being passed on. Chapter nine, entitled *Hebi Sani*, as the last data chapter, explores internal challenges, in particular psychological and spiritual challenges, that affect mental well being.

Chapter ten, entitled *A Kaba*, lastly, brings the journey full circle as it tries to draw out the lessons learned from this journey and magnifies them through the lenses of Globalization, African Diaspora and enhanced Black Feminist Theory. The journey started out by looking at the mental well being experience of Afro-Surinamese people in Paramaribo, Suriname. The lessons learned however covered a far larger territory.
Through the story of the working class Afro-Surinamese people, lessons about being well in the world made themselves known.

Chapter ten closes with a reflection on the experience of Spirituality, with the expectation of it ultimately being translated into a specific methodology.

From the international political arena to the academic world, Suriname is barely a bleep on the radar screen. This journey has taught me that big lessons can be learned, even from small places. I believe this small, Caribbean/South-American country provides insight into living and being in a globalized world. It provides insight into our connection between our mental well being and our humanity. How we live with each other on this planet, or fail to live with each other is reflected in our mental well being.

Furthermore, the official systems that are in place to address mental well being have often been accused of being ineffective in assisting the populations they are supposed to serve. It is my hope that the findings presented here will contribute to the development of alternative models to address mental well being.

As a child of the Afro-Surinamese tradition, I believe that the call and execution of this work lay not solely in my own hands, but was and is instead guided by forces seen and unseen. As I am, so are my people, and it is with their blessing and in their honor that this work is presented. Ko w’ go, Let’s begin.
Chapter 2.

Buku Sabi nanga Denki Fasi: Literature Review and Theory

How do I feel good about myself as a human being? What does it take to feel good as a person of African descent in a world that is often hostile toward me, and that often limits my possibilities for progress? How do I affirm and reaffirm my value as a human being, while receiving messages from my environment to the contrary? What do I need to have in place so I can feel good and confident about who I am and my possibilities to be a productive world citizen? These are the questions that lie at the base of this study, and I investigated them while living and working among the working class Afro-Surinamese population in Paramaribo, Suriname. Initially considered to be questions about mental health, I now see them as belonging to the larger concept of mental well-being.

Understanding the Afro-Surinamese population’s lived experience of well-being requires a contextualization of people’s lives within the larger socio-economic – and political forces that guide and affect them (Baer 2002, Singer 1989, 2001, Krieger 1993). The contextual backdrop for this story will be that of globalization. It is the larger forces of international globalization that trickle down through national and local policies and powerfully affect people’s daily lives. People might not recognize these effects as stemming from the global arena, especially when the struggle to maintain a decent livelihood is often pursued in local terms. Nevertheless, globalizing forces and the mental well-being of a population are closely linked.
People’s lives in Paramaribo are complex. To navigate through this complexity, I have chosen a combination of three different perspectives to guide me: Globalization Theory, the African Diaspora, and an enhanced form of Black Feminist Theory.

Globalization theory mandates a specific way of looking at people’s lives in a rapidly changing world. Globalization serves a dual purpose; both as context and as theoretical viewpoint. Globalization acknowledges that lives are shaped and influenced by events and decisions that are made thousands of miles away, and that those living in marginalized areas have very little control over these forces. It further brings to light that large global trends are felt both on the personal and interpersonal levels.

The African Diaspora forces me to pay deference to the fact that this is a story of a population of African descent, which means that because of their specific history, their story might be used for comparative purposes to others of similar histories. At the same time, it provides a space for identifying uniqueness, which in turn might give clues as to why the story plays out the way it does in different locations. As one of my goals is to present a story about Suriname by one of Surinamese descent, the African provides a particular space in the Academy for people of African descent to be heard and acknowledged. The African Diaspora further pays specific attention to populations of African descent as having suffered at the hands of colonial, post-colonial and other marginalizing and oppressive forces. Thus the story of Suriname is a story of the African Diaspora and can only be told within the context of globalization.

Black feminist theory lastly, places me in a tradition of black women within the academy who are acutely aware that because of our status within the academy - and the world at large for that matter - particular sites and participants, and speaking for-and-with
these participants, might carry some type of significance. Black feminist theory provides a specific methodological approach, the strongest aspect of which is a continuous self-awareness of one’s own position in reference to the participants studied. This approach further supports a self-reflective voice and encourages a commitment to create work that can be used for the empowerment of people.

I have enhanced my use of Black Feminist Theory by including elements from Third World Feminist Theory and Caribbean Feminist Theory. Both these viewpoints add a consideration of nationality, inter-ethnic and multi-ethnic dynamics, and a particularity of national history that is missing from Black Feminist Theory. I make a special reference to Caribbean Feminist theory as Caribbean feminists are seeking to develop theory that addresses the specific life conditions in the Caribbean.

Lastly, I discuss the concept of spirituality. Spirituality is repeatedly mentioned as essential to understanding the African Diaspora, and Black Feminist theory, yet remains poorly defined. I will use this research to make a beginning to operationalize spirituality as a method of inquiry.

2.1 Mental well being

It takes a certain kind of mental illness for African Americans to survive in America. You have to have a split personality… You know it’s unhealthy, but you know this is the way you have to do it to survive. (40+ year old man)

I dealt with a social worker in dealing with my daughter going through her troubles and things like that. And it was like coming from a foreign world. What they would do, and how they would handle it, is not necessarily how we would handle situations. And it’s like they want to talk about stuff, maybe imaginary or thought-up ways. You see, I am
talking about concrete ways to deal with the problem that’s going to have a solution. (30+ year old woman)

We sing, we dance, we laugh, we tell stories for our healing. (40 year old woman)

We turned our whole community into a mental health facility. You do not see people in the South End walking around talking to themselves, in the middle of the street, none of that peeing up on a tree, or none of that. So the whole North End where we are,...[pause]... we kinda get used to seeing people, you know deranged and that, and we accommodate that. (40+ year old man)

These were some of the expressions I encountered as I researched the status of mental health in a low income class African American community in Lexington, Kentucky between 1998 and 2000 (Baruti 2001). During that work, it became clear that the definition and treatment of mental health for this African American population did not coincide with that of the biomedical establishment. Instead, things such as community, church, education, and family were important, making mental health a far broader concept than I had been trained to deal with. I additionally found that people’s social and cultural status, and lessons learned from their culture, significantly influenced how mental health was perceived, defined and experienced. People filtered their perception of the world through an “Us vs. Them” lens, which reflected a strong sense of a self-constructed black identity.

I initially started out the Lexington research by investigating the concept of mental health, since my perception had been strongly shaped by my education and training as a clinical psychologist. Through my personal interest in culturally sensitive practices, and my anthropological studies, I had already explored research on alternative models of mental health. Kleinman (1980) is one of the earliest and well-known contributors to the consideration of culture as a significant force in shaping one’s
conception of illness, and he challenged the biomedical model with a need for emic models. My research participants in Lexington convinced me to make a permanent shift away from mental health and to pursue mental well being as a more holistic model.

The Western bio-medical health paradigm is based on the Cartesian split of body and mind (Kendler 2005), which is reflective of a Eurocentric worldview where individuation is highly regarded. For many non-western cultures, this split between body, mind and spirit, however, is non-existent. Ademuwagun et al. (1979) and Ebigbo (1989) highlight how traditional African mental health systems stand in contrast to Western bio-medical ones, presenting the values of integration of self with interpersonal and communal relations over individuality, for instance (Ebigbo 1989).

Creating a model of mental well being to fit my population of interest was a challenge. Looking first at a general model of well being, I found comprehensive measures of physical, mental, and social health in the literature under headings such as alternative medicine, complementary medicine, holistic healing, traditional medicine, or medical pluralism (Beckerleg 1994, Crandon-Malamud 1991, Ademuwagun et al.1979, Ernst 2002, Okpaku 1991, Jingfeng 1987). Several of these (Jingfeng 1987, Ademuwan et al. 1979, Okpaku 1991) tend to be comparative to the Western mental health model, or they critique alternative health models to the extent that they were and are being co-opted by the corporate medical system (Baer 1989, 1995, Singer 1990, Micozzi 2002). Baer (1989), especially emphasizes that marginalization of alternative health care by the dominant Western bio-medical model is a reflection of larger socio- political and economic relations. Presented in comparison to biomedicine, these perspectives fail to bring non-Western health models to the forefront in their own right.

One work that stands out in this genre, is that of Adelson (2000) on Cree Indians in Northern Quebec. Adelson presents well being as a direct alternative to the Western bio-medical model of health. She presents the concept of *miyupimaatisiium* or “Being alive well.” For the Cree, well being is interspersed with political and economic struggles, but especially with the challenge of maintaining identity in an ever encroaching white man’s world. This work clearly establishes the concept of well being as a valid approach to health in itself.

But approaching mental health from a well being perspective is even less common than a well being health perspective. In the literature, mental health remains predominately regarded from the - presence/absence of mental illness - perspective (Desjarlais 1995). Even though large institutions such as the WHO and the NIMH support research into holistic models of mental health, they do not incorporate non-empirically based information (WHO 2000a, Gureje and Alem 2000, Mustafa 1991). For the most part, mental health in non-western cultures remains studied to the extent that it diverges from, or can conform to, western models of mental health (De Jong 1987: 1996, Guarnaccia et. al. 1990).

Dossa’s study (2002, 2004) stands out as an exception in the research of mental well being. Her work on emotional well being with Iranian Muslim women provides a
key model for my own investigation. In collecting narratives of post revolution Iranian women in Canada, Dossa highlights the need for emic models of mental health, the need to contextualize people’s stories within a larger social and political perspective, and the ineffectiveness of biomedical mental health care treatment for this population. Here the participants themselves adopt the concept of Salamat-e Ruh [peace of soul] over the standard concept of depression. In addition, Dossa utilizes symbolism and metaphor (that of the veil) to explore the different levels of oppression that affect Salamat-e Ruh. I connected with the Surinamese metaphor of hebi for my study, which means weight or burden and can be either physical, mental, or spiritual.

Once I explored the literature for mental well being, I then proceeded to look for background information in the literature of Sub-Saharan African\(^1\), African American, Caribbean and Surinamese mental health, respectively.

In exploring the literature on African mental health, I found discussion of prevalence, systems and models, but very little about people’s lived experiences. In comparison to African American and Caribbean mental health data, African mental health provided the strongest evidence for a holistic perspective on mental health. Mental health is experienced within a communal context as opposed to an individualized, Western one (Ebigbo 1989, Patel 1995, Odejide et al. 1989). The African mental health model reflects a predominant cosmology where the individual is interconnected with other people and natural and supernatural forces, in particular ancestors and spirits. In some form this cosmology can be found throughout all of Africa (Odejide et al. 1989).

\(^1\) I looked at literature from sub-Saharan Africa, and not at literature from South Africa. I looked at Sub-Saharan Africa as I wanted to look at black populations and populations who are dealing with the same kinds of issues. South African mental health literature presents different issues, in particular post-apartheid race dynamics, violence, and AIDS. In addition, most of the literature on African mental health, other than South Africa, is representative of the West African region.
In the most traditional and rural setting, mental illness can be seen as an expression of imbalance in the harmonious relationship between all forces involved (natural and supernatural) (Waxler 1977). The presence and severity of stigma might depend on the afflicted’s recovery and the presumed cause of illness, i.e. the violation of a taboo (Talle 1995). In cases of severe stigma, the family as a whole might be stigmatized and/or ostracized (Mustafa 1991).

The urban area experience might be significantly different from the village experience. Although many people in urban areas are still linked to villages of origin and extended families, living in cities, being involved in a more individualized cash economy, and adoption of Western values has resulted in a breakdown of supportive network structures. As a result, we find in urban areas, a development of a homeless population and a dependence on illicit drugs, similar to any industrial nation in the West (Olu Sule 1987, WHO 2000b). In addition, we find new institutional structures catering to mental health that are based on so called “transitional norms”, meaning they take the place in between traditional and Western norms. Some of these include New Style healers, spiritualist churches and treatment villages.

Jahoda (1979) describes New Style healers in Ghana as those who have a kinship connection to training in traditional healing methods. One type of healer rejects the traditional aspects of healing and sets up shop, similar to a medical doctor. They dispense medication made from herbs and may go as far as wearing white coats and using Western diagnostic manuals. They deal with both physical and psycho-social problems, but focus mostly on medication distribution. Another type of healer does not reject the
ideology of traditional healing, but dresses their practice and shrines in a more “modern look” with the goal of attracting contemporary clients (Twumasi 1979).

Treatment villages are successful psychiatric treatment communities that are based on the Aro village experiment in Nigeria by professor Lambo in the 1950s (Binitie 1991). Treatment villages are communities where psychiatric patients are temporarily housed with their families, and where they receive psychiatric care from doctors and nurses. Treatment villages represent a positive syncretism of Western and traditional mental health care.

In African mental health literature, spirituality is identified as a significant aspect of mental health. Witchcraft and spiritual causes are often considered causal factors of mental illness (Hiddema et al. 1984, Patel 1995, Binitie 1991, Waxler 1977). More recent literature, however, brings other accounts into view. Beckerleg (1994) for instance, explains that because of Muslim religious movements and migration, large numbers of people in Kenya no longer ascribe illness as caused by spiritual sources, and that treatment choices often reflect an ideological and political stance. Similarly, choices about care are affected by numerous factors including cost, patrilineal or matrilineal authority, presence or absence of family members, ascribed value of available treatment, and so on (Beckerleg 1994, Crandon-Malamud 1991, Reis 2002, Tsey 1997).

Spiritualist churches “have borrowed freely from the Christian and Islamic religions, but utilize African vehicles of divination, ritual songs and dance and the expulsion of evil spirits (Binitie 1991: 13).” Mullings’ (1984) excellent ethnography explores these churches from a mental health perspective and places them in the context of the political economy. These churches provide a social and networking space away
from home for those trying to improve their socio-economic status. They see their
greatest rise during times of financial crisis and are mostly run by articulate young men
who have some education, but who cannot hold positions of authority in their traditional
communities of origin. Thus, these churches allow people to engage in Western ideology
while not having to give up all their traditional convictions (Jahoda 1979, Odejide et al.
1989).

Despite a tendency toward more holistic mental health models, “The West” is in
general very present in African mental health care literature, especially the “colonial”
West. Several pieces stress models of pre- and post-colonial occupation (Asuni 1991,
Ademuwagon et al. 1979,). Other works emphasize comparison between traditional and
and the United States particularly can be rather negative about traditional African mental
health systems and see little to no value in traditional practices (Twumasi 1980, Ezeilo
1990).

Nevertheless, in Africa traditional mental health care systems remain more
popular than Western systems. This may be partly due to logistics and availability.
Roberts (2001) reports that in 2001 there were 15 psychiatrists for a population of 18
million in Ghana, but about 45,000 traditional healers. Ghana has three psychiatric
hospitals of which two are in the capital Accra, and the third is 90 miles away in Ankaful,
Nigeria’s psychiatric association, which was the largest organization of Sub-Saharan
countries, had a membership with a little over 50 members! But traditional healing also
remains popular because it is in tune with the culture of the people, as well as being
readily available and affordable (Harrison 1979, Edgerton 1979, Odejide et al. 1989). Consultation is stigma free, and people tend to consult with traditional healers in times of health and in times of trouble (Roberts 1991).

In the psychiatrists’ defense, little to no funding has been allocated to mental health care in African countries (WHO 2000a; 2001, Mustafa 1991), even though western mental health care remains the officially sanctioned treatment model for all African governments. Kirmayer and Minas (2000: 444) summarize the situation best when they state:

In many such countries psychiatry has a short history, often revolving around disintegrating mental hospitals (not infrequently built close to prisons) bequeathed by departed colonial powers. Here, the focus is on developing the most basic mental health services as part of the primary health care system. There are usually few psychiatrists, most of whom trained in overseas centers or recently trained at home using imported training methods and materials, and resources of all types are scarce. Although ethnic and cultural pluralism is a common feature of these countries, the most pressing cultural issue is the wholesale importation of forms of psychiatric thinking and practice that may not be appropriate to local circumstances.

Among African, African American and Caribbean mental health literature, African American mental health literature by far holds the largest volume of information. However, there are several similarities with the African mental health literature, especially the issues of inter-personal connectedness and social support, and the role of connection to family, community and religion. Landrum-Brown (1990) presents the thesis that the biomedical mental health care system is based on a Eurocentric worldview, which stands in stark contrast to an Afro-centric worldview. Nobles (1986), Akbar
(1984), and Schiele (1994) concur, emphasizing a self-based in collectivity, extended relationships and a connection to the universe.

Carol Stack demonstrated in 1974 how extensive kinship networks ensured survival for low-income African American women, and her work remains relevant thirty years later. Snowden (1998), Neighbors (1988), and Brown and Gary (1987) lay a link between family, supportive kin networks, and mental health, although supportive networks seem to be more effective for women than for men (Kim & McKenny 1998). Dressler (1985) finds that for a rural sample, economics is the strongest predictor for depression, but that once economics is controlled, both men and women benefit from supportive networks.

Similarly to the African literature, spirituality is seen as contributing a significant aspect of African American mental health. In contrast to the African literature, though, spirituality is generally approached from the perspective of institutionalized religions, as opposed to traditional spiritual practices. Church aspects such as group cohesion, dynamic and adaptive format, and a safe and therapeutic space for self expression and learning have been documented as conducive to mental health (McRae et al. 1981). Furthermore, prayer and other religious resources are common coping mechanisms for African Americans (Neighbors 1983, 1985, Millet et al. 1996, Cheung & Snowden 1990, Snow 1983).

The more traditional concept of spirituality, when mentioned in this literature, is mentioned as an essential psychological profile (Nobles 1986, Schiele 1994), or as an etiological cause of mental disorder in the form of voodoo, hoodoo, rootwork, or witchcraft (Winthrop 1973, Wilson 1982, Snow 1983, Dein 2003, Morrison and
Thornton, 1999). The number of articles on voodoo and mental health among African Americans is rather small however. Voodoo is more likely to be discussed in relation to Haitians, and then in the context of religion and voodoo deaths, not in relation to mental health. These accounts of Haitians, leading to more “exotic narratives” are more likely to be found in anthropological journals as opposed to mental health journals.

In general then, while the issue of interpersonal connectedness is evident in the African American literature on mental well being, the issue of spirituality remains lightly treated and poorly defined. Schiele (1997, 1998) shines as an exception, highlighting an Afro-centric paradigm for social work, and discussing specific theories and methods for countering the increasing levels of violence among African American males.

In contrast to the African literature, where Western imposed models and the effect of colonialism are seen as central issues in African mental health, the literature on African American mental health focuses more on the specific North American historical experience. Consequently, race, (institutional) racism, cultural difference and cultural (in)competence provide the salient factors shaping African American mental health in this literature. For example, the African American literature expresses a lack of trust and comfortability across the color line, from the patients as well as the careproviders (Carter 1979, Jones & Gray 1985, Surgeon General Report 2001). Racism structures African American lives, causing difficult and stressful living conditions (Cooper 1993, Jackson et al. 1996). In addition, racism has been known to cause psychological distress (Landrum-Brown 1990) and physiological distress (Blakey 1994, Broman 1996). Institutional racism is experienced through the type of treatment and diagnoses black patients receive,
which can be significantly different from their white counterparts (Flaskerud et al. 1992, Bell & Mehta 1981, Cheung & Snowden 1990).

But, racism might not be the sole source of different treatment and diagnosis. At times, cultural differences, stereotypes, and misreading of cues can be the cause. For example, the behavior of “wearing the mask”, which is a cultural survival trait, has led to the false diagnosis of “inappropriate effect” (Adebimpe 1981). As a result, the need for cultural competence is discussed in the literature of mental health education and community mental health practices (Flaskerud 1986, Toia et al. 1997, Baker et al. 1997, Walker & Staton 2000).

While in Africa the lack of government sanctioned resources and available care are major issues, for African Americans mental health care is far more available in comparison. Accessibility to available care is a major topic of concern and investigation, however. There are obstacles to access. Cost of service, transportation problems and availability of services in certain areas (Stefl & Prosperi 1985, Blendon et al. 1989, Jones Jr. & Rice 1987) are some of the obvious ones. Distrust of mental health care and stigma are also significant hurdles to seeking out care (Surgeon General Report 2001, Alvidrez 1999).

Most of the literature on African American mental well being is based in psychology, psychiatry, social work, community mental health care and medical journals, and very little in anthropology. Narrative, ethnographic accounts are little to non-existent, (with exceptions noted above) and would make a good contribution to this literature.
Compared to African, African American and Caribbean mental health literature, the Caribbean and Surinamese mental health literature is the most limited\textsuperscript{2} in that most of the information consists of statistical reports (Mahy 1997, Alarcon and Aguilar-Gaxiola 2000, Alleyne 2002, Mesa-Lago 1992). These reports are generally written for large institutions such as the World Health Organization or the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and their discussion of mental health is limited to biomedical categorization. All agree on the poor status of mental health in the Latin American and Caribbean regions and the need for sound policy. Mahy (1997) specifically emphasizes a need for a shift from policy on mental illness to one on mental health, whereas Mesa-Lago (1992) highlights how unequal access to resources further complicates matters for the poor. The latest publication from the PAHO predicts a significant rise in the incidence of mental disorders by 2010 and that “their magnitude has been underestimated (2005).”

I found one descriptive study on mental health in Jamaica (Harris 2003) that addresses well being. This study calls for research and analyzes quantitative data. Similarly, Pedersen and Baruffati (1985), and Guarnaccia et al. (2003) discuss mental health in Latin America and the Caribbean, however they emphasize the shortcomings in adequate models and the need for research.

Given that spirituality appeared as a significant element of mental health in both the African and African American literature, I sought for it in the Caribbean literature as well. However, given that most of the information is displayed in statistical reports,

\textsuperscript{2} Mental health of Caribbean (including Surinamese) populations when studied, is studied mostly in Europe and to some extent in the United States. I avoided these studies as they are mostly produced from the perspective of deviant immigrant behaviors. Although I looked at some of this literature for the Surinamese population, I wanted to look specifically at studies that regarded the population as citizens and not as visitors to another country.
which are based on the DSM IV, I found little mention of spirituality. There is quite a bit written on spiritual systems in the Caribbean, but mostly in regards to religion, identity, symbolism, and dance (Taylor 2001, Prorok 2000, Murphy 1994, Hurston 1990, Dunham 1969, 1983). Sometimes special attention is paid to the roles of gender and class, but a connection to larger political economic forces or health systems is usually absent.

Dunham (1983) for example, does establish a link between spirituality and mental health in her dance work on Haiti. She refers to psychological and sociological functions of voodoo dance, but does not place either concept within a larger context of politics, society, or economics. In doing so, her work tends to present the Haitian people and their story in isolation. For a small Caribbean island, that is already politically and economically marginalized from the world, this is a missed opportunity. This is unfortunate, as this work could have created awareness and a sense of connection with Haiti for the world at large.

The literature on Surinamese mental health is also limited, and most of the data on Afro-Surinamese mental health is based in the Netherlands. A few articles on psychiatric issues are written from the perspective of (deviant) immigrant behavior (Schrier et al. 2001, Schudel et al. 1999, de Vries et al. 1997, de Jong 1994). The rest of the Surinamese mental health literature is focused on the Afro-Surinamese spiritual system of Winti and the extent to which it affects and interferes with standard psychiatric treatment in the Netherlands (Swalen 1990, Dorff 1981, 1988, Wooding 1984a, Buyne 1988, Pengel 1988). Most of these studies stem from the late 1980s, early 1990s at a time when transcultural psychiatry and cultural competency were trendy issues (Giel 1988).
At the time, there was also a debate about whether to include *winti* practices and treatments in the nationalized health insurance plan (van Wetering 1991). Since then, major budget cuts have taken place and the inclusion of *winti* is no longer an issue, as funds are no longer available. Hence, there are few writings on *winti* these days, and treatment of *winti* in Dutch academic literature is predominately in the field of education of mental health and social service workers (De Jong en Wesenbeek 1992, van der Kwaak en Wolffers 1993, de Beet 1989, Sordam 1998, Stephen 1988, Slutzky 2000), and no longer in the literature dedicated to exploring mental health systems.

For the most part, information on mental health in Suriname addresses the poor state of the mental health care system (Sluiter 2001, van Meekeren 1991). For example, Korste and De Jong (2002) emphasize the problems associated with the only psychiatric hospital (PCS) in Suriname as:

…limited amount of funds to keep the PCS afloat; decreasing numbers of qualified personal; limited execution of tasks by treatment providers due to low salary; limited psychotherapeutic knowledge and experience for treatment providers; non-standardized diagnoses and record keeping; poor organization and limited psycho-pharmaceutic resources; minimal care for psychiatric patients with limited or no finances; lack of resocialization opportunities and poor transfer and outflow of patients; a dilapidated and poorly equipped aftercare program; a centralized and too much on the capital oriented mental health care system; high barrier to seeking mental health care due to the high stigma of the PCS (Korste & D Jong 2002: 723).

With respect to spirituality in Surinamese mental well being, some effort has been made to design holistic mental health models that include Afro-Surinamese spirituality – Maroon as well as Creole – (de Beet 1989, Pakosie 1998, Stephen 1988, 1990, Wooding 1984b). Out of the four examples however, only Wooding has tried to implement his model and without success. The other models are either theoretical or descriptive.
2.2 Globalization

Our world has seen incredible rates of progress over the past Century in the fields of technology, medicine, communication, trade, and so on. As a whole, societal functioning and struggle for daily survival has markedly improved in comparison to the state of the world 100 years ago. This increase in progress, however, has been accompanied by increasing levels of social, psychological, and behavioral distress. For countries and regions who were already struggling, and for whom progress has not been as forthcoming as it has for others, the burden has been heavier (Weisbrot et al. 2002).

In addition to the developments the world has seen over the past Century, the world in the 21st Century has been overtaken by “globalization”, a process typified by increased international interaction and exchange, and a decreased sense of separateness (Lewellen 2002). Although people across the world have always interacted and influenced each other’s cultures, the rate and the magnitude of these interactions have grown exponentially over the past 50 years or so. The national and international flow of trade, finances, consumption goods, ideas, media, and migrant bodies, assures that people all over the world are connected with each other at any given point in time (Appadurai 1996, Friedman 1994).

Kellner (2002) argues that globalization has been mostly known for its financial and technological advances, and coins the term “technocapitalism” to illustrate its impact on the world. Giddens (2000) explains:

The level of world trade today is much higher than it ever was before, and involves a much wider range of goods and services. But the biggest difference is in the levels of finance and capital flows. Geared as it is to
electronic money – money that exists only as digits in computers – the current world economy has no parallels in earlier times (2000:27).

But the impact of globalization reaches beyond finances and technology. The issue of globalization is a complex one. Structurally, globalization has significantly altered political influence and power relations between nations. In contrast to the colonial era, where governments of wealthy nations dictated policy for poorer nations, today that power is exercised by multi-national corporations. Furthermore, globalization has contributed to a greater divide between the rich and the poor, with the poor cohort becoming larger (Trager 1999, Navarro 1999; 2003). On the positive side, resources and ideas are being distributed more widely, increasing access to these resources to people who were previously denied them (Drager et al. 2001, Yach & Bettcher 1998). Yet, on the negative side, these interactions are usually asymmetrical, and access to goods and information is highly unequal among and within nations.

Ultimately, these structural forces affect how globalization is experienced on the ground by people in their daily lives. People’s sense of identity, nationality, and family are constantly changing. (Hall 1994, Kearney 1995, Lewellen 2002). In a world where borders are seemingly becoming thinner, and where theoretically nation-states are disappearing, one finds a rise in people asserting their ethnic and/or national identities. These assertions can be as innocent as a rise in cultural festivals or as violent as ethnic cleansing wars (Hobsbwam 1992, Trager 1999).

Similarly, people’s abilities to make choices about where to live, where to work, and where to recreate, are taking on new meaning. From forced migration because of war, to the loss of territory and indigenous jobs to a booming tourism industry, globalization is oppressive force for those with little power over their lives.
Mental well-being is one of the most overlooked and under-evaluated aspects of the effects of globalization on people’s lives. Populations’ level of income, life expectancy, technology, and/or level of violence, for instance, are far more likely to attract attention. Globalization has led to countries influencing and changing each other’s policies, practices, landscapes, and life experiences, often with harmful, if not devastating results. Many of these forced changes have directly jeopardized the health and well-being of already marginalized people (Drager et. al. 2001, Daltabuit and Leatherman 1998, DeWalt 1998, Paltiel 1996, Navarro 1999; 2003).

Malnourishment, increased hazardous exposure, high levels of stress, despair, and violence, are commonly found among the people who supply the labor for globalizing industries (Foek 1997, Harcourt 2001). In addition, few resources are available to address their needs.

How does one feel good about oneself when one’s options for progress are limited, while the rest of the world seems to progress exponentially? How does one feel good about oneself, when the richness of the world arrive nationally, yet means for basic existence and well being still remain out of reach? How does one maintain a sense of optimism when one has little or no control over the forces that shape her/his life? How does one cope with the stress of disrupted family and community lives when no resources are available? These are issues that directly affect and shape people’s mental well being.

Increased international interdependence and interaction has been the cause of many of today’s psycho-social struggles. In Africa, for example, poverty, the inability to effectively respond to natural disasters, drug and alcohol abuse, wars, forced migration, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic are identified as contributing factors to the expected rise in
psycho-social problems (New Vision March 29, 2001, PANA April 6, 2001, Brundtland 2002). Similar trends are reported for Latin America and the Caribbean (Alarcon and Aguilar-Gaxiola 2000, Alleyne 2002). In general, for regions with limited resources, such as Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, health resources are less likely to be funneled into mental health care than other health care arenas (Gureje and Alem 2000, WHO 2000a; 2001), and infectious diseases such as malaria, diarrheal disease, tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS, have preferential status.

The struggle with mental health in these areas, when directly paired with limited or lack of resources and opportunities, limits the possibilities to transform them into thriving communities and societies (Brody 2002, Mesa-Lago 1992). However, whereas globalization might play a significant role in the causation of mental well being problems, potentially it can also serve in identifying solutions. International studies (such as this one), and the exchange of information across borders and institutions, should be a hopeful sign. The holistic approach and vision of mental well being rather than mental health, is one such a progressive step. The World Health Organization (WHO) echoes this sentiment, stating that mental health is more than the mere absence of mental illness, and encourages studies into overall quality of life and well-being (WHO 1994, 1998, 2001). Problems with mental well-being are often preventable, treatable, and reversible, (Desjarlais et al. 1995). The status of mental well-being needs to be studied and addressed, not just to improve the lives of local populations, but to bring mental health more into the foreground as an issue of global importance.

In addition to using globalization as a framework for mental well being, globalization also theoretically affects this work in its methodology. I have chosen the
works of Lewellen (2002) and Giddens (1990, 2000) in particular to guide this research. Lewellen encourages the use of globalization as context and stresses the personal impacts of globalization. He states:

To understand globalization, we must study it at the level of real people who imagine new lives, make plans, travel, form networks, assume identities and socialize their children. Global ethnography is not a contradiction in terms; it is the only way to understand (2000: 26)

Globalization in my work is the ever-present context and backdrop against which the lived experiences of the Afro-Surinamese are explored. The role of economic duress of everyday life and subsequent choices people make, which are directly due to globalizing policies, for instance, are ever present considerations when studying working-class Afro-Surinamese lives.

In addition, I am using elements from the work of Anthony Giddens, specifically time-space distanciation, tradition, and family. Like Lewellen, Giddens turns the scope of globalization not just from the global to the local, but more intimately to the personal. He states:

Globalisation isn’t only about what is ‘out there’, remote and far away from the individual. It is an ‘in here’ phenomenon too, influencing intimate and personal aspects of our lives (2000: 30).

For Giddens, *Time–space distanciation* presents social life as stretched across time and space. It is based on the premise that social life has two basic interactional patterns: face-to-face, and remote encounters. Social networks become displaced through globalization, affecting and changing their interactions as they try to maintain relations. Subsequently, the remote (global) experiences find their way back to the local and interpersonal. Time-space distanciation applies directly to my participants, as
dispersed family relations across the Atlantic Ocean are a basic aspect of everyday life for the majority of working class Afro-Surinamese.

Furthermore, Giddens highlights *tradition*, pointing out that the focus of globalization theory has been mostly on “modernity”, but that tradition needs attention as well. Tradition, though invented, provides structures and rules, and tradition belongs not to individuals, but is always the property of “groups, communities or collectives” (2000: 59). As tradition is under attack by globalization, it needs to be explored, given its impact and purpose of group cohesiveness, identity and well being.

### 2.3 African Diaspora

In addition to globalization, this study is placed within the context of the African Diaspora. In its most basic form, using the African Diaspora involves an approach to understanding people of African descent as dispersed throughout the world because of the Atlantic slave trade. Addressing the dispersal of African peoples goes as far back as the early 19th century, early academic exploration of “African Diaspora”, however, took place as an outflow of the civil rights movement at which time an upsurge in African and African American studies took place at universities. An Afro-centric point of view was promoted in rebuttal to the dominant Eurocentric viewpoint (Asante 1988, Nobles 1974, Karenga 1982, Akbar 1984) in order to center African and African-American visibility in academia and beyond. Afrocentricity has been heavily criticized for its essentialist undertones, its tendency to homogenize people of African descent, and being separatist and divisive (Bekerie 1994, Winters 1994, Reed et al. 1997, BaNikongo 1996). However, it was successful in its aim of creating recognition for African American
scholarship, and for centering African Americans in the academic discourse. Bekerie states: “Afrocentricity is definitely a radical idea because it proposes the centering of peoples and communities in their own histories and cultures (1994: 143).”

True to its history in black nationalist movements and revolutionary thought in the 1960s and 70s, Afrocentric theory has always promoted both theory and action. As such, Afrocentric theory has provided spaces of empowerment. Mullings explains:

Given the deeply felt pessimism about the ability or willingness of white civil society to transform itself in order to accept the demands of people of color, nationalist strategies seek empowerment through autonomously controlled institutions that address the needs of African Americans and buffer them from the racism of Euro-Americans (1997: 134).

In spite of its focus on empowerment and international solidarity, Afrocentric theory was a movement created by American based scholars, and was highly reflective of black American politics and closely tied to the black North American experience.

Since its early days, the study of the African Diaspora has seen a range of epistemological approaches, ranging from African cultural survivals to cultural difference and contingent linkages. More recent scholarship of the African Diaspora has become far more nuanced and attentive to the specific conditions that shape the lives of those of African descent. Analysis now often involves consideration of gender, class, and political factors (Patterson and Kelley 2000, Marable 2002).

Two of the most influential scholars who have reshaped the concept of the African Diaspora are Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, who are both British scholars. Both presented anti-essentialist models of the African Diaspora, emphasizing the fluidity and hybridity of movement and identity. Stuart Hall addressed the hybridity of the African-Caribbean (1994). For Hall the African Diaspora continuously produces and reproduces
hybrid identity and cultures as the result of interaction with different cultures. In addition
he sees Africa as the mythical presence that contributes to an African Diasporic identity.

Gilroy, who was a student of Hall has received more notoriety. Gilroy presented the
concept of the “Black Atlantic” (1993) and totally removes Africa as a signifier, instead
focusing on movement and action across the Atlantic. Rather than acknowledging a
common root, Gilroy sees commonality in similar forms of racial oppression and
struggles that people experience. Gilroy’s theory in particular directly countered the
essentialist notions of the American black nationalists, who were the promoters of Afro-
centricity.

Gilroy has been criticized as being overly anti-essentialist and not understanding
that essentialism plays different roles in theoretical academia as opposed to political and
activist venues (Chivallon 2002, Dayan 1996, Yelvington 2001). He has also been
criticized for being too American and Anglophone oriented (Patterson & Kelly 2000,
counter arguments to Gilroy, contending that African Diaspora is both process and
condition. Patterson and Kelly explain:

As a process it is always in the making, and as a condition it is situated
within global race and gender hierarchies. However, just as the diaspora is
made, it can be unmade, and thus scholars must explore the moments of its

Zeleza states:

Diaspora, I would suggest, simultaneously refers to a process, a condition,
a space and a discourse: the continuous processes by which a diaspora is
made, unmade and remade, the changing conditions in which it lives and
expresses itself, the places where it is moulded and imagined, and the
contentious ways in which it is studied and discussed...Diaspora is
simultaneously a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of
voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings… If the term ‘diaspora’ is to retain analytical specificity it has to be conceived in some bounded way, but not too narrowly if it is to remain useful for comparative study (2005: 41).

Patterson and Kelly, as well as Zeleza, allude to the African Diaspora as a dynamic and complex phenomenon. Zeleza acknowledge that it needs some boundaries in order to be useful for analysis. However, both promote the study of the African Diaspora from a broader perspective than Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. Instead, they mention the presence of overlapping Diasporas, the need to move beyond cultural survivalist/cultural nationalist perspectives, and the need to think internationally and globally.

Patterson and Kelly give the example of Brazil where several cultural ideologies exist in tandem. Afro-Brazilians respond with their own cultural ideology rooted in artistic, religious, and cultural strength, to an ideology of the ruling class which marginalizes Afro-Brazilians, while downplaying the notion of racism in a discourse of racial harmony. Rather than having one dominant ideology, these ideologies are actually made “in struggle, products of alliances, historical circumstances, allegiances by race, gender, class, and so on” (2000: 21). Thus, Patterson and Kelly move beyond the simple oppressor/marginalized binary. They state:

…shifting the discussion from an African-centered approach to questions of black consciousness to the globality of the diaspora-in-the-making allows for a rethinking of how we view Africa and the world, and opens up new avenues for writing a world history from below (2000: 26).

Zeleza (2005) concurs, arguing that African Diaspora studies need to have a global framework, an interdisciplinary methodology, and a comparative perspective.
As the study of the African Diaspora starts to focus on the fluidity of movement, identity, and ever-changing notions of homeland and relationships with home, it is presenting some of the similar insights as globalization. Both African Diaspora and globalization force us to look beyond bounded territories, identities and cultures, to start thinking globally, and consequently challenge us to adapt our methods and questions of inquiry.

The African Diaspora will be used as a lens to view mental well-being, something which is not commonly done. Early scholarship of the African Diaspora involved numerous works on psychology and personality (Akbar 1984, Nobles 1986, Cress Welsing 1991, Baldwin 1981). However, most of these works were based on rather essentialized notions of African personality, and did not really look at the broader concept of mental health or mental well being.

One psychological issue that has been addressed in the diasporic literature is the affect of racism on the psyche, as people of the African Diaspora globally have been positioned in minority and or marginalized status. This work dates back as far as the early 1900s with Du Bois’ work on double consciousness in the US (1969). Another significant work is that of Fanon in the 1950s on the psychological ramifications of racism experienced by Africans in Algeria and France (1984). Race and racism have been studied in anthropology (Drake 1987; 1990, Dressler 1993, Baker 1998, Smedley 1993, Harrison 1995, Torres & Whitten 1998), but the study of race has generally been trumped by the study of ethnicity (Gregory & Sanjek 1996). Even when racism has been investigated in anthropology, it has not necessarily been studied in relation to mental health, but more in relation to social – political complications, or in relation to racism.

The African Diaspora can be chosen as a site to explore the particularities of mental well being among people of the African Diaspora. How different is the experience of racism for people of African descent living in a world with a white-black paradigm (USA) as opposed to those living in a world with a multi-ethnic paradigm (Caribbean)? For example, men of African descent are more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia as compared to men of other ethnic groups, in the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean (Schrier et al. 2001, de Jong 1994, Hickling and Rodgers Johnson 1995, Pipe et al. 1991, Estroff et al. 1991). But are the factors contributing to these outcomes comparable to each other? What should we pay attention to, what should we honor, and what should we rule out when we make comparisons between Africans, Afro-Europeans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African Americans? How do we account for within group differences of race, class, religion, and so on?

Mental well-being is a site where the African Diaspora and globalization come together. Globalization significantly influences the lives of those of African descent, especially as the majority of these populations are overrepresented in the lower socio-economic classes (Drager et al. 2001, Singer 2001, Mesa-Lago 2001, Ho 2002, Whiteis 1998, Alarcon and Aguilar-Gaxiola 2000). The flow and lure of consumption goods, international money flows, government priority in providing individual business opportunities over state funded social welfare programs, small enterprises losing out to big business, the loss of jobs due to big business mergers, push and pull migratory movements, are all aspects of globalization that can compromise the well being of
marginalized populations. Furthermore, globalization contributes to a ‘diasporic consciousness’ through improved global communication (Levy 2000) by providing continuous comparative information streams about the rest of the world. From a positive aspect, improved communication can revive dormant institutions, but more often than not, improved communication ensures an overflow of images and information confirming and reinforcing one’s marginalized status in comparison to others.

These considerations shape the approach to this research. What roles do migration, remigration, and transnationalism play in family connections and stability? What roles do individualism, consumption, and global communication play in a healthy sense of self? What roles do global capitalism, tourism and the media play in the creation and maintenance of identity and financial well being?

To come to an understanding of identity, I chose to examine the lived experience of the Afro-Surinamese people. Caribbean scholars claim that the theory as used so far, to explore the Caribbean, has been insufficient, and that there is a need to further develop theory by looking at the lived experience (Robotham 1998, Barriteau 1995, Taylor 2001). African Diaspora theory is grounded in lived experience and acknowledges the role of creativity and imagination in how people negotiate the forces in their lives (Appadurai 1996, Condé 2000).

According to Caribbean scholars such as Mintz (1996) and Robotham (1998), the Caribbean is a model for contemporary globalization, with its history of international relations and fluidity of migratory movement, ethnicity, power and economic exchanges. They believe that the complexity of the region has been underestimated and undervalued in a world where larger regions with bigger “voices” more easily catch attention. They
argue that people from the Caribbean have been more prepared and better adjusted to dealing with issues of globalization than other Third World nations. They proclaim that it is precisely because of the Caribbean’s role as a model and as a longtime historical player, that it should receive closer attention. In addition, post-migration Caribbean peoples have become significant and prominent members of North American and European communities (Reis 2004). To bring the Caribbean out of obscurity then, we should start documenting its stories, and this research will contribute to doing so by highlighting one of its stories, that of the African Diaspora in Suriname.

Finally, the African Diaspora can be used as a starting point and entryway into other Diasporas. The African Diaspora explores a variety of factors between groups of people who have African ancestry in common. Comparisons can and should be made with people who do not necessarily have African ancestry, but who do share in a history of colonial oppression, exploitation, forced relocation, or other aspects of marginalization. Patterson and Kelly (2000) refer to the need to look at overlapping Diasporas. It is telling that the most inspirational work for this proposed study does not stem from a study on a sub-Saharan African population, but from one about migrant Arab Muslim women who are marginalized in Canada. I further think of opportunity for insight and comparison into the indigenous people in North America, Australia, and New Zealand, for instance.

From Australia and New Zealand, we are starting to see literature on the damaging effects of colonial and post-colonial practices of family disruption, on the mental well being of several generations of aboriginal people (Brown 2001, Beresford
and Omaji 2000, Collinson and Copolov 2004). From Hawaiians and US Native Americans, we see efforts to reinstate or use elements of native traditions to improve mental well being for a population which has been ravaged by a historical legacy of oppression, genocide, and imagination (Cook et al 2005, Dufrene and Coleman 1994, Struthers and Lowe 2003). What can we learn from each other and how can our collective knowledge contribute to a better understanding of the plights of marginalized people? It is my intent to use the African Diaspora as a doorway to global understanding of people’s mental well-being. Using the African Diaspora to broaden the viewpoint, rather than to narrow it, is also a trend of the newer scholarship within the African Diaspora (Patterson and Kelley 2000)

2.4 Black Feminist Theory

I have chosen to use Black Feminist Theory, supplemented with elements from Caribbean Feminist Theory and Third World Feminist Theory, and with a special attention to the concept of Spirituality as my third and last theoretical viewpoint.

Black Feminist Theory developed as a corrective to the second wave of the women’s movement and subsequent feminist discourse in academia in the late 1960s and 70s. Criticizing and challenging feminist theory as racist and classist, black women introduced the awareness that the lives and struggles of black women were not the same as their white, middle class counterparts. Black feminists advocated for an anti-racist and anti-sexist epistemology. In addition, they brought attention to the fact that identity and power relations are not limited to gender status alone, but are confounded by interconnected factors including economics, heterosexuality, age, race, and so on.
Identified first by Angela Davis (1983), and later coined by Kimberle (Williams) Crenshaw (1989, 1991), this concept of “intersectionality” has been another major contribution to feminist theory and social theory in general.

The clearest black feminist voice for me is that of Patricia Hill Collins. According to Hill Collins (1991, 1998) and others, Black Feminist Theory is based in African Diaspora or Afro-centric theory, and places the black woman at the center rather than at the margin of knowledge production. Black women have been voiceless and faceless in American society, or when presented, have appeared through distorted and imagined images, not of their own making (Mullings 1997, Taylor 1999). Even within the black community, especially during the Civil Rights Movement, black women were silenced and expected to give deference to black men (Wallace 1982). Black Feminist Theory has been brought forward to correct this silence and misrepresentation.

Black Feminist Theory works from the premise that black women, because of their regular experiences at the margins, have a unique standpoint from which they view the world (Hill Collins 1991, hooks 1984). This standpoint represents a breadth of general knowledge, which, once submitted to analysis, can then be theorized. Theory is important as it allows for collective and strategic planning. It is believed that, once views are theorized for knowledge production, the ensuing epistemology will provide an alternative to the standard white male dominant epistemology of knowledge formation and validation, by which everything is measured and determined.

We often look for standpoint formation in the lived experiences of well-known black women activists and pioneers. Hill Collins believes however, that even though
there are great African American 'sheros', such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Anna J. Cooper, and Fanny Lou Hamer, ‘regular’ women should not be ignored. She states:

Although their sustained resistance, to black women’s victimization with interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression it is well known, these women did not act alone. Their actions were nurtured by the support of countless, ordinary African American women who, through strategies of everyday resistance, created a powerful foundation for this more visible black feminist activist tradition (2000: 183).

Hill Collins (1991) clearly validates ‘regular’ women’s lives in knowledge production. She lays out four guiding concepts for the production of knowledge based on black women’s experience: valuing the lived experience; learning through dialogue and exchange; the appropriateness of affect; and accountability. I connect with these principles as it validates my personal approach to knowledge, which is strongly shaped by my experience with elder women in my family, but also as it shapes and validates my methodology.

Anthropology in particular lends itself to using Black Feminist Theory, as it is a discipline where the concerns of marginalized peoples are brought to the forefront. As a field dedicated to social change, however, even here the voices of black women anthropologists are still often marginalized or silenced (McClaurin 2001, Harrison 1991). It is, therefore, important to create a space for black women to be heard and seen, inside as well as outside of the academy.

My main goal for using Black Feminist Theory then is that of “giving voice”; giving voice for a population who has more often than not been ignored, silenced, or spoken for; and giving voice for a black woman in a white epistemology based institution. Black Feminist Theory provides me with the methods and guidelines for
doing so. It provides me with a method of inquiry that includes an engagement with knowledge from a black woman’s perspective. It also provides me with a method of relaying the acquired information, namely through the use of self-reflexive voice.


…brings not only a multiple vision but a distinct consciousness to native anthropology. This consciousness is influenced by our own lived experiences with struggles against race, gender, and class oppression. It is also influenced by our knowledge of the historic struggles of our Black feminist foremothers (2001: 243).

There are a few aspects of Black Feminist Therapy with which I have some contention, namely intersectionality and activism. Even though intersectionality has been brought forward as an important concept, it often remains poorly defined and operationalized. Other than adding the categories of race and (sometimes) sexuality to the concepts of gender and class for analysis, it has not added much more. Analysis often remains problematic. McCall states:

Yet despite the emergence of intersectionality as a major paradigm of research in women’s studies and elsewhere, there has been little discussion of how to study intersectionality, that is, of its methodology…I suggest, however, that intersectionality has introduced new methodological problems and, partly as an unintended consequence, has limited the range of methodological approaches used to study intersectionality (2005: 1771, 72).
Johnson – Bailey (1999), Bhopal (1995), Few et al. (2003), for instance, write extensively about their interactions with black research subjects, and their research communities. Even though they address various issues including gender, class, skin color gradation, and ethnicity, they are unable to use a true intersectional approach, and describe them as separate issues. Where intersectionality falls short for me is that it does little to accommodate the stories of women’s who are not American.

One strong criticism of Black Feminist Theory and African Diaspora theory is that they are limited to the North American experience (Reynolds 2002, Patterson and Kelley 2000). Reynolds (2002) for instance criticizes Black Feminist Theory for using the idea of a presumed collective black womanhood based on race, class, and gender subjugation. Whereas black feminists criticized white feminists for treating their women’s issues as generalizing for all women, black feminists are criticized for treating their issues as being general for all black women. I agree with this criticism and am frustrated by statements such as “for Black women race is the most salient construct centering both their individual and group identities (Few et al 2005: 206).

My second contention is with activism. Activism, political action, and community work, are all found back in the works of those who use Black Feminist Theory. Harrison (1991) points out how the multiple vision that native anthropology provides, serves as a valuable research tool, but can also be used as a tool for political change. Rodriguez (1998) studies grass roots activism in her own Florida community (1998), and through using native anthropology contributes to activist work. Harrison (1991) used activism in exploring the political climate in Jamaica in the late 1970s, and the list goes on.
Hill Collins (1991, 1998) believes in the transformative power of Black Feminist Theory for the Academy as well as the black community, and black women in particular. According to Hill Collins, knowledge, but especially theory is directly linked to power. She states:

This interdependence of thought and action suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate changed consciousness (1991: 28).

Thought is linked to action, which leads to empowerment. Black Feminist Theory implores inherent activism and writing for the betterment of the community (Hill Collins 1991, McClaurin 2001, Rodriguez 1996;1998). Rodriguez (1996) for instance, implores the use of native anthropology; introducing new subject matter and alternative methodologies; and challenging the prevailing images of black womanhood within the social sciences. These requests seem quite reasonable and doable. Burke et al. (2000) on the other hand, list a number of activities in which they believe black feminists in the academy should engage. According to them, black feminists should: share personal experiences, name oppressive processes, utilize existing policies while playing a key role in developing new policies, place themselves in strategic positions, network, mentor, challenge the oppressive environment, and be sensitive to communities of research.

Similarly, black feminist anthropologists stress the role of black feminist anthropologists as inherently political and argue that they should play a significant role in transforming anthropology (McClaurin 2001). Because of a black anthropologists’ marginalized position within the academy, it is assumed that whenever they speak, their voices are inherently political.
Both of these last two examples exemplify extraordinary burdens and responsibilities placed on the shoulders of black feminists in the academy. The danger is that it becomes the marginalized black feminist’s responsibility to change the institution, black community, etc. Black Feminist Theory is born out of the lived experiences of black women and is aimed at empowering black women in and outside of the academy, yet black feminists are seemingly expected to sacrifice themselves for the cause. What is supposed to be about empowerment becomes about ‘working oneself to death’ and sacrifice. This is especially true for black women who struggle for survival inside the academy, and are often the same women who struggle outside of the academy, carrying a double burden of activism and transformation. I believe our work should be used to bring out change, but should be done wisely rather than recklessly, especially within the Academy. I do not believe that we should always raise our voices against injustice. There are times when it is wise to be silent so you can survive another day in an institution that was never designed to accommodate you in the first place.

In order to complement Black Feminist Theory for myself as a more balanced approach, I supplement it with elements from Third World Feminism, Caribbean Feminism, and Spirituality.

**Third World and Caribbean Feminism**

Third World feminists, similar to Black feminists, launched a critique on Western feminism, the two most notable are Uma Narayan and Chandra Mohanty.

Mohanty’s (1988) initial critique challenges Western feminists’ approach to Third World women as all suffering and being oppressed by their respective patriarchies. In
doing so, Western feminists pose themselves as ‘saviors’ of their struggling sisters, and overlook the intricacies of Third World women’s agency and creative forms of resistance. She further counters Western feminism’s usage of gender as the primary axis of power in hegemonic systems. Instead, using the concept of intersectionality, she poses that race, class, sexuality in combination with gender shape women’s lives. She sees the struggle against racism and colonial domination as the primary struggle in Third World women’s lives.

Narayan (1991) introduces the issue of national identity for Third World women. She contends that national realities shape women’s lives, and that problems experienced by women in the Third World are not mere imitations of problems experienced by women in the Western world. Nationality and culture are not homogenous entities, and in effect provide many contradicting messages about one’s identity. Narayan stresses the need for developing theory out of Third World women’s own experiences, as theory allows for debate and political engagement. Narayan (2000) is also concerned with the dilemma of essentialism, for as Third World women try to create a space for themselves, they inevitably have to use colonial notions of essentialism. Her more recent work (2000) also includes the role of global capitalism as a major force constraining Third World women’s lives.

Both Mohanty and Narayan demand a consideration of nationality and a respect for the complexity of Third World Women’s lives. In this same trend, Sampoia (2004) investigates the role of globalization in the lives of Third World women. Globalization adversely affects the lives of many marginalized women, but can also be used as a tool for political mobilization. She highlights a cooperative trans-national project between the
US and Mexico, which she uses to theorize about Third World women from a source of empowerment, rather than the standard mode of these women as marginalized and downtrodden populations. She also utilizes Narayan’s notion of strategic essentializing to come to a format for addressing change. She states:

… transnational feminism provides a platform engaging both an oppositional and differential mode of consciousness with a subjectivity that is decentralized and strategic, and which expresses agency in varying forms of political activity from strikes to international forums and even the exchange of information across the telephone, fax and the Internet (2004: 199).

Caribbean feminists have built upon this work, realizing that more work needs to be done academically, to bring women in the Caribbean out of obscurity, but they also emphasize the need to do so accurately (Mohammed 2000).

Caribbean feminist scholars assert that most of the theory presented on the Caribbean and Latin America has been based in economic dependency and development (Freeman and Murdock 2001, Barriteau 1995). Doing so has limited the ability to capture the richness of the area and has focused on women as victims of development, instead of them as capable beings. Barriteau (1995) is one of the most outspoken scholars on this issue. She insists that socialist feminist theory, which has been the most prominent and influential in analyzing the lives of Caribbean women, has been insufficient. She criticizes studies on women’s liberation and national liberation, women and wage labor, sexual division of labor, women’s work, and histories of women’s organizations and women’s struggles, stating:

…none of these studies are dedicated to building theory [emphasis by original author]. They start with the theory as a given and apply its assumptions to a wide range of social and economic conditions affecting
women. The researchers take the assumptions and methodologies and apply them to women’s conditions in developing countries including the Caribbean. They establish the relevance of socialist feminist theorizing without examining any potential limitations (1995:29).

She does not renounce socialist feminist theory altogether, but believes it falls short when it comes short to adequately addressing the diversity and specificity of Caribbean women. She, therefore, asks for continuous effort in designing a Caribbean feminist theory. She states:

Feminist theorists should use women’s experiences as the starting point for theorizing rather than trying to force women into pre-packaged theories that excluded women in the first place (1995:54).

According to Freedman and Murdock (2001) there are two explanations for the overemphasis on economic dependence and development. First, dependency theory originated in the region itself and was and continues to be strongly imbedded in political movements. Secondly, North American and British scholars in the late 70s and early 80s were trained in dependency theory at their respective institutions. They highlight Bolles’ *Sister Jamaica: A Study of Women, Work and Household in Kingston* (1996), and Safa’s *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean* (1995) as examples of new scholarship that give more balanced attention to both macro- and micro-analysis of women’s lives, and that portray women as active agents.

Similarly, Ho (2002) addresses the effects of transnationalism on Caribbean women. Even though she does discuss issues of economic dependence, she thoroughly investigates the impacts of shifting family units and the role of women in managing these changes. These works are examples of an approach that exemplifies women as agents
rather than victims of development, which can lead to some new theorizing as Barriteau calls for.

Another difficulty within Caribbean feminist theory is the concept of “woman” itself. The category of ‘woman’ has usually implied a woman of African descent of lower or working class, while feminism has publicly been brought forth by the black middle class. Other ethnicities and class levels are generally ignored (Mohammed 2000). Caribbean feminist scholars need to do a better job including the multiplicity of women’s experiences.

Lastly, academic feminism has always been linked with the lived experience of women in the Caribbean region. Theories have been used to address the current substandard status of women throughout the region, analyzing patterns dating as far back as slavery (Beckles 1998). The Caribbean has inherited an unjust gender system from its colonial foremothers, and ever since independence, issues of gender have taken a back seat to nation building (Barnes 1999). As a result women live as second class citizens and are undischproportionally, heavily impacted by globalization (Ho 2002).

In spite of these living conditions, women survive and ‘make do’ (Bolles 1988). Part of the reason that they make do is directly linked to the incorporation of feminist norms and feminist infused women’s movements for the betterment of women’s lives. Magaly Pineda, a famous Guatemalan activist and feminist, expresses her sentiment:

We’re seeing movement after movement with women in the forefront. And we’ve moved from a time of denunciation to a time of action – without giving up denunciation because there’s certainly a lot to denounce…. In spite of all that constitutes our lives and would seem to rob us of our hope, we women have managed to feel confident ( Randall 1995: 118).
It is for this reason that Caribbean feminist scholars request new theories, which are not only rooted in the lived experiences of women, but are dedicated to activism as well (Mohammed 1998; 2000, Deare 1995, Freeman & Murdock 2001). Caribbean feminist anthropologists, in particular, ask for an activist approach, urging that researchers should take the responsibility to educate and involve their subject communities in some way (Mohammed 1998, 2000, Deare 1995). One outstanding example is the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA), which is an organization whose mandate specifically addresses the improvement of women’s lives through feminist research (Bolles 1993, Deare 1995). CAFRA, for instance, participated in a regional study on sex tourism and HIV/AIDS infection. In doing so they educated street workers on the risks involved, and they contributed to the development of a regional task force to address the growing epidemic in the region (Kempadoo 2001).

Caribbean Feminist theory contributes to Black Feminist Theory and Third World Theory by adding the consideration for the specificity and complexity of women’s lives in the Caribbean. Doing so adds a consideration of language, ethnicity, transmigration, nationality, and identity, to the general feminist issues of gender, race, and class. In addition, Caribbean Feminist Theory is directly dedicated to the improvement of women’s lives. As Caribbean Feminist Theory becomes more developed, it will aid in making the voices and lives of women in the Caribbean more audible and visible. So far, most of Caribbean Feminist Theory has been developed out of the Anglophone areas in the Caribbean, through the University of the West Indies. Having a voice from the Dutch Caribbean added to the discourse should be an asset.
Spirituality

Black Feminist Theory is based in a very concrete world, dealing with issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. I believe that the emphasis on concrete experiences and activism is due to the fact that Black Feminist Theory is strongly influenced and inspired by the heroic lives of Civil Rights icons. These women’s lives were shaped by racism, sexism, oppression, and marginalization. The Civil Rights era is also a specific aspect of the larger North American experience, however.

I do not deny that structures such as racism, sexism, and classism provide real struggles for black women’s lives, but I believe that by excessively focusing on these structures as if they are based in concrete categorical divisions, we limit our potential to overcome them. These studies, although claiming to “transcend boundaries”, fail to do so, and instead create boundary-based thinking. Engaging in binary thinking such as male/female, black/white, oppressed/marginalized, insider/outsider, and so on, “erases the complexities and contradictions as it seeks to fit all within the metaphor (Patterson and Kelley 2000: 20).”

Traditional feminism, in its attempt to battle sexism created a reputation of being anti-male. Black feminism purposely set out to be holistic, rather than divisive, and claims to embrace men and children, as well as women. For this reason, some even avoid using the term “feminist” altogether and instead prefer the term “womanist” (Rodriguez 1996, Phillips and McCaskill 1995). The concept of wholeness is still limited to a concrete concept of wholeness though, and is in the literature usually referred to as being ‘one with the black community’, or being ‘one with other black women’ (Johnson-Bailey
1999, Burke et al 2000). I see these as horizontal concepts of wholeness, in the material or physical plane. I believe the concept of wholeness can be broader, and can include the vertical plane, namely spirituality.

I believe that a framework of spirituality begins with the premise that one is a part of something larger. It implies a connectedness beyond oneself with the world, seen and unseen. Mentioning the word ‘unseen’ immediately raises questions from an empirical perspective, but from a lived experience perspective, the world unseen is something the majority of people on this earth have some type of relationship with. Consequently, I believe that a concept of spirituality provides a framework of wholeness that far surpasses a sense of wholeness that is based in concrete, material connections. Instead, wholeness based in spirituality refers to being one with other people, and with natural elements, and forces in the invisible realm including ancestral and spiritual forces.

If people function within a concept of wholeness that is based in spirituality, what are the implications for dealing with racism, sexism, classism, which are mere human inventions? We might ask, how does a focus on spirituality change the way racism is perceived? Would we still focus on the racism itself, or could we focus on racism as a challenge, or as a set of experiences that are supposed to teach us something about our humanity, and our capabilities for our short duration in the physical realm? What are the implications for doing research, if one believes that one is not the ‘lonely’ explorer, but is guided by unseen supernatural forces? How would preparations and execution of field work be different, if at all? What are the implications for true activism, when one works with a belief that one can call upon forces for assistance, and that they will be manifested in times of need?
I am aware, that the mere mention of spirituality, immediately places me at the edge of valid academic knowledge. However, isn’t this the stuff people talk about in their churches every Sunday? Aren’t these the issues many people struggle with on a daily basis, and if so, do not they shape their lived experiences and hence their standpoints and knowledge production? I believe that this goes to the heart of the essentialism vs. deconstructionism debate. Having the two concepts as polar opposites, illustrates our inability to embrace both concepts within a holistic framework. We need essentialism to claim an identity and a sense of who we are. At the same time, we know that when we take a real close look at ourselves, we can step outside and beyond all the labels we use to define ourselves. We can deconstruct ourselves right into a nihilistic abyss of nothingness. Hence we come up with concepts as “strategic essentialism”, where we denounce it as dangerous, but acknowledge that it has strategic value for identity purposes (Spivak 1994, Azoulay 1996).

Instead, by using a holistic spirituality framework, we could embrace both. In the spiritual realm, we are connected beyond our male/femaleness, our race, our professions, our class, our age, and so on. Our experiences in the material/concrete/physical realm provide us with particular histories and social realities, which have implications for our lived experiences. However, for many of us, the goal of our lived experiences is to gain knowledge and enlightenment, which feeds back into our oneness with the universe. Within such a model of wholeness, life conditions are designed to give us experiences for learning and growth. As such, I believe that there is a need in this research to pay close attention to the role of spirituality, for the research population, but also as an aspect of methodology.
Spirituality has been discussed in African Diaspora and black feminist literature; however, it remained under-theorized (Akbar 1984, Nobles 1986, Dillard et al. 2000), or in the case of feminism, was mostly relegated to the realm of religion. For the most part, the concept was limited to the premise that human beings are connected. African scholars within African Diaspora literature are somewhat more specific (Sefa Dei 1994, Wangoola 2000) and do elude to human beings as connected to spiritual forces and how these forces are manifested in every aspect of daily living. The lack of a clear and operationalized definition of spirituality in both African Diaspora and black feminist theoretical literature is unfortunate and a missed opportunity. Lack of an understandable and workable concept of spirituality weakens the potential of either theory. Given that spirituality is generally under-theorized, African Diaspora and black feminist theories can make a major contribution by providing a sound layout and road map to the spirituality concept. This work will make an attempt to contribute to the development of a useable framework of spirituality. In the conclusion of this work I will write a reflection on my own experience with spirituality while traveling this journey. These reflections will hopefully provide some insight as to how spiritually might be operationalized as a research tool.

2.5 Conclusion

This research will address mental well being of the working class Afro-Surinamese, an African Diaspora population. The concept of mental well being is used over mental health, as it incorporates a broad range of issues that are connected to mental health, but that are not necessarily incorporated in the biomedical definition of mental
health. Using the theoretical framework of the African Diaspora allows for the study of the working class Afro-Surinamese population as a particular population of African descent. Hopefully, some comparisons will be able to be made to other populations of African descent, while giving deference to the particularity of the Afro-Surinamese experience. Very little has been written on mental well being in Suriname or the Caribbean region. It is my hope to make a contribution to that literature with this work.

The Afro-Surinamese experience is unique in the sense that it is highly shaped by globalizing forces, in particular by the interdependent relationship with the Netherlands. A colonial and now post-colonial connection ensures a continuous relationship with the Netherlands, mainly through the many relatives that reside there. As such, relationships with family members, which is a significant aspect of mental well being, are directly affected by the relationship with the Netherlands. However, flows of capital, finance, technology and media images from the Netherlands and other countries, also significantly influence the lived Surinamese experience, and hence the experience with mental well being. How life and mental well being are impacted, will be explored in the following chapters.

Lastly, the use of Black Feminist Theory, infused with elements of Third World Feminism and Caribbean Feminist Theory allows for a very personal approach to the research. Academically, Black Feminist Theory provides an epistemological framework for me to negotiate my unique status as an anthropologist and ethnographer, in a way that is familiar to my upbringing. The international perspective as brought in by Third World Feminist Theory supplement Black Feminist Theory through accommodating a sensitivity to issues of nationality, ethnicity, and language to the issues of gender, race,
and class. Spirituality, lastly, is a theoretical aspect of this work that is as of yet unclearly
defined, but will be explored throughout this work, in the hopes of developing some
specific guidelines for how to understand and utilize spirituality as a legitimate
anthropological method.
In early March 2005, US officials warned that US relations with Suriname would be affected if the new government was headed by a convicted drug trafficker (Sullivan 2005: 1).” This sentence is from the opening paragraph of the report on US – Caribbean relations by the Congressional Regional Service, Library of Congress. Rather
unflattering, if not outright embarrassing, this is one of the official ways that Suriname is presented to the world.

Unfortunately, drug trafficking, weapon smuggling, political corruption, and economic instability are commonly used to present Suriname to the international community. Indeed Suriname has been performing poorly economically, due to major political and economic setbacks. Two hostile military coups, a civil war, and an emptying of the country’s financial reserves by a corrupt government, are just some of the major events of the past 25 years. However, in 2005 the economy seems somewhat stable, and the former military dictator and convicted drug trafficker did not make it to power in the May 2005 elections as the US had feared. So what is the current economic and political situation in Suriname?

Suriname’s economy is heavily dependent on its bauxite and related alumina production. Suriname imports far more than it exports. There is potential growth for timber, gold, oil, and tourism, but environmental groups are concerned about the large interest from logging and mining companies. Alongside the official economy, an informal economy of goods and services has flourished. The gold industry has been mostly illegal, and is a potential source of consistent income, once legalized.

The government is the nation’s largest employer, which is a drain on the national budget. Lack of resources is an ever-present burden and hindrance to governmental departments’ abilities to be effective agents for society. The government is full of “ghost

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3 Suriname is the 8th largest bauxite producer in the world. According to World Bank figures (2005) in 2003 Suriname earned 488 million US$ from export trade, of which 336 million US$ was from bauxite derivatives and alumina. Import expenditures were 704 million US$ that year. Total income for goods and services came to 697 million US$, while imports of goods and services cost 863 million US$, leaving a resource balance of negative 166 million US$. Agriculture accounted for 9% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while industry and services accounted for 22% and 69%, respectively for that same year (World Bank 2005).
laborers”, workers who do not work but remain on the payroll. Ghost laborers, poor management, and lack of resources have resulted in education being one of the least effective ministries in the region (Buddingh 1999). A weak educational system feeds directly back into the economy, as young people are ill – or under-prepared to become productive, contributing citizens.

Numerous historical factors laid the groundwork for Suriname’s current economic profile. However, the political and economic developments since the late 1980s are the most salient factors shaping the economy today. After military rule in the 1980s, an elite informal power base developed in the early 1990s consisting of ex-military leaders and business elites (Buddingh 1999, 2001). The political parties were mostly ethnic based, and most of the power business elites were affiliated with the Hindustani party. This caused friction with the leading party, which was predominately Afro-Surinamese. This informal power base gave rise to high corruption, a small wealthy class, and the transformation of Suriname into a “narco-state”, a state in which the drug economy plays a significant role in the regular economy. Annually, about 26000 kg of cocaine makes its way to Europe via Suriname; the gain of cocaine almost equals the export value of bauxite (Buddingh 1999, Snijders 2003).

According to an Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) report (Martin 2001), the high level of corruption in Suriname is a serious deterrent to investments and leads to stagnation in economic growth. Budding (1999, 2001) discusses the need to revamp the current banking system, which collapsed in 1997. He sees the development of Suriname into a narco-state as a serious detriment to the country’s progress, and is rather bleak in his optimism for the country’s ability to pull itself out of its present situation.
The current government has been able to bring some economic stability to the country, which since the 1980s had been subject to skyrocketing inflation. Its biggest accomplishment to date is the conversion from a Surinamese guilder system to a Surinamese dollar system in 2004 and stabilization of the exchange rate. In addition, Suriname joined the Caribbean Common Market and Community (CARICOM) in 1995, the main political and economic body in the region, which is designed to strengthen the Caribbean as a regional economic block (Caricom 2006, Erisman 2003). Membership has been a small step forward for Suriname, as Surinamese businesses are not able to compete with their regional neighbors. However, here too there is room for potential.

Thus the political and economic picture might be bleak, and relations between the different ethnic groups might not be as harmonious as they seem, given the course of political events. But Suriname is more than just politics and economics. The richness of an incredible environmental landscape, and people of different ethnicities who have lived side by side for hundreds of years without any inter-ethnic bloodshed, should count for something. Regardless of how difficult life conditions might be, people will not leave Suriname. And thus, people learn to live with difficult circumstances. They make do, they cope, they live. Understanding how people live and cope is the goal of this research. How forces have shaped current living conditions is the focus of this chapter.

_Suriname and the Dutch_

Suriname’s existence as a colonial and then post-colonial entity has been marked mostly by its relationship with the Dutch. The Dutch were not the first colonizers of Suriname, they were in fact preceded by the Spanish, the Portuguese, and the British,
(Bakker et al. 1993), but they made the most significant permanent impression. Obtained from the British in 1667 in exchange for New York, Suriname remained a colony of the Netherlands until it received its independence in 1975 (Bakker et al. 1993). As a colony under the Dutch, it was a colony like no other. Unlike the British and Spanish colonies, the Dutch had a hard time recruiting families to the territory. Other than a few pioneering families, early Surinamese settlers included contracted ex-convicts, falsely contracted hobo’s and shanghaied orphans (Buddingh 1999). These were followed by French, German and Jewish settlers attracted to social and religious freedoms and economic opportunities.

Rather than an expansion of the mother country, as was the case for other European colonies, Suriname was a colony, where settler’s main purpose was to get rich quick in the plantation business. Inheriting African slaves from their British predecessor, the Dutch quickly engaged in the import of Africans to support the free labor force on their plantations. After setting up plantations, planters soon made their way back to the capital Paramaribo, leaving the plantations under supervision of administrators. Paramaribo became a lively place with a “free for all”, liberal atmosphere. The diversity in European settlers, the small ratio of Europeans in relation to the large number of enslaved Africans, and the lack of a dominating Catholic institution, made Parmaribo’s society less unified than their Spanish colonial counterparts in South America (Budding 1999), contributing to many contentious relationships.

One such contentious relationship existed between the planters, the colonial administrative government and the government in the Netherlands. Although the Dutch did fairly well with their plantation outputs, being affected by the up and down swing of
the stock market and other factors, the colony always remained highly dependent on Dutch funding and investments (Hoefte 2001). The slavery based plantation system lasted for a good 200 years until Emancipation in 1863, after which some major social and economic changes took place.

As the Dutch foresaw an upcoming loss of their cheap labor force with the Emancipation in 1863, they contracted thousands of laborers from India, Indonesia, and China. Efforts were made to maintain a plantation economy post Emancipation in Suriname, but these efforts failed due to rising competition, a drop in the market value of plantation crops, lack of Dutch investments, and environmental set backs (Budding 1999, Hoefte 2001). New prospects were sought in minerals, particularly bauxite, balata, gold, oil and wood.

Transforming Suriname from a (Dutch) plantation economy to an economically self sufficient nation proved difficult. Foreign investments and developments, though intended to improve the economy as a whole, mostly benefited foreign companies, and the Surinamese economy was never able to develop to independent economic status. The Dutch granted Suriname self rule in 1954 (while maintaining control), after which political parties were fashioned, consisting of strong ethnic factions with an elite based patron-client format (Dodge 1966). The Surinamese gained total independence from the Netherlands in 1975, resulting in an outpouring of citizens, seeking their hail in the Netherlands, as they had little faith in the new independent nation (Gowricharn & Schüster 2001).

A sizeable severance development purse accompanied the granted independence. Unfortunately, a large amount of the money was wasted on unrealistic projects, and or

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4 Bauxite became dominated by the Americans.
returned to the hands of Dutch contractors and Surinamese elites. According to Buddingh (1999:318): “the economical structure, including production, export and job opportunity, had changed very little.”

In 1980 the military overthrew the government under the direction of a Dutch trained army Lieutenant, Desi Bouterse. Promises of a better government and better life were never achieved as the patron-client system ballooned into a level of corruption never seen before. Executions of people who were significant intellectual countervoices to the revolutionary military regime resulted in another wave of emigration to the Netherlands, in particular of intellectual and cultural icons.

In response to the coup, the Dutch froze all development moneys on which the Surinamese were so dependent, sending the economy into a rapid downspin. Remittances and food supplies from relatives in the Netherlands kept the population afloat during the hard times. Elections in 1991 restored a democratic government and reinstated the development monies and the new government made an effort to return to some level of economic stability. The progress was undercut in 1997, when a different political party, under direction of Wijdenbos, a trustee of Bouterse, came to power. Distanciation from the Netherlands and high corruption sent the country further into an economic downspin. This political party was removed after only one term and serious efforts have been made since to stabilize the economy. While Dutch development moneys have been reinstated, they are only provided for Dutch approved projects.

Culturally and ideologically the Netherlands remain a consistent presence as well. Daily media programming provides news, political, and entertainment programs from the Netherlands. People will watch and listen because what happens in the Netherlands can
possibly affect their relatives. Therefore, continuous inundation with Dutch ideas and images is inescapable.

Although officially declared independent, it is fair to say that Suriname is still entwined with the Netherlands. The mere fact that well over 30% of the Surinamese population resides in the Netherlands, ensures a continuous relation for years to come. Meel (2001:150) underscores this relationship when he states:

In the Caribbean, Suriname’s extreme dependency on the Netherlands sets the country apart from neighbouring states. Sustained by the large Surinamese community in the Netherlands, the focus of attention of many Surinamese is still directed towards the former mother country. The continuous dominance is of crucial importance here. There is ample reason to assume that, for the time being, in terms of power and prestige, the Dutch language and culture will remain firmly anchored in the Surinamese society, unchallenged by Afro-Surinamese culture and Sranan Tongo, the republic’s lingua franca, and by the Hindustani and Javanese cultures, which are systematically supported by the Indian and Indonesian government respectively.
Placing the lived experience of the working class Surinamese in the context of globalization requires an exploration of the international forces that shape Surinamese life. The Netherlands has by far the largest influence on Suriname, given that its connection to Suriname is historical, financial, familial, ideological, and political. The United States is also a significant presence, but its presence is more limited to financial, military, and trade relations. Suriname does not have to negotiate the impact of these relationships in isolation however. Being that Suriname is imbedded within the Caribbean, the Caribbean serves as somewhat of a buffer. Being surrounded by countries with similar colonial legacies creates a space and impetus to start thinking about national identity, and economic and political independence and relations. Throughout the Caribbean, countries struggle with some of the same issues, and countries of the region
have been working on unifying and supporting each other against some of the harmful First World forces that affect them.

Thus, although unique, Suriname shares history and experience with its Caribbean counterparts. According to D’Agostino:

The legacies of conquest, European colonialism, the plantation system, African slavery, and the persistent influence of external powers have produced similar patterns of political change and are evident in the values, practices, and institutions prevailing throughout the region (2003:85).

There are indeed several areas in which Suriname is similar to other nations in the Caribbean, including a colonial foundation with a dominant Afro-Caribbean presence, an elite based democracy, international patron relations, significant migration, and the overlooked role of women in politics and the economy.

The history of the region starts with occupation in the 1500s by Europeans, at which time a large portion of the indigenous population was annihilated. From 1492, with the first invasion, to 1604, the Spanish maintained a monopoly in the region (Randall 2003). During early settlement, territories switched hands due to ongoing battles between European nations, sometimes up to ten times. Of the ten different powers that played a role in settling the Caribbean, the French, British, Spanish, and the Dutch became the most significant players (Boswell 2003).

The Dutch introduced the British and French to a plantation system of sugar cultivation. Dutch influence did not last as long as the other powers, but was nevertheless significant, especially in the slave trade. Sugar cultivation in the non-Hispanic colonies quickly took hold and required large amounts of labor. After the Native population was all but decimated, planters decided to use African slave labor
(Everett 1993). According to Boswell (2003), an estimate of four to five million enslaved Africans made it to the Caribbean, constituting up to sixty percent of the total stolen Africans. Most arrived during the peak of sugar era in the 18th Century. The Caribbean received ten times the amount of stolen Africans in comparison to North American colonies. The large number of Africans changed the demographics drastically and contributes to the dominant African-Caribbean presence today.  

The United States did not become involved in the region until after the end of the Civil War in the 1860s, and focused its attention on Cuba. The US invested heavily in Cuba, and when Cuba’s movement toward independence seemed to cause ‘instability’, the US joined the dispute and declared war on Spain in 1898. The US dethroned Spain as the great colonial power, and claimed Cuba as a US protectorate, while claiming Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam as US possessions. Consequently, the US gained a stronghold in the Caribbean and “the war also brought the US into a new role as colonial administrator in the Caribbean, setting the stage for the next Century of US hegemony in the region” (Randall 2003:66).

With the exception of Haiti, which obtained abolition in 1794, abolition for the different nations in the region took place between 1834 (British) and 1886 (Spanish). The abolition of slavery brought a need for replacement cheap labor, and consequently East Indian and Chinese laborers were brought in by the thousands throughout the region. The Dutch were the only colony that also imported migrant laborers from Indonesia, one of its other colonies. The large presence of Indo-Caribbeans has contributed to enduring

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5 The Spanish colonies did not get involved in sugar cultivation until the mid to late 1700s, hence their smaller numbers of people of African descent.
tensions, which in some cases has led to violence, namely in Trinidad and Guyana (Randall 2003, Buddignh 1999)

Decolonization in the Caribbean came in different forms for different countries (D’Agostino 2003, Randall 2003, Oostindie 1996). Haiti was the first to fight and gain its independence from the French, becoming the first black republic in 1804. The other French islands in contrast became overseas departments of the mother country in 1946, and in effect increased their dependence on France (Condé 2000). Spanish territories, including Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines were lost to the US in the Spanish American war in 1898, and obtained commonwealth status in 1952.

The British utilized a gradual approach to independence and instituted a Caribbeanized version of their Westminster parliamentary system. After independence the Anglophones attempted to unify in a Federation in 1958, involving Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and the Windward and Leeward Islands, but it was short lived and dissolved in 1962. Government remained mostly in the hands of white or light skinned elites.

The Dutch decolonized its territories, Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, St. Eustasius, Saba, St. Martin, and Suriname, through making them part of the Dutch Kingdom (Oostindie 1996, D’Agostino 2003). Aruba obtained separate self-governing status in 1986, in anticipation of full independence in 1996. They withdrew their petition for independence in 1990. Suriname is the only former territory to fight for its full independence, which was granted in 1975.

Throughout the Caribbean region, independence did not guarantee prosperity or even self-sufficiency, and many Caribbean citizens migrated in search of better lives.
Emigration to Europe and the United States took off post World War II. Although Caribbean migrants represented relatively small numbers in their respective receiving countries, they represented a significant percentage of the home population. For instance, currently, upwards of thirty percent of the Surinamese population reside in the Netherlands. Forty four percent of Puerto Ricans live in the United States, as do twenty five percent of the Barbadian population and twenty percent of the Jamaican population. Throughout the Caribbean, migration is a normal part of life for many families, and is what keeps families afloat (Conway 2003). Many of those who migrated during the first wave post World War II, intended to return, but did not. They became permanent residents of their host countries, and permanent reference points and material and ideological resources for those left behind.

Emigration is not only outward, it has existed within the region ever since the days of slavery (Baranov and Yelvington 2003). Suriname has had a long-term migrant labor relationship with neighboring Guyana, and more recently with Haiti and Brazil. Most of these laborers have made their way to the plantation, timber, and mining industry in the interior. The Brazilians, especially have found a niche in the gold industry. Inter island – and mainland – migration, has put so much pressure on already struggling small nations, that some have resorted to immigration restriction policies (Boswell 2003).

As long as there has been migration to the Netherlands, there has been re-migration back to Suriname, albeit in far smaller numbers (Bakker et al. 1993). It remains difficult to attract higher educated professionals back to Suriname. Similarly, many Surinamese young people who have the opportunity to pursue their college education in the Netherlands do not return. This “brain drain” which is also felt among
nurses, has limited the governmental support for foreign educational pursuits (Buma 2002). Whereas prior to mass migration, globalization came in the form of trade and political relations, mass migration has introduced globalization on the personal level, as no family can escape its impact.

Economically, the region has collectively been working on becoming viable on the global market. To an extent, all former colonies continued an economic dependent relationship with their former colonizers. Caribbean nations have collaborated in the formation of the Caribbean Common Market and Community (CARICOM) since 1973 (Erisman 2003). The CARICOM has focused its efforts on becoming an economic stronghold and less dependent on US and European exports and has made efforts to establish favorable extra-Caribbean relations. Although criticized for its lack of depth and vulnerability, the CARICOM has been a significant force in addressing the needs of Caribbean citizens.

Lastly, one commonality throughout the Caribbean region is the status of women in society. The status of women has been below that of men politically, economically, and financially in the Caribbean, and Suriname is no exception. Women have always been very active in the labor force throughout the Caribbean, however they mostly represent poor wage industries, especially with the influx of new globalized industries and tourism jobs (Safa 1995, Bolles 2003). It is hard to assess women’s full presence in the labor field, as they have been significantly involved in their nations’ respective informal economic practices (Wekker 1997, Bolles 2003). Women’s struggle for equality has been most visible in the Anglophone nations, where women played a
significant role in the labor movements in the 1930s, and to a lesser extent in the Hispanic Caribbean (Bolles 2003, Barriteau 1998, Mohammed 1998).

A rise in labor movements was also present in the 1930s in Suriname, but records do not indicate women playing a force as dominant as in the rest of the Caribbean (Buddingh 1999). Even though women in Suriname have been able to achieve high cultural status, they have failed to do so politically and economically. According to Wekker (1997), this is due to the fact, that when organizing, the differences of class and ethnicity have been too difficult to overcome in setting a unified agenda.

The Working Class Afro-Surinamese

The Afro-Surinamese are a unique African Diaspora population about whom very little is published academically. Given their existence in a multi-ethnic society, which strongly shapes their sense of identity, and the hard and continuous effects of globalization on their daily and personal lives, the Afro-Surinamese can serve as a strong example to explore the effects of globalization on the mental well being of an African Diaspora population.

Suriname is known and hailed as a model multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society where people of different ethnicities live in relative harmony with each other (Lewis 1994, St. Hilaire 2001). Even though language has united people officially in Dutch, and unofficially in Sranan Tongo, the respective ethnic groups have mostly held on to their different cultural traditions and norms. Ethnicity and associated culture shape the way people view and experience their world. One’s ethnic identity is shaped by one’s ethnic culture, and by its differentiating experiences with the other ethnicities. How working
class Afro-Surinamese view and practice their mental well being then, is based in a
culture that has been shaped over their course of history, starting even before they were
forcefully supplanted from Africa to Suriname. Ensuing I will present the course of
history that has shaped the particular Afro-Surinamese sense of identity as we know it
today.

The Afro-Surinamese are the descendants of the captured and enslaved Africans
who were brought to work on the Dutch plantations in Suriname from the 16th through
the 19th Centuries, as part of the Atlantic slave trade. The first Africans were brought to
Suriname by the English who established their colonies in Suriname in 1651. After
Suriname exchanged hands from the British to the Dutch in 1667, the Dutch continued
the practice of slave labor on their plantations, and established a slave trade monopoly.

There are different accounts of the ethnic composition of the imported Africans in
Suriname. According to Polimé (1992), imported Africans hailed mostly from the West
Coast, in particular the area between the Senegal River and the Congo River, with a large
representation of Yoruba, Ibo (current Nigeria) and Ashanti (current Ghana) peoples.
Bakker et al. (1993) add a word of caution stating that even though trade posts were
situated on the coast, many Africans were stolen from interior regions and transported to
the coast. They report that in addition to populations from Guinea, and the region
between the Slave Coast (current Togo, Benin, Nigeria) and the Gold Coast (Ghana), one
fourth of the African population came from Gabon, Kongo, Zaire and Angola. The Slave
Coast Africans were predominately of the Yoruba ethnicity, while the Gold Coast
represented the Ashanti (1993: 40). Africans from the Gold Coast were the most favored
“they were presumed to be very intelligent and hardworking, while the Angolese were rumored to be weak (1993: 40).”

Like other children of the African Diaspora, the Afro-Surinamese cannot pinpoint their direct heritage in Africa, but have a tendency to feel a strong affiliation with Ghana because of the many obvious Akan elements in Surinamese culture, ranging from language, to traditional religious symbols. Much has been written by scholars about survival, syncretism, and creation of New World African cultures (Herskovits 1936; 1958, Mintz and Price 1976, Yelvington 2001, Thornton 1998). Herskovits is most known for his discussion of African cultural survivals in the Diaspora, and is one of the few anthropologists to write in depth about Afro-Surinamese culture (1936). Also based on examination of Surinamese culture and Herskovits’ work, Mintz and Price (1976) propose that rather than direct African cultural survivals, the African Diaspora holds unique cultural expressions based on the survival of African cognitive templates.

Thornton (1998), in contrast, argues that in societies where slaves existed in isolated self-reproducing communities, slaves were able to preserve, recycle, and develop elements of their own African heritage. It seems this would be a plausible explanation for Suriname’s system of slavery. However, these models are not mutually exclusive, and the quest to determine which African cultures contributed directly or indirectly to Afro-Surinamese culture is mostly reserved for scholars. For practitioners of certain Afro-Caribbean religions such as Vodun and Condomblé for example, “genuineness and authenticity do not appear to be central concerns (Glazier 1996: 425).” Similarly, for the Afro-Surinamese, the connection to Ghana is an undisputed and accepted fact, even at the aspect of under-recognition of the other regions from which Africans were forcibly taken.
The Dutch distinguished between original Africans, and their offspring born in Suriname. Original Africans were referred to as “Salt Water Negroes” and were considered more troublesome than Surinamese born African descendants, who were referred to as “Creoles”. Salt Water Negroes were more resistant to slavery and were more likely to run away or commit suicide (Bakker et al. 1993). Since the beginning of the plantation system, resistance and escape from the plantations were rampant; so much so that communities of Marooned Africans developed in the interior. These Maroon societies were eventually able to negotiate independent status.

The particularity of Surinamese plantation life during colonialism has contributed significantly to a particular sense of Afro-Surinamese identity. The Dutch slave system was based on an absentee landlord system. The plantations consisted of large numbers of Africans and Creoles, under the director of a European administrator and a few Creole assistants. The people of African descent outnumbered Europeans ten to one by the second half of the 18th Century, and on some plantations 65 to one (Bakker et al. 1993). These numbers instilled great fear in the Europeans who resorted to physical violence, and strong legal codes and laws, to maintain order. Slaves were punished for the smallest trespasses. Cruelty by Dutch plantation owners gained reputation through the writings of John Gabriel Stedman, a professional mercenary who was hired to fight the Maroons and lived in Suriname from 1773 to 1777. Other accounts followed, among which Governor Bonham, who served in Suriname from 1811 to 1816, is quoted as saying:

I have remained in the West Indies for 21 years and in every colony I have heard that it was severe punishment for a Negro to be sold to a planter in Suriname, and now I’m finding that this is true. I have been in no colony where the slaves are treated this poorly, are provided with
such poor food and clothing provisions, all the while being forced to work such a heavy load beyond their power (Bakker et al. 1993: 47).

Oostindie and Van Stripriaan (1995) pose a complementary if not alternative ecological explanation for the harsh living conditions of slaves in Suriname. Due to Suriname’s soil condition, the Dutch had to use polder technology to make the soil suitable for agricultural usage, similar to their practices in the Netherlands. Poldering consists of gaining the land from the water. Through an intricate system of irrigation and channels, water is drained, and underlying soil is exposed and turned into usable land. This is how a large part of the Netherlands came into existence as it lies below sea level. Poldering requires continuous and hard labor, as it did in Suriname. Oostindie and Van Stripriaan explain (1995: 81):

Digging and keeping up the dikes, waterworks, sluices, etc., with nothing but manual labor must have been formidable tasks. One is hard pressed to find comparable labor demands on plantations in other parts of the Americas.

Because Surinamese plantations were so labor intensive, they had more slaves than other areas of the Caribbean. In the late 18th Century, an average coffee plantation in Suriname held 110 to 120 slaves, while a coffee plantation in St. Domingue (current Haiti) held an average of 40 slaves per plantation. Through polder technology, Surinamese plantations were able to produce and harvest on an ongoing basis, without a fallow break. Other countries did not function on such an ongoing cycle. The labor burden was harshest on sugar plantations, which involved around the clock labor hours, and tasks more strenuous and dangerous than any other crop. The poldering of the plantations resulted in plantations physically and socially functioning like islands. One
positive outcome of this polder technology, was the production of fertile soil, which could be used by the slaves for subsistence farming.

In addition to the hard living conditions, the cruelty suffered contributed to a strong sense of cohesion and identity among the enslaved. This is supported by the ever and continuous efforts of overt and covert resistance, and by the use of socio-cultural expression in song, dance, stories, music and children’s games, which were full of hidden critiques (Herskovitz 1936, De Drie 1985, Buddingh 1999, Bush 1986, Buyne 1989).

The song in the children’s game Faya siton which stems back to slavery days, tells the story of how slaves were punished for not bringing in their quota of coffee for the day. If they failed to do so, they were forced to hold stones in their hands, which had been heated in fire. Their hands would burn, and at times the infections would lead to death. The song goes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faya siton</th>
<th>Fiery (hot) stone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No bron mi so</td>
<td>Do not burn me so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No bron mi so</td>
<td>Do not burn me so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No bron mi so</td>
<td>Do not burn me so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agen masra Jantje</td>
<td>Again Master John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiri suma piken</td>
<td>Killed somebody’s child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subsistence farming also played an important role in identity affirmation for the slaves. Other than being an important resource for survival, subsistence farming – and small animal husbandry for that matter – provided a strong sense of independence and self-sufficiency, especially when slaves were allowed to sell or barter some of their wares (Buddingh 1999). Furthermore, there was a law that prohibited slave children from being sold away from their mothers. Of course this law was broken, especially after the Dutch stock market crisis in 1773 (ten Hove 1996). Nonetheless, this law resulted in people
having a strong connection to their maternal lineage and physical place, as many slave families were connected to their respective plantations for generations. All these plantation factors, ranging from physical isolation and cohesively experienced cruelty, to maternal lineage, contributed to a strong sense of identity and connection to the plantation as home place. To this day, Afro-Surinamese identity remains tied to plantation homesteads.

Within these cohesive communities, however, there were always forces at play that tried to create divisions, sometimes successfully so. Children born from relations between European men and slave women received higher status and better treatment than slaves of “pure” African descent. This group of lighter skinned Creoles evolved into a class between the European planters and the African and Creole slaves (Pierce 1998, Hoetink 1973). This development was encouraged by the European planters, as it provided a buffer between the Europeans and their slaves. Although related to the Dutch, the light skinned Creoles were never fully accepted or invited to belong to the Dutch class, yet ideologically they related more to them than to their relatives of African descent. Today this group does not refer to themselves as Creole, which connotes a strong African heritage. Instead, they refer to themselves as “Dougla”, meaning of mixed heritage.

Although the Afro-Surinamese are historically related to the upper-class, lighter-skinned Creoles and the Maroons, these three groups have developed into distinct ethnic groups over the years. The light-skinned Creoles associate more closely with their Dutch heritage and relatives as opposed to their African heritage, and live an upper-class lifestyle. As such, their life styles are far different and have been less adversely affected by
globalization, and in many instances have improved. Maroon identity remains anchored in nature and traditional customs, even as many have made their way to the city of Paramaribo and the Netherlands.

In this research, I focus on the working-class Afro-Surinamese, although the lower-class Afro-Surinamese form a large group as well. The effect of globalization however is so drastic for people on the lowest rungs of society, that an examination of their lives would need to be done separately. I believe that though strongly affected, people of the working class have some ways to maneuver and make choices about their well being. I assume that for those who constantly struggle with even the basic necessities for survival, rules for mental well being exist which are starkly different from those who have some negotiation power.

Spirituality has contributed to a distinct Afro-Surinamese identity in the spiritual belief system of *winti*. Due to their social distance from the Europeans, and due to the large number of Africans and Creoles present on the plantations, a unique Afro-Surinamese spiritual system developed out of the different elements of the various spiritual systems that were represented among the slaves. Unlike the spiritual systems in other slave societies such as Brazil and Haiti, where the slaves lived in closer proximity to the Europeans and where traditional practices were purposely syncretized, the spiritual system of *winti* was not syncretized with elements of Christianity. *Winti* provided a system of spirituality, medicine and social therapy that played a significant role in people’s survival (Stephen 1983, Wooding 1972).

*Winti* is a system that is not based in text. Instead it is based in practical experiences and expressions and is guided by the knowledge of ritual experts and family
kinship networks. It provides freedom for private interpretation, and the expert knowledge is often housed in the senior women of the family, providing them with cultural capital and status (van der Pijl 2002, van Wetering 1995). As winti has evolved over the centuries, it has adopted cultural elements of the other ethnic groups’ cultural systems, including Christianity (Stephen 1983). Winti is said to be practiced, to some extent, among the majority of working and lower classes Afro-Surinamese in Suriname (Simons 1993). It remains a marker for those who have maintained their African heritage, as opposed to those who have relinquished it (upper-class light-skinned Creoles, devout Christian Afro-Surinamese).

Since its inception, winti was regarded as something uncivilized and backward by the European settlers. Stigmatization became strictly enforced since Emancipation in 1863 when any association with winti was forbidden through joint government and Christian establishment assimilation policies. Winti remained forbidden by law until 1972. Practiced mostly in secrecy, in the last 25 years or so, winti has become more public, reflective of an upsurge in African identity awareness which has made slavery more publicly debated and explored in Suriname and the Netherlands (Lamur 2001). Shame and stigma have remained, especially with the continued damnation by the Christian church. It must be mentioned that the division between winti and church is not clear cut, however, as many Christians practice winti in secrecy, while quite a few reject it (publicly) as idolatry (Hoogbergen 2002, Simons 1993, van der Pijl 2002).

Lastly, Afro-Surinamese identity is solidified through relationships with and comparisons to other ethnic groups in Suriname. East Indians (called Hindustani), Javanese, and Chinese came to Suriname in the mid 1800s as contract laborers to replace
the upcoming loss of free slave labor with Emancipation in 1863. The ethnic groups were socially, politically, religiously, and geographically segregated (Lewis 1994, Hoefte 2001). The East Indians and Javanese occupied the agricultural and peasant sectors in the rural districts. Whereas the first generation of Chinese contract laborers freely mixed and were taken up by the other ethnic groups, the subsequent generations and Chinese immigrants made their niche in the merchant sector. Lebanese merchants made their way into Suriname at the end of the 19th Century by way of French Guyana (Loor 1992).

After World War II many Hindustani and Javanese also moved to the city. The Hindustani have since become dominant in the business sector, and have politically and economically rivaled the Afro-Surinamese population. Suriname has evolved into a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society wherein – unlike the rest of the Caribbean – ethnic groups maintain their separate institutions, while living in relative harmony. Although these populations have been in Suriname for well over 100 years, the Afro-Surinamese often feel as more “authentic Surinamese” because of their longer history, and their history of slavery (Hoefte 2001, Buddingh 1999, Oostindie 1996).

The 20th and 21st Centuries have brought additional international movements that affect Afro-Surinamese identity. When Suriname received its independence from the Netherlands in 1975, Afro-Surinamese populations (and other Surinamese ethnic groups as well) immigrated en masse to the Netherlands (Gowricharn & Shustern 2001). Whereas prior it had mostly been the elite, education oriented people who had migrated, now it was the working class, lower class, and even the rural farmers who were over represented in the migration population. In addition to the break up of many families,
Dutch ideology and culture was introduced in Afro-Surinamese life on a much more intimate and consistent level.

The 20th Century has also brought an influx of immigrants from neighboring Guyana, Haiti, and Brazil into Suriname, in search for work and better lives. Although present in large numbers, publicly they are often ignored and they are never mentioned in any kind of official description or depiction of Suriname’s ethnic make up (Oostindie 1996, Hoogbergen 2004). One can only speculate why this is so. What is remarkable is that the government and tourist industry hold on to a public image of a multi-ethnic Suriname that is based on a reality of nearly a century ago. I personally believe that the use of artificial ethnic representations obscures the structural hardships people are subjected to. Thus, it is easier to refer to Maroons as the “natural people from the bush” as opposed to thousands of civil war refugees who live in a substandard housing development in Paramaribo, without electricity or water. Similarly, by silencing the presence of poor Haitians, we are not made aware of the many who have been housed in condemned housing.

As described, numerous factors have contributed to a particular sense of Afro-Surinamese identity since African people’s presence in Suriname. As a result, today what it means to be Afro-Surinamese is mostly tied to living in the city of Paramaribo, in a continuous relation and exchange with people of many different ethnic identities. City life can be considered a second homestead, however, as people’s identity and lineage are still connected to rural home grounds of former plantations. Living in the city then holds a unique history, which contributes to a sense of identity. At the same time, part of one’s
identity is anchored across the Atlantic Ocean to relatives who are continuously being “othered” in the Netherlands and who are having their own multi-cultural experiences.

Afro-Surinamese have survived and thrived in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Ethnic identity has shaped cultural norms and behaviors, which might have been key to Afro-Surinamese survival in the ever-changing conditions of their lives.

Paramaribo - 2005

Since Paramaribo’s inception it has been known as a multicultural city with a liberal atmosphere. The year is 2005 and religious freedom is still the norm in Paramaribo. This city is one of only three places in the world where an Islamic Mosque and Jewish temple stand side by side. Still known for its cultural diversity, Paramaribo has people in all colors, shapes and sizes.

With a freedom in architecture, there are as many different types of neighborhoods as there are groups of people. People build to their liking, as they see fit, and as they can afford (Verkuijl 1992). By merely stating a name of a neighborhood, one is easily informed about the class and ethnicity of the people who live there. Wooden shacks, remnants of a slavery era long gone, easily are found in proximity of contemporary villas. A new trend is developing as, like in the West, gated communities are being developed, aimed at attracting American dollars and Dutch Euros, and at keeping the pervasive poverty out of sight.

Downtown Paramaribo after the noon hour, and the scene is rapidly taken over by a sea of blues, that is school children in blue uniforms. Once plagued by scarcity, now downtown is overloaded with consumer goods. Brazilian fashions, Japanese cell-phones,
Internet café’s where the youth play games or chat on line, Dutch pastries and cheaply made Chinese goods, all can be found here. Consumer goods stalled in European styled boutiques and stores stand in contrast to street vendors who sell home made or homegrown wares from homemade wooden carts, out of car trunks, sitting on street sidewalks, or out of windows and front porches of family homes. People supplement their income by actively participating in an informal economy. Janitors, teachers, bankers, and government workers, all have to draw on their creative ingenuity to broaden their income as their salaries are insufficient for survival.

There are far too many cars, many of them the latest models, imported from Japan and China with the steering wheel on the right, nicely adjusted for the left lane traffic, a little leftover from British occupation way-back-when. Not a mere ten years ago the “car scape” of Suriname was totally different. At the time, Suriname seemed to be the dumping ground for old and discarded automobiles. Lenient import regulations and miracle working automechanics helped maintain cars which were easily 20 years old and looked like they had their best days behind them. As the economy recovered, so did access to credit, hence the reformed auto landscape. For many, automobiles remain unaffordable, and even bus fare provides a strain on already meager budgets. Brightly and artistically painted small city buses, of Chinese manufacture, driven by Hindustani “chiefs”, blare the latest Jamaican dance hall music. They never have a problem packing their buses with patrons.

International NGO’s are a regular part of the landscape. Building plaques depicting donations from Germany, Canada and other countries attest to the continuous influx of foreign moneys that help keep this city afloat. Beautiful old colonial buildings
stand downtown. Housing government departments provides unfortunately no assurance of maintenance or upkeep. And thus, a beautifully maintained colonial building can stand beside a deteriorating rotting one, both in service of the government.

All the cinemas are gone, lost to the video and dvd market, with its illegal copies of the latest films. They are replaced by casinos, the new form of entertainment, which are rising across town like buns in the oven. Paramaribo is a city of contrasts: extreme wealth alongside extreme poverty; latest technology, yet few resources to maintain it, ethnic harmony yet segregated neighborhoods, and so on.

Paramaribo houses 70% of the national population. Paramaribo is politically and economically a dominant city, not just nationally, but internationally as well. De Bruijne (2001) labels Paramaribo as a ‘plantopolis’, meaning a city whose outward orientation overrules the internal direction of the country. He adds that even though the center-periphery model is hardly ever used anymore, in the case of Paramaribo and the rest of Suriname, the model is highly accurate as Paramaribo is really the only major city from which everything flows including goods, finances, decisions and ideas.

In spite of its outward look and international status, Paramaribo has the feel of a village. The majority of the country’s population lives here, and the number of last names seems limited. By hearing someone’s last name, one usually knows somebody who must be related to the person. One quickly gets the feel that “everybody is related to everybody.” The large number of multi-generational households ensures a continuous connection with the past as do repeated references to plantation homesteads of origin. And thus people may look outward in terms of materials, economics, and politics, as De
Bruijne contends, emotionally however, the attachment to the interior of the country remains.

Paramaribo was chosen as the research site because of its easy access to the research population, the working class Afro-Surinamese. Paramaribo has the largest Afro-Surinamese population and is also the one city in Suriname where the forces of globalization are most seen and felt. From theater plays to government seating, every major event takes place here. Paramaribo is an international city with a direct connection to the country’s international airport.

The cultural organization NAKS and the department of Culture Studies in Paramaribo functioned as the primary research sites. They each provided office space and administrative support. NAKS helped in providing initial access into the research population and it served as the main local supporter of my research.

NAKS has been in existence since 1947 and is one of the oldest and most well-known Afro-Surinamese organizations in Suriname. NAKS started initially as a community organization dedicated to cultural and sports activities for the Afro-Surinamese population. The acronym N.A.K.S. originally stood for Na Arbeid Komt Sport, which literally translates into “After Labor Comes Sports” or freely translates into “work before pleasure.” However, since NAKS has expanded to far more than a recreational organization, they prefer to be known as “NAKS” without the acronym reference.

NAKS has expanded since its early recreational days, with an additional focus on “the improvement and strengthening of the social and economic life conditions of the lower and middle income populations in and around Paramaribo (NAKS 2002: 1).” It
provides programming ranging from cultural arts, music, and theater to business development training. NAKS is locally and nationally known for its dedication to Afro-Surinamese folk arts, and is often sent to international festivals to represent Afro-Surinamese culture.

NAKS was chosen because as an entry site the activities of the organization closely matched the pursuit of this research. The concept of well-being is included in the organization’s vision statement. NAKS is located in a working class neighborhood, providing direct access to a working class population. One of NAKS’ goals is to develop a research and documentation program for its members.

The Department of Culture Studies had hired me as a part-time “specialist in Creole culture”. They continued their support while I pursued my dissertation research. They are also interested in the documentation of this work and in eventually housing it in their library. My affiliation with NAKS and the department of Culture Studies brought me in contact with numerous important people and organizations in the community. For example, I came in contact with several cultural organizations, youth centers, male societies, female societies, and so on.

I selected two of these organizations in addition to NAKS, to use as additional entry into the Afro-Surinamese community and to find my research subjects, namely the National Women’s Movement (NVB), and the men and women’s lodge (fraternal and sorority societies) order of Mechanics. Each of these groups is part of an extensive network of contacts in the Afro-Surinamese community.
Mental Health in Paramaribo

The Surinamese mental health care system most closely resembles that of mental health described in the African literature. There is one psychiatric hospital, the Psychiatric Center of Suriname (PCS), for the whole country, which is located in Paramaribo. Funding or rather the lack of, is always an issue. Very recently newspaper reports relayed accounts from the director of the hospital, in which he describes a gloomy situation where the hospital has a shortage of qualified personnel and medicines (Peneux 2005).

During my research, I interviewed the then acting director of the PCS in 2004. He explained that the institution would like to offer a three part day treatment program, consisting of custodial (day) care, supplemental mental health counseling, and job and skills training. Due to a lack of funds and qualified staff, they have only been able to offer custodial day care. During my two years in Suriname, the PCS opened a walk-in support facility for the homeless population.

A lot of homeless people fill the streets, many of whom suffer from mental illness and or drug addiction. There has been some suspicion that the opening of the homeless day program has just as much to do with removing the panhandling homeless from public spaces, as it has to do with the provision of care. This has become especially noticeable as efforts to remove them from the streets have always been heightened during public government functions and tourist events.

The treatment model used at the PCS is purely Western. For the average Afro-Surinamese person, treatment at the psychiatric hospital is purely for “crazies” and highly stigmatized, something the new director addressed in his speech at the 110 year
celebration of the hospital on October 1, 2005. He also identified the shortage of professionally trained staff, and the lack of a national training program.

I was unable to identify other professional mental health care services that were frequented by the average Afro-Surinamese person, other than AIDS services. I was unable to receive information on available treatment services from the department of health, nor from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). I was told to leave my name and a doctor would contact me. I never received a call.

Traditional healers and spiritualist churches seem to fill the void in mental health services, as they do in Africa. The use of traditional healers is not limited to the use of Afro-Surinamese healers. People do not shy away from using Hindostani, Javanese, Amerindian, or Maroon traditional healers. However, the first and most prevalent mental health care provider seems to be the family, who protects, cares for, and sometimes hides the mental health status of a family member.

This chapter has introduced Suriname and its people in 2005. It has provided a comprehensive account of all the factors; historical, global, national, and local, that contribute to a certain life experience for working-class, Afro-Surinamese people in Paramaribo. Now that the stage is set, we can learn how the research proceeded.
I was excited yet deeply shaken and moved. I had expected a social yet intellectual exchange of information. I would merely guide and perhaps stimulate the exchange. And indeed, that is how it started out, but ... all of a sudden the mood changed.

October 2004, a sweltering evening at the cultural center NAKS. Eleven adults, seated in a large semi-circle, look at me questioning, not sure why they are present. They were supposed to have been informed by their department leaders about the purpose of the meeting. Official invitation letters had been sent. Things do not always work as intended. From the look on their faces I suspected that they had been summoned by their department leaders, without much explanation at all. Suddenly I felt very silly, realizing how foreign these types of official procedures were.

I walked them through the consent form which they all signed, more blank faces. I looked up and looked at my aunt, my mother’s oldest sister, at 40 years my senior she is one of the oldest members and was one of the oldest persons in the room. I calmed down. These people knew me, they knew my family, and they were my family. They might not have known exactly about the event scheduled that evening, but they knew me, that I was one of them who had been working almost daily on the grounds, doing positive things with the young people. They had attended my lectures, watched me perform. Things would be okay.

As we begin there is only one man in the room, later he will be joined by two more, still he is outnumbered by the women. As I pose the first question, I am met by a hesitated silence. Two or three people answer succinctly and quietly. Gradually the conversation picks up, until the issue of poverty is broached.

“We do not suffer in Suriname, because you can find something to eat everyday”. This is an argument I would hear repeatedly throughout my stay in Suriname. “We do not suffer? We do not suffer?” I heard the sole male voice respond... and with that the floodgates were opened. What followed was a heated debate about experienced poverty and who or what was to blame. Those that sat quietly joined in and tensions and volume rose steadily and quickly.

It became clear to me that I had to shift hats. No longer the thoughtful observant, shifting into therapist mode, I quickly attuned myself to the emotions in the room. Calming the emotions and redirecting the conversation became my primary objective. I was witnessing a purging of a sort. I jumped in and did what I was trained to do so many years before.

“People do not get opportunities to share about these things”, someone would explain to me later. “There is a need, a dire need”, they
further explained, “but there is no forum.” What was I thinking, how could I have expected that talking about these deep personal issues of identity and mental well-being would remain a detached, intellectual exchange?

After the session, I stayed behind with my students, my head still reeling with what I had just witnessed. My students were equally impressed and excited about the evening. Three had been taking observation notes, while a fourth had helped with distributing and taking up consent forms. My college student admitted that she had started out taking notes, but after a while had become so engrossed in the exchange that she had stopped writing.

As I sat down behind the wheel of my car, ready to drive home, I took a deep breath and paused for a minute. It was really happening. All this thinking, writing and planning; now it was really happening. I did not know whether I was more excited about the discussion session, or about the fact that my students were so thrilled about their research experience.

This excerpt describes my first night of a series of discussion sessions. I have to acknowledge that this section of the dissertation is by far the most challenging to write. The methodology section not only lays out step by step the methods used, it also legitimizes or negates the value of the research. This is an ongoing struggle for qualitative research in the academy. This is an even greater struggle for methods based in black feminist theory and spirituality.

Numerous feminist and other non-standard epistemological approaches advocate alternative, creative methods of research (Hill Collins 1991, Smith 1990, McClaurin 2001). These methods are supposed to “decolonize”, transform, or introduce anti-hegemonic epistemology into the academy. Using non-standardized epistemological techniques carries great risk however, of which the ultimate risk is dismissal from the academy. Consequently, I have encountered ethnographies which on the surface seem to be radically different, yet their methods remain rather standard (Bolles 1996, McClaurin 2001). Breaking away and covering new ground is thus not as easy as it seems.
Research Design

My research methodology combined ethnography with the principles of Black Feminist Theory according to Hill Collins (1991) and paid deference to the aspect of spirituality. In addition I used elements from Third World Feminist and Caribbean Feminist Theory. From Hill Collins I used her four elements of knowledge production. I focused extensively on the lived experience. I engaged in dialogue and reciprocal relations with people. I used affect, when appropriate, and allowed myself to be held accountable. I further worked from the perspective that thought and action go together, and that this work ought to be used for the betterment of the Afro-Surinamese community. Using Third World Feminist Theory, I expanded Black Feminist Theory to pay attention to the roles of ethnicity, inter-ethnic dynamics, and nationality as significant factors that influence Afro-Surinamese lives. From Caribbean Feminist Theory, I used the concept of activism and education. I designed my research project with the goal of educating and training local people about the research process.

Lastly, I used Schiele’s (1996) model of spirituality, which acknowledges that I am, in fact, connected to my research population, that affect is appropriate, and that there is an invisible world beyond the material world, with which I have to deal. I interpreted this last aspect as the presence of forces unseen that can guide and interfere with intended plans of action at any given time. As such, I could plan my research to the smallest detail, yet events happened over which I had no control.

Schiele’s model of spirituality does not lay out how spirituality is actually used however, and hence I decided to pay attention to spirituality as part of the research
experience, with the intent of using my experiences to make some concrete contributions to incorporating spirituality in research practices.

Research Techniques

I chose an ethnographic research design that utilized qualitative anthropological techniques to help answer the three questions I posed in the research, namely

1. What constitutes mental well being?
2. What challenges mental well being?; and
3. How is mental well being maintained?

Techniques consist of discussion sessions, group interviews, individual interviews (structured and unstructured), free listing questionnaires, and participant observation. I used no deception. A description of each technique follows:

*Discussion sessions* consist of a group of attendants who are presented with a few general questions throughout the course of a specific time period. They are encouraged to discuss the issues among themselves. The discussion leader guides the discussion, making sure the discussion flows well. The discussion leader can also ask probing questions or clarifying questions based on what is said in the discussion. Attendants are expected and guided to bounce thoughts and ideas off of each other, rather than solely direct their answers to the discussion leader. This type of group discussion is also referred to as an exploratory group interview (Weller 1998, Fontana and Frey 1994).

*Group interviews* are similar to the group discussions, but more structured. Rather than general questions, specific questions are asked of the group. The discussion leader is more active in keeping the attendants on topic, as a number of questions need to
be answered in a specific time period. Attendants are still encouraged to bounce thoughts and ideas off of each other (Fontana and Frey 1994).

A structured individual interview consists of a one-on-one interview between an interviewer and interviewee, during which the interviewee asks specific pre-selected questions. This type of interview does not leave much room for flexibility either in changing the questions or in responding (Bernard 1995, O’Reilly 2005).

An unstructured individual interview consists of a one-on-one interview between an interviewer and interviewee, during which the interviewee is asked some guided questions, but is rather free in the course of answering and can take the response in a direction he/she might prefer. The interviewer is free to change or add questions based on how the interview is going (Bernard 1995, O’Reilly 2005).

Free listing questionnaires consist of short, simple questions, intended to illicit immediate “gut” responses (Fleisher and Hampton 1998). An example might be: “What are the first three things that come to mind when you hear the term Afro-Surinamese culture?”

Participant observation consists of submerging oneself in the culture of study and participating with regular activities alongside the population. Experiences and observations are systematically recorded in field notes. The personal experience and the shared experience with the subjects is key to this type of investigating (Dewalt et al. 1998). My participant observation notes came from living in a working class neighborhood in Paramaribo, and working with working class Afro-Surinamese, on an Afro-Surinamese dance project.
I had not initially planned on collecting life histories, but during the research it became clear to me that I needed to do so. Life histories are the recollections people divulge about the course of their lives (Bernard 1995).

Almost all interviews and the life histories were recorded on audio tape. All interviews were recorded in writing.

Recruitment of Participants

The population of study was the working class Afro-Surinamese population in Paramaribo, Suriname. Entry into this community was facilitated through three different types of community organizations; the socio-cultural organization NAKS, the National Women’s Movement (NVB), and the men and women’s lodge (fraternal and sorority societies). Each of these groups is part of an extensive network of contacts in the Afro-Surinamese community. I used convenience samples for the recruitment of the participants in my initial group discussions, and snowball sampling to recruit some participants for the subsequent individual interviews.

A convenience sample consists of utilizing anyone who is willing to participate, but has the danger of providing a skewed or biased sample. When using a convenience sample, effort is always made to choose a population sample that is representative of the chosen topic (Bernard 1995). I therefore selected three different types of organizations to represent the community of working class Afro-Surinamese. Since organizations were the best and most efficient way to gain entry, and given that my population category was broad, I deemed using the convenience sample as the best method.
Snowball samples consist of referrals from key informants (Bernard 1995, Trotter and Schensul 1998). Snowball samples also carry the risk of bias, however. By the time I pursued individual interviews, I was looking for individuals with specific ‘expert’ knowledge. For this situation, specific referrals were necessary.

As stated, I considered my category to be broad, and thus sought a broad sample of the working class community, including males and females, youth, adults, and elders. For this reason I chose NAKS, the NVB, and the Lodge as sites of entry. NAKS was going to give me access to people ranging in age from youth through senior adults. The Lodge would provide me access to older working class Afro-Surinamese adults, mostly over the age of 50. The NVB would provide me with access to women. This turned out a little bit differently.

The NVB has women’s groups throughout the city. These groups are either support groups, or dedicated to a specific theme. I was referred to two Afro-Surinamese women’s groups by the NVB. One was rather far out of my immediate vicinity, which I did not pursue due to unreliable transportation. The other group, which was in my neighborhood, turned out to be a group for Maroon women who were working on their literacy skills and who spoke no Dutch and very little Sranan (Surinamese). This group turned out to be non-suitable for the study. The NVB then referred me to Stibula, a community center in a working class Afro-Surinamese neighborhood. Stibula facilitated meetings with a group of adults from the area, and a group of teens from the neighborhood high school. Both groups consisted of both males and females.

I first had personal contact with leading figures at each of the organizations, which I followed up with a written description of the research and a formal invitation for
participation. Each invitation stressed that members as well as non-members were encouraged to participate, and that participation was voluntary. The non-member invitation was mainly aimed at the NAKS and Lodge participation, because I assumed that people who participate or are members in organizations, are a particular kind of people and may be more actively involved in issues outside of the house. I did not emphasize the same for the Stibula center participants, because these subjects were not members of an organization, but community residents recruited through the community center.

Confounding Circumstances

Two things particularly influenced the course of my research. First, I did not have a grant or other type of financial funding to support my study, hence I had to work to maintain myself and my family. I decided that if I had to work, I wanted to design the job for myself. I created the ultimate job by writing a research proposal to study traditional Afro-Surinamese dance, and received support from NAKS, the Anton de Kom University, and the Department of Culture to execute the project. The project was indeed my ultimate job, but it was difficult to get paid. I had to wait eleven months for my paycheck from the government, for example. As my savings ran out, I was faced with some difficult issues trying to provide for my family. Looking back, I received first hand experience of being part of the struggling working class Afro-Surinamese population. I learned about accessing resources, asking for help, hustling second and third jobs, prayer, and daily miracles. I learned about disappointments, anger, and forgiveness.
Secondly, I found out shortly after my arrival in Suriname that I was pregnant. Being a single parent of two sons, about to embark on a double research endeavor, the realization of my pregnancy came as a shock, to say the least. With the comforting words and support of my oldest son, I decided that I would continue with the journey as planned and that we would make room for one more. As I worked my ideal job and took care of my sons, I had to navigate through a medical care system that ranged from nurturing to archaic, folk beliefs about pregnancy and infant care, and my own physical limitations. I learned about disillusion, depression, determination, perseverance, and listening to my body.

Having my baby in Suriname brought me even closer to the Afro-Surinamese people. The fact that I opted to have my baby in Suriname, rather than in the US amazed several people, something I did not appreciate until I went to the hospital where basic items such as soap and towels were not provided. It also created a nurturing supportive relationship with several women, and fostered their respect, which people would express to me on an individual basis.

These factors, my financial situation and need to work, and my pregnancy and subsequent expanded child care responsibilities, significantly influenced my research practices. Whereas it limited my availability and capability to go out and meet people for interviews at times, it did provide me with incredible first hand participatory experiences. They were by no means the only factors that influenced the research. The national election was another major factor that influenced the research. The “circus” like events surrounding the elections severely limited my access to people temporarily, while again providing me with outstanding first hand participatory experiences.
There were two other confounding circumstances: my dance research project, and my students who were supposed to serve as research assistants. The dance project became larger than expected. I had expected to be able to finish the project within a year. I had gravely underestimated the amount of work involved in training my students and presenting the project to the community. It took at least one year for people to become comfortable with the idea of people studying and presenting traditional Afro-Surinamese dance. The logistics of teaching and working for the government also lengthened the project beyond original expectations. As my dance work was my main source of income, and as my dance project was not finished within the one year, I continued it into the second year. As a result, I worked on both my dissertation research and dance research at the same time. However, working on Afro-Surinamese dance, with an Afro-Surinamese population provided an excellent source of participant observation material for the dissertation research.

It had been my intention to utilize my students from the dance project as assistants in my dissertation research project on mental well being, but I discovered that their level of competency was not sufficient to do so. I had underestimated their level of training for such an endeavor. Some of my students were as young as 16, and I was expecting college level work out of them. The readings I provided were college level readings, and were in English, something that also proved to be a problem. In order for them to participate as assistants in my dissertation research, they needed a higher level of independent working skills. But all was not lost. As described in the opening vignette of this section, I structured their participation as a learning experience, followed each time
by discussion sessions. Participation for them in the dissertation research was on a voluntary basis, and they only participated (as observers) in the discussion sessions.

In retrospect, the research was planned, but elements of it also “fell into place, presented themselves, just happened, or came about by inspiration in the field.” Whether divine intervention, ancestral guidance, or personal spontaneity, there are things that shape our work that we do not plan for and over which we have no control. In spite of these issues, I feel with confidence that I collected the information I was supposed to receive. The eventual research project then lasted from August 2003 through June 2005 and consisted of four phases: pre-research phase; information gathering; interviewing and data collection; and data analysis and ethnography construction.

Pre-research Phase

I consider my first year in Suriname (August 2003 to August 2004) to be the pre-research phase. This phase allowed me to engage in pre-research activities; build rapport and introduce the research to the population; locate sites of research; get comfortable with the language; and finalize strategic planning for the dissertation research.

I started in October 2003 with the traditional Afro-Surinamese dance research project, which took the form of a participatory action research project, with a strong learning component. I had an average of 20 young people, whom I trained in anthropological research methods, public speaking, organizing, choreographing, and dance instruction.

As a direct outcome of the dance work, I was able to build rapport and introduce myself and my work to the public. I did not realize until well into the second year, how
important it had been for me to be there for a year before starting the actual dissertation research. Dewalt et. al. (1998) and O’Reilly (2005) discuss the importance of establishing rapport and gaining access to the population. I did not encounter any difficulties in doing so for a number of reasons. I had a long history in Suriname, and Paramaribo in particular, through my family. My mother’s family is very well known in Suriname for their involvement in the cultural arts. Secondly, my maiden name, which is my father’s last name, is a very common Surinamese name, like “Smith” or “Johnson” in the United States. I made sure to always use my maiden name alongside my married name. This would always evoke immediate recognition, and to my surprise, people would generally choose to address me by my maiden name and totally ignore my married name. Furthermore, I had a history of executing dance projects in Suriname, having been there in 1996, 2000, and 2002, and people remembered.

My work with the dance project gave me a lot of publicity. Television appearances, interviews on the radio and TV, newspaper articles about our work – including some I wrote myself – and public lectures made me a rather popular, if not well-known person. Whenever I talked about the dance research, I would always also mention the upcoming dissertation research.

Living in Suriname for a year prior to the research, especially helped in locating the sites for the research. I was already well familiar with NAKS, and had an established relationship with them. I was not that familiar with the NVB or the Lodge order of the Mechanics. My first year in Suriname led me to believe that the Lodge in general, and the NVB are some of the most established and important organizations for working class
Afro-Surinamese people in Suriname. Through a contact in NAKS, I was introduced to these organizations, and was welcomed with open arms.

The pre-research phase also served as a significant asset in learning to negotiate the language. Dutch is the official language and Sranan Tongo or Sranan, a Creole language, is the lingua franca. I am fluent in Dutch, as it is my first language. I am also proficient in Sranan, and fully understand it, yet feel uncomfortable speaking it because of my strong Dutch accent and lack of fluency. I felt self-conscious and anxious about speaking, even though people in Suriname are used to ex-patriots coming to visit, and thus are used to hearing Dutch accents. The few times I did speak Sranan among acquaintances, people would react enthusiastically, which only added to my level of self-consciousness. I decided to just keep speaking Dutch; however, that caused some tensions.

Whenever I opened my mouth, due to my accent, people would assume I was Dutch and a ‘wealthy’ tourist, which proved troublesome at times. Vendors and merchants are known to raise their prices if they assume they are dealing with a wealthy Dutch person, which was never the case in my situation. In addition, it caused some personal dissonance as people tended to look at me as Dutch, even though I had spent the previous 19 years, and the majority of my life in the United States, and I no longer felt “Dutch” myself. I noticed that initially I would lower my volume of speaking to hide my Dutch accent, but I got over it. The more comfortable I felt, I spoke Dutch freely.

While I was not able to get past my self-consciousness of speaking Sranan, people were aware of my ability to speak and understand Sranan, however, and had no problem addressing me in either Dutch or Sranan during the interviews. Often, people
would start off in Dutch and would switch over into *Sranan* as they became more comfortable. Being able to speak and understand both Dutch and *Sranan* was invaluable.

Lastly, I used my first year in Suriname to finalize the strategic planning for the execution of the research, and obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Kentucky to do so.

*Information Gathering*

I held a series of group discussions from October 2004 through January 2005 at NAKS, the Lodge, and the Stibula community center. The aim of the discussion groups was twofold and as originally intended: to gain information on which issues contributed to the concept of well being; and to have this information filtered through an Afro-Surinamese perspective, as much as possible. In the discussion sessions then, I focused on what it means to be Afro-Surinamese in Suriname, and how this cultural identity shaped the definition and practice of mental well-being.

In order to design my discussion questions, I focused my goal on three concrete concepts: cultural identity, (globalizing) forces affecting people’s lives, and mental well being. Based on these three concepts, I constructed the discussion questions for the groups. They were as follows:

- What are some cultural characteristics of the Afro-Surinamese population? (and how are they different from the other ethnic groups in Suriname?)
- What role do foreign influences play in the Surinamese community?
- How would you describe the economic situation of the Afro-Surinamese community?
• What things come to mind when you hear the term “mental well being?”

• How is mental well being practiced among the Afro-Surinamese population? (and how are they different from the other ethnic groups in Suriname?)

When leading the group discussions with youth, I would use the same questions, but I would pose them differently. I would use language that was a little more “kid friendly”. So, rather than asking about mental well being, I might ask “What do you need to feel good about yourself?”

My first group discussion sessions were held at NAKS with 14 adults, followed by a youth group discussion session with 15 youngsters between the ages of 8 and 22. I then held a group discussion session at the Masonic Lodge Order of Mechanics with about 22 elders in age ranging from about 55 to 80. Finally I held two sessions at Stibula, one for adults with 12 people in attendance, and one for youth ages 15 to 20 with about 10 people in attendance. A total of 73 people contributed to the discussion sessions.

The notes from the discussion sessions were coded and themes and questions for exploration were identified. I then clustered these themes and questions into larger themes, and did so for both the adult and youth discussion sessions. Grouping the themes into larger themes made it easier for me to start thinking about the issues I would have to pursue. They also provided me with a reference point, something to come back to throughout my research, when I would get overwhelmed with all the data I was collecting. The larger, clustered themes are listed here, while the extended themes are listed in Appendix B. They are as follows:
Adult themes:  
- Mental/Spiritual  
- Cultural  
- Interpersonal  
- Inter-Wordly  
- Nature/Spiritual  
- Health  
- Conflict  
- Questions I have

Youth themes:  
- Parenting/Family  
- Romantic Relationships  
- Social Relationships  
- Welfare (material)  
- School  
- Fears  
- Health  
- Questions I have

In addition, I constructed a short, free-listing questionnaire to get specific feedback on mental well being and Afro-Surinamese cultural identity. The questionnaire asked the following questions:

- When I hear the term “Afro-Surinamese” the first three things that come to mind are…..
- When I hear the term “Creole” the first three things that come to mind are…
- When I hear the term “mental well being” the first three things that come to mind are…..

My students were going to distribute these to at least 40 people outside any of the three participating organizations; however they were not very systematic and forthcoming with collecting this information. In addition, the information I did gain from the free listing questionnaires did not add much to the information I had collected during the
group discussions. I thus decided not to use the information, and instead used the
exercise as a learning tool for my students.

Throughout this period I collected data on my participatory experiences, living
and working among the Afro-Surinamese.

Interviewing and Data Collection

The information I gathered from the discussion sessions was rich, and
immediately presented numerous important themes and questions, as already indicated. I
had originally intended to construct a questionnaire for group interviews and subsequent
individual structured and unstructured interviews. However, after the group discussions,
having more group and subsequent individual structured interviews to search for themes,
seemed an inefficient use of time. I thus discarded my original interview model. Instead,
I decided to use a semi-structured interviewing technique, as opposed to a structured one.

I used the list of original themes and questions and larger, clustered themes to
generate a list of questions. I intended to use the questions as guiding questions, having
a set of basic questions, yet allowing for flexibility to focus in on specific issues. The
questions are listed in Appendix C.

I still returned to Stibula, NAKS, and the lodge for group interviews. I was
unable to schedule a follow up group interview at Stibula with adults due to the elections,
but was able to have a group interview with three teenagers, using the new list of
questions. At NAKS I held my group interview with men only (22 attendants), whereas
the initial group discussion was dominated by women. The group interview at the lodge
had an emphasis on mental well being in general and in the organization specifically. In
addition, I engaged in informal group conversations with youth and adult members at NAKS, my place of employment at the Department of Culture, and other places.

For my individual interviews, I identified “experts” to address certain issues through referrals from key informants or through personal relationships. Sometimes the “expert” would be an individual, at other times a group of people. For instance, one young woman was the daughter of a woman who would baby-sit for me on occasion. She had been working as a seamstress at home, but after teaching some classes for women at NAKS, she and some other women started a cooperative at NAKS, where they would sell clothing and arts and crafts they made themselves. I asked her for an interview to discuss issues regarding gender and economics and she agreed.

Similarly, I interviewed other experts, asking them general questions, and exploring those issues about which they had more knowledge. I would catch people when, and wherever I could get them, at their house, place of employment, the organization NAKS, or the Department of Culture Studies. The majority of these interviews were scheduled and documented interviews. There are about three or four interviews which started spontaneously and were not recorded as interview notes, but as field notes.

In this manner I interviewed 24 people. They are listed with their corresponding expertise as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expert</th>
<th>Expertise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41 year old man, banker and farmer</td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randall age 41</td>
<td>Traditional culture, <em>winti</em>, nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>Expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+ year old woman, single parent</td>
<td><em>Winti</em>, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72 year old woman</td>
<td>Relationships, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+ year old woman</td>
<td>Nature, lodge membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director AIDS organization</td>
<td>HIV/AIDS, mental well being, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59 year old man</td>
<td>Story telling, lodge membership, organization membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 year old man</td>
<td>Dutch ex-patriots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 year old woman</td>
<td><em>Bigi Yari</em> celebration, <em>koto dansi</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 year old man and 17 year old woman</td>
<td><em>Bigi Yari</em> celebration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40+ year old man</td>
<td>Theater, arts, mental well being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 year old woman</td>
<td>Women, economics, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72 year old retired police officer</td>
<td>Surinamese society, mental well being, international relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 generations of women of one family (7 members)</td>
<td>Family, women, mental well being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+ year old man</td>
<td>Arts, <em>winti</em> tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40+ year old man</td>
<td><em>Winti</em> tradition, mental well being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+ year old man</td>
<td>Lodge membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+ year old woman</td>
<td>Nature, relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During this phase two other new ideas presented themselves. Alongside my participant observation field notes, I maintained a personal diary. My personal diary included numerous entries about my interaction with Florence, whom I saw on a daily basis. Through my work with the dance project, I had also spent a lot of time with Randall, and we would have lengthy conversations about many different topics. Looking at my experiences with both Florence and Randall, it became clear to me that I should
collect their life histories. At the time, I wasn’t sure as to what capacity they were going to be used, but I had a sense I needed to collect them.

Furthermore, by now it had become clear to me how important people’s relationships with their relatives in the Netherlands proved to be. Initially, I had considered my sample to be working class Afro-Surinamese, exclusively living in Paramaribo. My informants showed me how their relatives across the ocean were merely an extension, a stretching out of family systems and kin networks. Although not physically or visually present, Dutch relatives are a significant aspect of the lives of working class Afro-Surinamese people and contribute significantly to well being in numerous ways. Lewellen (2002) asserts that as anthropological fieldwork is shifting from the local to the global, participant observation as we know it might need to change and might need to be extended to include multiple sites. This is a notion which became clear to me as I was doing my fieldwork. I had selected the working class Afro-Surinamese population in Paramaribo because that is where most working class Afro-Surinamese live, and because living in Paramaribo provides a specific set of living conditions. I had not realized that by ignoring the large number of Afro-Surinamese living in the Netherlands and who are still connected to the population living in Suriname, I would not only be excluding an important part of the population, I would be doing my original population sample an injustice.

I had the opportunity to visit the Netherlands during my fieldwork, and decided to follow up on this information. I requested permission from the IRB to expand my sample to include working class Afro-Surinamese in the Netherlands and permission was granted. Part of my reason for visiting the Netherlands was my involvement with the
Afro-Surinamese dance project. I gave a lecture in Amsterdam on the Afro-Surinamese dance project and appeared on a local Afro-Surinamese radio station. This publicity brought me in contact with several Dutch Afro-Surinamese who were willing to talk to me. Rather than interviewing them about mental well being, I mostly had unstructured interviews with them about their relationship with their relatives in Suriname and their connection with Suriname as a whole. I had a scheduled group interview with five people, which was recorded and documented. I had additional unscheduled interviews with five more people.

Finally, other than my one interview with the director of PCS, I had difficulty connecting with other professional mental health care providers, in particular with the department of health and the PAHO, where I had hoped to find some information as to mental health care services availability. Neither one of these organizations had public information access, and my experience with the PAHO – leave your number and we will call you – deterred me from going through the same with the department of health. Given that there is only one psychiatric hospital in the country, I decided being able to speak with them would be my best source anyway. I did some archival research in the local newspapers on psychiatric care, and further decided to drop the pursuit of professional mental health care services data.

Instead, I focused in depth on what mental well being means to the Afro-Surinamese people and what the lived experience of mental well being might look like. I made this decision with the confidence that a good rapport will find its way back to the professional mental health care system eventually, where hopefully it might be of use in implementing some positive changes.
Almost all of these “expert” interviews were recorded on tape and handwritten notes were taken for each. A total of 62 people were interviewed through group and individual interviews in the period from February through June 2005.

I continued to engage in participant observation of Afro-Surinamese life and work during this phase.

Analysis and Ethnography Construction

Participant observation data were recorded as field notes by hand and on computer in Microsoft Word. I used different styles of field notes, from jottings to descriptions (Emerson et. al. 1995). In my notes I would often write down ideas or questions that came to mind for later follow up. I did not focus on specific themes right away, but wrote down things that struck me even if I did not need them later. There were times when it was difficult for me to write field notes, especially as my pregnancy progressed and I was struggling to provide for my two children. During those times I would focus more on my dance work and hustling teaching workshops here and there to bring in extra money.

As indicated earlier, data from the initial discussion sessions were analyzed for themes and major concepts, which were then used to construct interview questions for groups and individuals, and guides for participant observation. Upon completion of all data collection, including group and individual interviews, two life histories, and participation observation notes, I coded all my notes and clustered them in a new set of themes. These themes included:

- Sranan (Suriname)
• Attitude towards children
• Self
• Celebrating the self
• The dead/traditions
• Women/relationships
• HIV/AIDS
• Kulturu (Winti)
• Society
• International relations/ Netherlands
• Ethnicity
• Afro-Surinamese vs. Hindustani
• Economics
• Organizations
• Mental health/well being
• Taki (Talking, rituals)
• Hebi (Burdens)
• Youth
• Netherlands ex-patriots

I clustered some of these themes based on similarity and overlap, and used them to make a thematic outline of the data. For purposes of the dissertation, I decided to focus on the adult experience, keeping references to youth to a minimum. I believed that
I did not have enough data on youth to make concluding statements about them, however I would still use their data in the supportive thematic sections.

Upon further analysis, it had become clear to me that Florence’s life experiences a model of the lived experience of mental well being among working class Afro-Surinamese in Paramaribo. Therefore, I decided to use her story as a red thread throughout the ethnography, and I constructed several short vignettes on Florence. For a short time I decided I would do the same with Randall’s data, ensuring a male/female balance in this exemplary thread; however, I decided against it, as it felt a forced rather than a natural decision, and as the amount of data was becoming increasingly large. Inadvertently, a lot of Randall’s data made it into the thematic data chapters along with other voices. Given his strong presence, I felt confident that both the male and female lived experienced were presented.

After constructing the thematic outline from all the data, I selected several of Florence vignettes I thought most representative of the themes. Of course, not every single theme is represented in Florence’s life, and Florence’s life does not follow a nice chronological path addressing each of the themes in order. Yet, I found the vignettes on Florence to be representative enough of a life in Suriname, embodying the themes most relevant to mental well being. My thematic data chapters, then, lay out as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Florence vignette</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. An introduction to Florence and how I met her. The walk to Florence’s house gives a short impression of life in Suriname, and the local and global forces</td>
<td>1. Being in the world is explored through examining aspects of the self in terms of construction, relationship to the environment, and in relation to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That shape it. The biographical section introduces Florence as a member of her family.</td>
<td>This provides an Afro-Surinamese model of, and a structure for maintaining mental well being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Explores my relationship with Florence, and how it was shaped and affected by our individual differences and Surinamese ‘rules’ for relating to each other given our differences. It also explores how the mental health of Florence’s sister directly impacts Florence’s life.</td>
<td>2. There are things in Suriname that just ‘are the way they are’ of which my financial support of Florence was an example. Some of these ‘are what they are’ things fundamentally chip away at mental well being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Explores male and female relationships and the matter of ‘correspondents’, a specific strategy women use to get out of Suriname.</td>
<td>3. There are certain specific strategies people use to transform their lives, of which ‘correspondents’ is one. These strategies go directly against the model and structures that ensure mental well being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Explores the gradual demise of Florence’s grandmother and the significance of talking throughout this whole process.</td>
<td>4. Suriname is a country where high emphasis is placed on oratory culture and communal rituals, of which death is one. Talking and ritual work well in maintaining mental well being. However, there are some (new?) aspects of living about which we do not talk and for which we have no rituals, which negatively impacts mental well being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Illustrates how Florence, who generally seems unaffected, or at least at peace with the harsh forces that shapes her life, finally breaks down.</td>
<td>5. Explores some of the (mental/emotional/spiritual) burdens, we as Afro-Surinamese carry, and explore where they might come from.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Language

Nineteen different languages are spoken within Suriname (Carlin 2002). The official language is Dutch, and the lingua franca is *Sranan Tongo* or simply *Sranan*.

Speaking *Sranan* causes anxiety for me because of my lack of fluency and my Dutch accent, but the issue of language is more complex than that. *Sranan* developed on the plantations among the slaves while Suriname was still a British colony from 1650 to 1667 (Bakker et al 1993). After the Dutch took over, the language remained but was always considered substandard to Dutch (St. Hilaire 2001).
In 1876 education became mandatory and Dutch became the official language in all educational institutions. Up until that time, missionaries had been educating and preaching in Sranan. This was now forbidden. This policy was part of assimilation politics and an attempt to raise the Afro-Surinamese population to a “higher level of civilization” through the use of the Dutch language (Bakker et al 1993). Sranan has remained stigmatized as a substandard language, the language of the common people, or slang. Our relationship to our language is similar to the Gullah people in the United States, who also have been made to feel ashamed about their language as substandard (Fishman 1995). Temporary periods of nationalistic pride in the 50s and 80s saw attempts to raise the status of Sranan, mostly by literary artists and nationalists, but they were never really successful. And thus, like myself, many Afro-Surinamese, even those born and raised in Suriname, feel anxious about speaking Sranan in public.

Sranan is not taught at the schools or at the University. It remains mostly a spoken and social language and many people do not know how to write the language, or use correct grammar. There are a few people, like the linguist Eddie van der Hilst, who are trying to promote the use of Sranan in a correct manner, hoping to elevate its status through independent publications and language programs. Their effort is a lonely one, however, as they receive no institutional support.

One of the goals of this project is to write a story about Suriname by someone of Surinamese descent, because our voices have been silenced. Limiting the use of our language, and ascribing it substandard status has been part of that silencing. The irony that I was uncomfortable speaking Sranan, and that I have to use the colonizer’s language to make our story heard, has not gone unnoticed. To contribute to the validity of the
**Sranan** language and to properly situate the ensuing story as a story by and for the Surinamese, I have chosen to use essential **Sranan** words in the text. When included, the **Sranan** words are printed in cursive and are immediately followed by translation, as not to interrupt the flow of reading. **Sranan** does not utilize an “s” to denote plural tense. Thus tori means ‘story’ as well as ‘stories’. There is also a glossary list in the appendix. **Sranan** phrases are translated and are not listed in the glossary. I have also purposely chosen to identify the main theoretical themes of this dissertation in **Sranan**, again to affirm that **Sranan** is valuable enough to claim a space in academia.

There are several notes for understanding the Afro-Surinamese tori, story that is about to be presented. The word “culture” translates in **Sranan** into kulturu. However, when Afro-Surinamese people use the word kulturu, or “culture”, they generally do not refer to the concept of culture as we anthropologists know it. Instead, they refer to traditional cultural or winti practices. Secondly, I have tried to preserve anonymity as much as possible. The symbols […] are used in quotes to denote a specific person, place, or street name, which could easily have identified someone. Clarifying information is also placed within square brackets [ ]. Except for one person, I do not identify people by name. Randall and Florence are pseudonyms.

**Alien**

“You should write a section about who you are”, my supervisor tells me as I am nearing the end of my first draft of this dissertation. “There is great complexity to your life and who you are, which has shaped the way you approached this research. There are
two voices in this writing; a personal you and an academic you, which are very closely intertwined.” She is so right. At times I can hardly keep the two voices apart.

I have resisted the idea of writing a section about myself, because I have been adamant about wanting to write about Afro-Surinamese people and not just about me. The truth is, I am them and they are me. As such, I am very much a part of the story. I agree with my supervisor that who I am has influenced the research and writing of this story, and thus will write something about myself that will help the reader understand the story a little better.

Ironically, after I left my supervisor’s office I bumped into my friend and colleague who is going through the same dissertation writing process. As I told her about my new assignment, she told me her people had told her the exact opposite; to take herself out of the writing and “just write the story.” I do not know what to make of that. I do not know if our opposing experiences are merely a reflection of having different, supervisors, or whether it is reflective of how the academy looks differently at black women and white women. Are our stories more interesting because we are more exoticized? Contemplating this issue at this point will only give me a headache, and I have thus decided to let it rest. I leave that for someone else to ponder.

So who am I? Using a line-up of identifying labels, I would have to say that I am a person of African descent, have Surinamese roots, with a Dutch nationality, am working class, and have lived in the United States for most of my life. I am a mother, daughter, sister, cousin, aunt, niece, granddaughter, grandniece, great-granddaughter, and a friend. I am a psychologist, anthropologist, educator, community worker, mentor, and a dancer. I am not an American.
If I were an American, I would probably add a label of my sexuality to my identity line-up. Gloria Wekker (1994) clarified for me that in Suriname, given the multiplicitous nature of the self, sexual orientation is regarded as a behavioral matter, and not as a defining measure of identity. Indeed, to me my sexual orientation is irrelevant as far as my identity is concerned. The fact that I am a mother is to me far more identifying.

Similarly, even though a scholar trained in American institutions, I did not list the label “feminist” as part of my identity line-up. I write from a feminist perspective, but I do not claim the label for myself. To me feminism is an academic invention, which has created a space for me in the academy. It means little to me in the real world.

Long before there was “feminism” there was my maternal great-grandmother, who used to carry a machete on her hip. She was tough, and considered a dya-dya uma, a strong, tough woman. She raised 5 daughters by different fathers by herself. Whenever a man would act out of character, she would pull out her machete and chase him off.

She was also a midwife. She delivered hundreds of babies, but needed to deliver a baby in front of a doctor at the clinic in order to be certified. The doctor stepped out of the room for a minute, and she delivered my mother. She did not receive her certificate. She left the clinic with her daughter and grandbaby and never returned. She continued to deliver babies.

This is my heritage and the legacy in which I walk. No feminist label could even come close to what this woman has meant to me. Adopting that label of “feminist” would dishonor and diminish her. If a label is to be used to exemplify certain qualities then let it be dya-dya uma, but I will not use the “F” word.
I am not an American, but I have lived in the United States for the majority of my life. I am not a US citizen. The Americans gave me a card that identified me as “Alien Resident.” Although I thought it a derogatory term at first, it has become a suitable identifier. I am an Alien. I do not fit in anywhere or any place, yet can land and adapt wherever I go.

I came to the US as a refugee, not a political refugee, but a psychological refugee. I escaped the Netherlands where they claimed I was one of them, yet where they treated me as an Alien. I came in search of some mental well being.

I was born and raised in the Netherlands to Surinamese parents, and I loved it, all of it. I loved the flat grasslands, the windmills, the cows, the cheese, the tulips, all of it. But ‘it’ did not love me. Being born in Amsterdam, before the great Surinamese migration in the 1970s, gave me the experience of being tolerated yet invisible. Following the migration and the large influx of Surinamese people, I became one of those “knifers”, “niggers”, those who “talk funny”, and those who should “get the h.. back to their own country.” I thought I was in my country. Apparently, I was wrong, so I left. I went to the United States.

The United States was and is not known for its harmonious race relations, but at least if somebody here would wish me the h.. back to my country, I had a point of reference. I did not mind being treated like an Alien here, because I was one. They gave me a card that told me so.

The most Alienating experiences I have encountered have been during my academic journey. I love learning and have been blessed with the gift that learning comes to me easily. However, the institution of learning hasn’t always loved me. I am
well aware of the privilege to be in academia. I know that these institutional structures
were not built with me in mind, nor with the intention of ever accommodating me. I am
aware of the struggles by so many that paved my way, and to whom I am indebted. That
is why I persevere. Because as exhilarating my love affair with learning is, it has been a
masochistic journey, more often than not.

From day one I have been confronted with the fact that I do not think, speak,
perceive, act, react, process, or write the way the others do. More often than not, I feel
like the odd one out, and feel like the true Alien I must be. I am constantly asked to
define, redefine, justify, explain, question, and doubt everything about me. Trying to find
a balance, and not become Alienated from who I am has been a challenge and ongoing
battle. Given the fact that I am big, black, have a deep voice, and a direct manner of
speaking – a *dya-dya uma* – does not help matters. I fact, I know I have frightened
people.

Like the one day when I questioned my teacher out loud why he had “slave
auction” on his list of fundraising activities for us. A hush fell over the room and my
white co-students diverted their eyes, afraid of what this angry black woman might do. I
was not angry. I was not angry with the ‘good ol’ boy’ former coach, who was about to
retire and who ended every class reminiscing about the glory days of football from the
1940s and 1950s. He did not upset me even as he blew me off with an “aw, you
shouldn’t see it like that” comment. What affected me far more was that my twenty or
so, white peers never said a word. But so is the life of an Alien.

Discovering Patricia Hill Collins (1991) was a life-saver as she informed me that
there were others like me out there. There was value in the lived experience, something
the women in my family had taught me. There was room for passion, for if you do not care, what’s the use? There was room for learning through dialogue, and it was okay to speak, as long as you did not mind being held accountable. She legitimized my way of engaging learning and knowledge, and legitimized my working class background. My working class background ever keeps me grounded, and with one foot in the community. She affirmed the necessity of a link between academia and the real world for me. So when I get reprimanded in the academy for sounding too colloquial, informal, or unprofessional, but get praised in the community for the same speech because they understood every word, then I know I must be doing something right.

Studying psychology, physical education, and anthropology have been my saving graces. Learning how people think, act, and are shaped by culture has contributed to a better understanding about my own Alien status. People might be surprised to learn that the lens through which I view the world is not primarily shaped by race or gender. Rather it is shaped by mental health and mental well being. I am always placing my observations in the ideology of the maintenance of one’s sanity, which stems from my own insane journey as an Alien on planet Earth.

It is with this intention of wanting to learn more about psychological survival that I went to yet another one of my homesteads, Suriname. I went to the home where my great grandmother walked the earth. I studied, listened, and learned, hoping that by placing my people on the map, I might find some ground for landing too, eager that one day I may shed my Alien skin and be revealed as a human.
Tori: Data Analysis

Florence – intro

I remember meeting Florence for the first time in 1996. She and two other girls, Frances and Doris, were at my aunt’s friend’s house. They were the girlfriends of three brothers. Florence was pregnant at the time. Frances had a three or four year old daughter, and Doris had a baby boy of about seven months old. They were all young, late teens, early twenties perhaps, and I just remember feeling sorry for them. Not because they were pathetic, but because I did not have much hope about their mates being serious providers and thoughtful about their families’ futures. I wondered about their futures. Time would prove me right, unfortunately.

2003, Florence and I meet again. She is still as quiet and reserved as I remember, very proper and polite. Her son is eight years old now. Her partner, left seven years ago for the Netherlands to create a better life for them. He left Suriname, smuggling drugs as a mule and got caught. The Netherlands with its easy drug policies, released him after a short incarceration and sent him back to Suriname with a slap on the hands. He left again on somebody else’s passport within a year. Once back in the Netherlands, he started a new life with somebody else and never looked back.

My aunt referred me to Florence as I was looking for a baby sitter for my newborn baby. Florence does not work and does not go to school. She takes care of her mentally disabled sister. Florence is 30 and her sister is 34. I am only eight years older than Florence, but in ways feel like our lives are worlds apart.
Still, I have a bond with her. I connect with the struggle of being a single parent and not receiving any support from the child’s father. I admire the grace and dignity with which she faces everyday. She is always kind, soft spoken, polite. But I also feel sadness, pain and anger for the injustices bestowed upon her. I get disgusted with her ex when I hear about his failure to take responsibility for his son. I feel sad at the thought of both Florence and her sister’s futures being halted. But such is life. Such is this particular life.

For the two years that I was in Suriname, I interacted with Florence on a regular basis. It is ironic really that the person who watched my child for me as I was out doing research turned out to supply the most salient story on mental well being. Her life is an average life. There are so many women like Florence in Suriname. Florence’s life with all her struggles, in all of its quietness, made a great impact on me. To many her life is invisible, disposable even, but to me her life was an amalgamation of all the different elements I identified in my data as significant in constituting mental well-being in Suriname. It is with great gratitude that I received Florence’s blessing to tell her story.

I have chosen her story because it is an interesting one. I have chosen her story as a window to a Surinamese story. Her story is similar to many others in so many ways, yet it is also unique. Through her story, which at time intersects with mine, and through the many additional contributing voices to this research, I hope to give a picture of the mental well-being experience of the Afro-Surinamese people in Paramaribo.
Florence – the walk

The neighborhood where I live is a complex of sandy roads with all kinds of working-class houses. Some of the houses are stone, some are wooden. There is lots of green, from coconut trees to papaya trees, and the houses have gutters in front of them. Most of the gutters are stopped up, so that when the heavy rains fall, the streets flood rather quickly. Even without the gutters, the streets would flood; to my understanding, that’s what happens with most of Paramaribo.

I have seen black and white post cards of Suriname in the late 1800s, with images of wagons pulled by horses, where the streets were flooded. Two centuries later the streets look pretty much the same during the rain season. The soil shifts, which explains why the sandy roads turn into hills and valleys, reminding one of a cross rally. Ever so often then, big scraping trucks come by to even out the streets, if you are so lucky to live on one of the streets where they come.

This same condition affects the main blacktop or cobblestone roads which start to shift due to the rains, leaving potholes the size of craters. Because of this, driving is an art in Paramaribo. People weave through the streets from left to right avoiding potholes. They use their horns as a form of communication whenever they pass a car, because they are aware that a car can swerve to the left or right at any given moment.

Driving in Suriname can be a nightmare, especially after the rains have fallen. You never know if the water you are about to go through is merely light flooding, or whether it is the cover for a treacherous, potentially axle bending pothole. I have ended up with flat tires on at least two occasions during the heavy rain season.
Chinese workers have been contracted from China to fix these streets. Unfortunately they do not address the underground watering or soil systems, and instead merely slap on a new layer of asphalt. As a result the streets look very nice for a couple of months after which potholes start to reappear. Sometimes, on the sandy streets, when the hills and valleys get too bad, and when no public works truck is expected, people take it upon themselves to fill up the valleys with bricks.

I live in the bottom part of a Bruynzeel house. A Bruynzeel house is the standard model of house built in the 50s through the 70s, or even 80s. The bottom consists of stone and can be either stilts or a small apartment, while the upper part is made of wood. The newer homes are mostly made of stone and are usually “flats” or ground level buildings.

Straight across from my apartment is a Chinese grocery store. You cannot walk 20 steps in Paramaribo without walking into a Chinese grocery store. Rumor has it that the store owners have contracts with Chinese cooperatives which brought them here, and to which they are forced to pay off a certain amount of money. As a result, the Chinese stores are always open, seven days a week. The only day they might be closed is on Chinese New Year, sometime in February. Even after closing hours, they might keep a window open where people can knock and ask for groceries. The store across from me is open from eight in the morning to about eleven at night, seven days a week. I feel for them.

I personally like Chinese stores, because they are the only places where I can practice speaking Sranan without any anxiety. Most of the Chinese store owners do not
even bother learning Dutch, except for counting money, and so one is forced to communicate in *Sranan*.

The Chinese stores sell everything, from sodas to gas tanks, to underwear. This store, across from my house, is often the social hangout for boys and young men who buy and drink their sodas, or for older men if alcohol is bought. The Chinese store is at the end of the street, which stands perpendicular to my street. When I walk through this street to get to Florence’s house, I do not walk too close to either side of the street, always careful of the many barking dogs that line the streets. Even though they are behind gates, I do not take my chances with a loose one, especially when I am pushing the stroller.

It takes me less then 10 minutes to get to Florence’s house. The front house in Florence’s yard is also a Bruynzeel house; this is her grandmother’s house. Here her grandmother lives along with a daughter (Florence’s aunt) and her son and Florence’s cousin and her daughter. In the back of the Bruynzeel house is a little stone house. It is old, with a leaky roof and sunken floor, but it is where Florence lives with her sister and her son. She is lucky to have her own place.

There is a shortage of housing in Paramaribo, while at the same time many houses stand empty. Many of the empty houses are from people who have left for the Netherlands. People refuse to rent to local people for the most part. Local renters have gotten bad reputations because they won’t leave the properties when they can no longer afford them, and the landlords are rather powerless at getting them out. A search through the papers shows that houses for rent are offered in Euro’s or American dollars and that people prefer tourists or interns for renters. The prices range from 300 to 700$ easily, a
price that working-class Surinamese cannot afford. To give an illustration, when I worked for the government as an anthropologist in the Department of Culture, I made about $350 per month, and that was considered a decent salary.

Florence’s aunt lives in the property next door and takes care of Florence’s sister’s son. Her grandmother owns that property along with several other pieces – some of which are also in the same street. She bought the properties so she could leave something to her children and grandchildren, a most precious commodity these days.

As you walk into the yard at Florence’s you are greeted by the barking of at least three dogs. Her aunt’s dog, a rather large one, from the property next door joins in, while trying to free himself from the long chain to come jump the fence. As you walk past the Bruynzeel house, there is a spigot where the children take their baths early in the evening. Florence has no running water in the house, so she uses the spigot for all her watering needs. When you walk further back toward Florence’s house, you are greeted by a little dog that barks along with the best of them.
Florence – bio

Florence is the fourth child in a family with five children. She has three older sisters, and one younger brother. They are Felicia 37, Celeste 34, Miriam 33, Florence 30, and Theo 26. Florence has resided in the little house in her grandmother’s back yard since the age of three, the same little house she lives in today.

Oma is Florence’s maternal grandmother. Oma gave birth to eight children, seven girls and a boy. When I met up with the family, three of Oma’s children had passed away over the years. During my relationship with them, another daughter passed. This was something Oma would mention to me often when she would see me, the hardship of the loss of her children.

Florence’s oldest sister, Felicia lives in the Netherlands now, but growing up she always lived “up front” and was raised by Oma, as was one of Florence’s cousins, Jaimy. Jaimy’s mother died when Jaimy was two years old. Oma took her in upon her daughter’s passing. According to Florence, Oma was closest to Jaimy’s mother out of all her children.

In speaking with me, Oma always refers to Jaimy as “the Chinese one” and never calls her by her name. It was obvious from Jaimy’s features that her father was Chinese, yet it struck me as odd and alienating that Oma would refer to her in that manner, especially since she raised her as one of her own. Jaimy still lives up front in Oma’s house, along with her eight year old daughter. So does Oma’s youngest daughter, who is also raising a seven year old boy by herself.
Florence remembers her parents as very strict, especially her father. Her and her siblings’ social lives were very restricted. They associated with family, mostly her mother’s, played some with her cousins up the street, but otherwise stayed at home. They did not participate in any extra-curricular activities, and from early on had many household responsibilities.

They spent their school vacations on boiti, oma’s property outside of the city. Oma was a medicine woman; she had an Ingi winti, a Native American spirit which “worked” with her. She did a lot of her practice on her boiti. When Florence and her siblings were there, they would fish, pick fruit, and help oma with the preparations for her work. These were some sweet memories for Florence.

When I ask Florence about her mother, she tells me about how her mother instilled independence in her, especially as far as household chores were concerned. By the age of 15 Florence could run a household on her own. Florence’s mother had a special relationship with Miriam, Florence’s third oldest sister, whom she says favored her mother. Florence’s one special memory of her mother is one where her mother took her fishing. She remembers her mother as a quiet, friendly homemaker, who was always very sickly. She had gallstones, an ectopic pregnancy, other ailments, and eventually became paralyzed and blind. One day they took her to the hospital, where she passed away three days later. Florence was 16 at the time. She easily recalls this as one of the most traumatic events in her life.

After her mother passed, Florence’s schoolwork deteriorated. It did not help matters that three months after the funeral, her father moved out. He did not leave on a bad note, or to live with another woman. He just moved out to live on his own. Oma
took over the childrearing responsibilities. Florence was held back in school that year. After that year she went to another school, which was one level lower, but she dropped out because there was no school money available for her. Her siblings all did finish school however, all except for Celeste.

Felicia finished school and landed a good job, first as a schoolteacher, and then in an administrative position at the department for education. She opted to leave for the Netherlands with her two children, where unfortunately now she is unemployed and on welfare because she could not afford the daycare costs in addition to the living expenses. Miriam finished her education, found a job and moved out, and Theo finished the technical school and worked at a gas station. He also moved out. Celeste made it into the last round of her student teaching, from the teacher education program and was forced to quit.

After their father moved out, they were left to fend for themselves. He would send money every now and then, and they had a place to live, but it was hard. Florence recalls that oma would talk to them on occasion about how to cope, but that she was the only one who did so. Her father, who had been struggling with health problems even before her mother passed away, started to deteriorate health wise. His stomach would swell, and from time to time he would be hospitalized. Out of his children, Florence was the only one who would go and spend the night with him from time to time. She loved him a lot, even though he tended to favor her younger brother, “I looked more like him”, she explained.

Florence had memories of her father being strict and often handing out physical punishments to herself, Celeste and Miriam, at least until she was 15. She also
remembers how he used to walk her to school, even when she was a teenager. Sometimes they would leave when it was still dark and they would go to the market first, where they would sit and drink some tea. He would then take her halfway while he went on his way to work. Five years after her mother passed, he passed away too. “Now we have nobody.”, she recalls her sister telling her as she told Florence the news over the phone.

Her father’s death changed her life in more ways then one. Celeste, who already was suffering from epilepsy, had 15 epileptic attacks in one day in reaction to her father’s death. The seizures left some permanent damage. Family members took her to the hospital, but the hospital sent her home, saying there was nothing they could do. Celeste came home and tried to pick up her life, but after she had a black out in front of her class room, oma decided that she should not go back. The epilepsy was just too shameful. A mentor encouraged Celeste to get some medical guidance, but oma’s mind was made up. Shortly thereafter, Felicia left for the Netherlands, and Miriam moved out.

Florence, Celeste, and Theo stayed behind. With Theo there, Florence was still able to work some. She worked as a hotel server, which she enjoyed. But she had to stop working when her brother moved out and when her boyfriend stopped assisting with child care. The family decided that she should stay home to look after Celeste, and so she has. It has been seven years since she worked outside her home.

Nine years earlier Florence met her son’s father in a discotheque. Six months later she was pregnant. After another six months she moved in with him in his mother’s house, but she found it too full with children, daughter-in-laws, and grandchildren, and when she got the news that her father was dying, she left and went back home. Her
boyfriend turned out to be a poor provider, spending more time in the streets rather than taking care of his family.

He followed her after a little while, however, and for about seven months they lived as husband and wife in her little house, “the way it should be.” He was supportive, and responsible, and helped with childcare. He came up with a plan to leave for the Netherlands to build a better life for both of them. He did leave, but nothing materialized as intended. After getting caught smuggling drugs, he was sent back to Suriname, only to leave again shortly upon return. He sent money for two to three months, after which he disappeared. Sporadically Florence might hear from him, and if his mother and sister exert some pressure on him, he might send some money. However, it is clear to her that the raising of their son is her sole responsibility.

Without an income Florence relies on her sister’s disability pension and sporadic financial gifts from relatives. She never complains, however, and takes everyday as it comes.
Chapter 5.

Yeye sani: A Model of Mental Well Being

5.1 Self/Celebrating the self

*Opo yu yeye*

For the Afro-Surinamese, the self is not an individual entity. Instead, the self is a vessel that stands in connection with numerous forces, seen and unseen, at any given moment. According to this belief system, a human being consists of forces that are part physical and part spiritual. One is connected to the universe that surrounds and traverses him or her. Physically, the person is connected to his or her body, and lives within a world made up of physical elements. Spiritually, the person is connected to nature forces, *winti*, and to the ancestors at any given time. This *winti* belief system is a direct survival of slavery days.

Wekker (1997) explains that this Afro-Surinamese multiplicitous sense of self is expressed in the language. She states:

> Unlike English, in which “I” is a significant repository of personhood, agency, and personal identity, and has no synonyms, in *Sranan* [Surinamese lingua franca], there are infinite possibilities to make statements about self in terms of one specific, male or female instance of the “I.” There exists for instance *mi, mi ik, mi ikke, mi kra, mi yeye, mi misi, mi masra, mi misi nanga mi masra, mi dyodyo, mì madyodyo, mi pa dyodyo, mi skin, a sma f’mì, and den sma f’mì*, or in terms of third-person constructions, one’s *winti* (1997: 335).

How the self is seen, experienced, and maintained is determined by the state of balance of all these forces. This sense of self is rooted within the *winti* spiritual system. Throughout my stay, I would repeatedly encounter two phrases addressing the self that, *Opo yu yeye*, and *Sabi yu srefî*, respectively translate freely into “Raise your spirit”, and
“Know yourself”. Within the *winti* tradition, the *yeye* or *kra* make up the “inner” spiritual essence, comparable to the soul, and consists of a male and female part. *Opo yu yeye* has strong spiritual and psychological connotations, but physical and environmental ones as well. A discussion of some specific physical and environmental connotations will be reserved for later in this chapter.

The most common explanation of *opo yu yeye*, is the need to take care of one self, or one’s selves. One should live well, know wrong from right, and be respectful of self and others. Taking care of self or selves involves hygienic practices, but also morally sound behaviors, such as not cursing or otherwise defiling oneself.

 Depending on the level of involvement with the spiritual tradition of *winti*, *opo yu yeye* can involve certain rituals to literally uplift the inner spirit, such as praying, meditating, communicating with the ancestors, or having an elaborate ritual performed under supervision of a medicine man or woman. The most common ritual is the *wasi*, a ritual bath, in which herbs, and sometimes flowers and sweet fragrances are mixed in water, and are poured over the head. Throughout the *wasi*, the selves are spoken to in a respectful manner.

 *Opo yu yeye* can also involve performing an action to compensate for the feeling of neglect by one of the aspects of the self. Thus, it would not be uncommon for someone to buy themselves a present, or take themselves out to dinner because one of the selves requested it. This request would be communicated through a sense of intuition, a dream, or in a consultation with a medicine man or woman.

 A thirtysomething year old seamstress explains: When I hear *opo yu yeye*... [it means] that you have to take good care of yourself, so that your things can go better. Because, I do not investigate
other people, I look at myself. When I make clothes, for instance – this is what I have discovered from myself – when I feel a bit lazy to make clothes for somebody, the thought will arise: “Make something for yourself.” And when I do that, indeed... then I’m normal again. You see? Then I can make clothes for days again. So it is always $mek’ wan san’ gi’ yeye, dan yu go doro di f’ trawan$, make something for your $yeye$, and then go on and make something for someone else.

One of the most common social rituals dedicated to uplifting and maintaining the spirit of the self/selves among the Afro-Surinamese is the celebration of the birthday, in particular the lustrum celebration. Starting with the first, and followed by every fifth birthday thereafter, the birthday is celebrated in a grand manner, usually including a dance party with live music, an elaborate feast, and some type of brass band. Guests are often requested to attend in costume by choice of the host or hostess. This celebration is referred to as $Bigi Yari$, which literally translates into “big year”. The older one gets, the more elaborate the celebration.

A $Bigi Yari$, for a 70 or 75th birthday can easily take three days and might involve one day with a special church or thanksgiving service, one day with family members and/or gatherings with community and organization members, and yet another day with a traditional brass band – which can come as early as 5 a.m. – followed by a catered dance feast with a live band. For a 5th or 10th birthday, a $Bigi Yari$ might involve a marching band with dancers, followed by a costumed ball with a live band. Some of the newer trends involve hip hop dance shows and dj’s, however.

I myself was asked to be a participant in a $Bigi Yari$ celebration. One of my dance students who celebrated her 60th birthday asked me and two other dancers to be her dancing escorts. Accompanied by a saxophone player, the dancers and I sang and danced with the $Bigi Yari Misi$, the hostess, down the street to the corner where her guests were
waiting for her in *koto*, the traditional Afro-Surinamese costume, accentuated with a required purple *anyisa*, traditional headdress. We then all danced down the street, returning to the house where the festivities were to commence [Figure 5.1].

Figure 5.1 (Photo by L. Uhlenkamp)

The *Bigi Yari* tradition is very common among the Afro-Surinamese working class, even in times of financial hardship. The *Bigi Yari* celebration is an occasion for which people save for years and/or for which they do not mind going into debt. The *Bigi Yari* is such a common tradition that it is not specifically connected with the *winti* tradition. It is related to the concept of *opo yu yeye*, however, more from a psychological perspective than from a spiritual one. It is through this practice, among others, that I noticed that even though *opo yu yeye* can be traced directly to an aspect of the *winti* tradition, the concept itself has been embraced by non-*winti* believers as well, in particular by Christians.
Repeatedly when I would ask about *opo yu yeye*, the non-*winti* followers would always clarify that they ascribed meaning to the concept, but not in relation to *winti*. For example, my dance student, the 60 year *Bigi Yari Misi* I described, expressed herself as follows:

I wasn’t raised with the saying ‘*opo yu yeye*’. We received a Christian upbringing, so not with ‘you have to wear a ring or a necklace for your yeye.’ My mother always taught me, you have a spirit in your body and you have to maintain it by taking good care of your body. So that’s what my mother taught me about yeye, about the spirit that you have. She always taught us – it was very strange what she said – ‘make your bed, because if you do not, your spirit will stay behind and your body will stand up. Shake your pillow so you will take your yeye with you.’ That’s what my mother always taught us, that your spirit has laid in the bed beside you, and if you do not make your bed it will stay behind and so many things can happen to you. But I think she got that from her ancestors. But like getting a ring or some other thing for your yeye… I give the *koto dansi*, the *koto* dance party, yeah I think my spirit enjoys it. But to lay the emphasis on *mi yeye wan’ wan koto dansi*, my yeye wants a *koto dansi*, I do not have that. Again, we were raised Christian, and so I was never taught that, that you do something for your [yeye]. It was just that my mother said, that if you really want something than you can get it, or should do it.

Other voices that highlight *opo yu yeye* outside of a *winti* context state:

When I think about *opo yu yeye*, I think about self respect, self knowledge, taking a stance for yourself. I am me, and nobody can get me down. 42 year old woman

It has many meanings of course, but for me it would mean to come clean with yourself. There are cultural meanings you can give it of course, but I see it in general as coming clean with yourself. And that does not mean that you would need to do things in the [traditional] cultural realm. If you were dishonest, become honest. If you were unreasonable, be considerate. Being reasonable is important, sincerity, those kinds of things. I think that they are the basis. So that’s what I see more as *opo yeye*. Live responsibly, to put it that way. 41 year old man
You should really start by respecting yourself, and then the respect from others will follow. As soon as you do things to strengthen your mental well being, and than I am not talking about bonu bonu, cultural medicine. No, to have the faith to do certain things. To know the difference between right and wrong and step into the world respectfully, than you opo yu yeye. It’s not for nothing that people say: “Doing good things lead to good encounters”. 70+ year old man

These voices collectively confirm a belief system in which taking care and nurturing the self are an essential part of living well. This taking care of the self involves rules and lessons about morals, values, and healthy social interactions that go beyond winti. Opo yu yeye practices are a general aspect of mental well being for the working class Afro-Surinamese, and are not just limited to Afro-Surinamese who uphold winti beliefs.

In addition to the birthday celebrations, there might be other celebrations, in particular dance festivities, that celebrate the self and are more often associated with winti. At times one might hear the expression Mi skin e firi lek’ mi wan dansi, My innerself feels the desire to dance. The dancing mentioned here does not refer to individual dancing, but specifically refers to the need of one’s winti spirit for a ceremonial social dance event.

One well renowned community elder, Alex de Drie, who is now deceased and was a specialist in winti and other cultural traditions, wrote in his autobiography:

| Na yu skin e taki san yu musu prey. Bika yu abi son sma en voorouders ben abi wan yeye e dini dan den mu prey a susa gi en. Dus awansi a dede a susa e go doorlopend. Yu sabi son sma en eigen ik mu prey wan kawna. Fu a kan tan gosontu a musu prey (1984:26). | Your innerself will tell you what kind of dance you must have. Because for some people, they were serving their ancestor’s yeye, and therefore they had to play the susa for them. So even after they (the server) have passed on, the susa continues. Then you have some people for whom their own self requests a kawna dance. They need the dance so they can stay healthy. |
Dancing itself then becomes a means for maintaining or obtaining spiritual and mental well-being through celebrating the self/ves. Dancing does not merely reflect the physical aspect of dancing, but includes the entire social event which consists of the sharing in a social activity, live music, sharing of food and drink, and the participation of the wini. The dance is pleasing to the wini, and thus restores a sense of well being for the person.

This cultural tradition of valuing dance has given Afro-Surinamese at times the reputation of “party animals”, especially during times of economic hardship. It is often difficult for others to understand why people would spend the little money they have on organizing and giving an elaborate feast. This criticism is not just from outside the Afro-Surinamese community, but is heard within the community as well. Of course there are people who go from dance event to dance event merely for a succession of pleasurable experiences. However, when linked to the concept of opo yu yeye, these dance events are important venues to celebrate the self, and to empower oneself/ves psychologically, spiritually, and socially.

Other than specific festivities, the arts in general are seen as significant forces for opo yu yeye. Live music, singing, poetry, fashion, decorative arts and so on, are all considered nurturing to the self. Live music is such an inherent part of Afro-Surinamese culture, that any type of major public event is accompanied by some type of live music. Participation and expression in the arts nurtures the self directly, but it also nurtures the self as artistic activities allow for social bonding. Storytelling, Folk theater, and humor are popular activities of the Afro-Surinamese. These art forms can be traced back to the days of slavery when dramatic expression, stories, songs, games, proverbs and jokes were
not only part of social gatherings in so called *banya prei*, but also insured psychological survival and rejuvenation.

One 59 year old story teller explains how story telling was an important part of his social and communal experience growing up, and how it nurtured him to become a story teller.

It was always during a particular period. Something with the dry season and the position of the moon, it would be full moon. Than you would have an evening when people would come together and they would have a *barbacot*, you call it barbeque. In the day time the men would go out fishing and the women would go to the subsistence plot to harvest. There would be all kinds of fruit and corn, sweet potatoes, bananas, *napi*, yams. And when the men came back the fish would be cleaned and they would make a big *barbacot* on the grounds. The men would go out and gather wood. They made the fire, prepared the fish, and put them on the *barbacot*. And the other things would roast in the fire. And when they were sitting there, then the stories would come. Each person would have their own specialty in telling stories. Of course alcohol was indispensable, our *lika*. We called it Bush Rum and Ma Coeur. Bush Rum was self brewed alcohol... So then they would drink and tell stories. One after the other *Anansi tori*, Anansi stories, and other stories. At the end of the evening around 11 they would send the children to bed. All young people were sent away because the stories would become more aslant, more obscene. So you would just have the adults and you would hear them busting with laughter. And of course they were filled with alcohol already. As a boy I would try to overhear some of those stories. If I couldn’t, because they were at a distance, I would crawl underneath the house through the crawlspace to get closer. You would risk all kinds of stuff doing that. You could run into snakes and all kinds of other animals. So you would get close enough to hear. Often they had excited sex stories. One day we got caught and that was the end of that. We got a whooping like no other. [laughs heartily] But that’s how the stories stayed with me. My grandmother used to tell *Anansi tori*. She was one of the story tellers.
Sabi yu srefi

Opo yu yeey, is closely related to Sabi yu srefi, knowing oneself. Knowing oneself has psychological connotations, as far as being self-confident and self-secure. From a winti perspective, sabi yu srefi, means an understanding of the forces that walk with, flow through, and guide a person. For those intensely involved in the winti tradition, getting to know oneself might involve a cycle of ritual treatments to find out exactly which spiritual and ancestral forces are aligned with the person, and in which order. For others, it might mean the attention and awareness to one’s intuition.

Randall is a 41 year old young man with whom I spent a lot of time. Throughout my time in Suriname, Randall came into his own as a cultural traditions expert and was turning his cultural knowledge into a business. Randall had worked for years as a mechanic and in the catering business. He had stopped and tried to make his living as a musician, which turned out to be difficult. He decided to go back to work and diligently started pursuing jobs, but his repeated efforts to land a job kept being met by rejections, even when success was expected. All the while he had been collecting information on his family’s history dating as far back as during slavery days. He had also documented his knowledge about traditional music, dance, theater, and plants.

Randall describes his self discovery as follows: While in the Netherlands on a trip he was asked to give a lecture about traditional culture. Upon his return he was asked to give another lecture. He continues…

When I returned to Suriname I just bared my soul and said ‘Randall, what are you?’ I went to sleep and heard a voice tell me: ‘do not do this, do not do this, follow that course.’ I startled awake, thinking: ‘this is it.’ The
next day I received an offer to give a lecture here in Suriname. Everybody told me what to talk about, and I just started to talk. I started to talk about things my father did not even know, about ancestral veneration.... And everybody asked, why did not you do that before? I told them, I did not know. Now I see, I applied to so many jobs, but it just isn’t working. But the moment somebody comes to me to talk about cultural traditions, than it does work...And more people keep coming and they all want to know about the culture. And then I told myself, ‘Randall, i no sab’ i sref’ ete’, you do not know your self yet....When I talk about it [traditional culture], I see that ‘hey, I should choose this.’ I keep looking [for a job], but when I pursue people to work, nobody will listen to me. But the moment I open my mouth and talk about plants, other things, the culture, then everybody pays attention. And that’s how I discovered that, ‘yes Randall, not until now have I gotten to know myself, who I am.’ Finally I have become aware. A woman that knew me told me: ‘Randall, you sing, play the apinti dron, the apinti drum, and you know all the songs, you play [theater]. Do you know who does all of that? I told the woman: ‘Why do you ask me such a question?’ She said ‘yes, do you really know yourselves?’ I said no, and then did some investigating. That’s when I found out who the person is who sings. Because I always thought ‘yes, Randall you can sing, you are great.’ But it isn’t Randall who sings. It isn’t Randall who plays the apinti. It isn’t Randall who tells the tori, the stories. That’s how I found out in 2003. Now we are in 2005, so I have only known for two years who I am. So like, ‘Randall that’s you’, and that’s how I’ve gotten to know myselves.

The concepts o[p[yu yeye and sabi yu srefi come together in the belief that if one knows oneself/ves, adheres to the guiding messages from the self/ves, and does right by him or herself and others, one will live in prosperity. It does not mean that one will not encounter hardships. It does mean, however, that whatever hardships one encounters, one will be equipped to handle them. One does not need to fear any kind of evil being directed at them. As one man said: “Your ‘I’ will protect you if you live well”.

Although Christianity and winiti are publicly portrayed as polar opposites, it is in this concept of the self, ironically, that Christianity and winiti believers come together. The belief in the importance of doing good and its rewards, are the cornerstones of both Christian and winiti beliefs.
At the core of the mental well being model then, stands the self. In order to have a strong foundation in mental well being, and thus a strong sense of self, one has to understand the self, which means knowing who one is. One has to treat oneself with care and respect, and one has to be diligent about engaging in acts that will strengthen the self.

A weakened sense of self would be reflective of and/or contribute to destabilizing the mental well being model. A weakening of the innerself is the opposite of *opo yu yeye* and is denoted as *saka yu yeye*, lowering one’s spirit. Not knowing the self, straying away from what one knows to be right, not listening to the self, not adhering to cultural rules about the body and the environment, are all things my informants identified as contributing to *saka yu yeye*.

### 5.2 Self and environment

The mental well being model starts with a strong self. The next level in the model is the self in relation to the environment and its natural elements. When examining the self in relation to the environment, we encounter the same concept of *opo yu yeye*. *Opo yu yeye* then does not solely relate to uplifting the innerself spiritually and psychologically, but relates to the physical world as well. Physically *opo yu yeye* relates to an uplifting relation with the physical, that is the physical body of the self, but also with the physical embodiment of the nature forces. One should take good care of oneself, such as eating the right foods or maintaining proper hygiene. One should also have a respect for nature and nature forces. As such, one should not enter certain spaces when menstruating, urinate in certain spaces, and so on. These acts could contribute to nature
violations, and might be answered with harsh repercussions in the forms of illnesses, misfortune, or other punitive actions by nature forces.

Numerous taboo actions have their origin in plantation and rural living, where an interdependent relationship with the environment was and is a lot more self-evident. Physical aspects of *opo yu yeye* cause concern, in particular as it relates to the person and his or her relationship with the environment. Many of the elder people in the city, are first generation migrant country people. They remember and value a relationship with the environment. They are also more likely to complain about the loss of the connection with nature.

For those who have been raised in the city either since birth or since moving there as a small child, the relationship with the natural environment is different. It is easy to think that by living in the city one maintains a relationship with nature, because the city of Paramaribo is not the type of city that is covered by concrete. Sandy roads, creeks, palm, mango, and papaya trees and many luscious greens are everywhere. But people, think, and behave as city dwellers

One of the statements I would hear repeatedly and that would often lead to a heated discussion on the topic, was the statement: “We do not suffer in Suriname, because we can always find something to eat.” This statement would often be followed by: “We do not need to go hungry because we can plant our food.” Indeed, Suriname is known for its fertile soil, commonly expressed as “You can drop a seed and tomorrow there will be a tree.” The reality however, is that very few people would plant their own food. People in Paramaribo are city dwellers, carrying the stresses that city living brings
with it. The average person works three jobs just to make ends meet, but more so, many
do not have the necessary knowledge to cultivate fruits and vegetables.

And so, knowledge from rural living, and rules about *opo yu yeye* that pertain to a
connection with nature, have been minimally passed on. The sense of a personal
connection to nature was, in the past, cultivated through rural experiences, which is
something the second generation of country migrants might have experienced, but the
subsequent generation, far less.

When we were children we would spend every school vacation on
grandmother’s *boiti*, piece of land outside the city. It would be over there,
by [...]. We would fish, pick fruit, and help prepare for her *winti* work.
We would help collect herbs and things like that. (Florence)

We would spend every school vacation at our grandmother’s in the
district. All the cousins would be there. It would be so much fun. We
would play outside and have to help maintain the grounds, pick fruits, hunt
*leguana*, iguana, things like that. At night we would all sleep together
and play jokes on each other. That is why we still love that land so much.
It is really our land. (42 year old woman)

These voices imply the role of generational traditions. The mention of the
relationship with nature as a means of maintaining well being and balance were always
brought up by elders, or by younger people (30s) who were either raised by grandparents
or otherwise stood in close relationship with elders in the family and spent time with
them in the rural district.

Nature is one of the things of which you can say belongs to mental well
being. When you wake up in the morning, just breathing in the nature that
surrounds you. The trees that offer you oxygen when you breath. Getting
up early and *son n’e opo na y’ baka*, rising before the sun comes up. All
those kinds of things. You must have traditions. Madam, I get up every
morning at five in the morning, before sunrise. Because in the old days
the elders would tell you, “*meisje opo, son no mus’ de na y’ baka,*” girl
get up, the sun shouldn’t shine on you, you must rise before it....Watch
yourself when you go to school. Watch your body, your body hygiene. Do not stink. Use some nice deodorant. Look fresh. All those kinds of things. Get up early. Do not let the sun shine on you. You should nurture your traditions a little. Get up, go plant. (60+ year old woman)

Every chance I get, I go out of the city. I go and just get quiet. I just need to be in nature, be around green. That’s how I get back to myself. You need nature to get back to yourself. Than you come back to the city and can handle things again. (36 year old woman, raised by her grandmother)

Rural living does not just recall nostalgic memories of the good old days, however. Life was hard, and many came to the city merely to pursue better lives. But even for those who left the countryside, the relationship with nature made a significant impact.

People do not tell you this, but plantation living was hard work. Even as a child you had to work, taking care of the chickens, weeding, chasing monkeys away. Life was hard on the plantations. I left early on and would go back to visit. I had opportunities in the city, nice clothes. I have lived in the city ever since, but the funny thing is, I cannot get the countryside out of my system. I feel most at peace when I am around nature. I think it goes back to my childhood. (72 year old woman)

I will tell you. I have had to work hard all my life. I started working when I was just a child. I grew up on the plantation and then moved to the city. I have lived all over the world. I have lived in cities. But if you ask me where I am really happy, than I would have to tell you on plantation in the […] district. There is nothing like it. That’s where I wish I could be. The nature is incredible. (75 year old man)

In addition, those city people that maintain boiti, today, and that cultivate their land to produce fruits and vegetables for their own use, are mostly people over the age of 50. In my discussions with teens and youth, nature was never brought up as an essential part of well being.

Tourism, however, is transforming the relationship with nature for the younger generation. Young and old talk about the desire to take a vacation outside of the city,
fueled by Dutch relatives and tourists, who prefer to visit the country sides and the interior, to escape city life. If not creating envy, because eco-tourism is mostly unaffordable for local citizens, this practice creates a continuous sense of awareness of the value of nature. The rich natural environment also creates a sense of pride. This appreciation, however, still seems changed, in that it is experienced from the perspective of being fed, nourished, and rejuvenated by nature, as opposed to having a mutually dependent relationship with nature, which would involve a certain level of responsibility.

Tourism outside of the city has transformed the relationship with nature in another way. Beach-like resorts, which have been developed mostly with foreign investments, are aimed at tourism and a young audience. Suriname does not have natural sandy beaches, hence, these new resorts have artificially created beach fronts, with the latest amenities. Whereas the older tourist resorts consist of huts or places to hang a hammock with or without a natural creek nearby, the new resorts have bungalows with running water, bars, a beach, a playground, and rent jetski’s. On the weekends, the most popular music bands and dance shows are held at these resorts, and tickets and transportation are offered at a reasonable price for youngsters. Globalization has made a return to the country side attractive and accessible for Surinamese youngsters who otherwise could not afford to go, but globalization has also helped to transform the relationship with the country side into a relationship based in and driven by consumption.

In general, I would dare to say that a deep spiritual and personal connection to environment has made place for a psychological connection and appreciation, and that this represents a generational difference. Elders believe that the young generation’s lack of connectedness with nature negatively impacts their mental well being. The new trends
seem to suggest, however, that the young have not lost their connection to nature, but that it has taken a different form, adapted to the globalized tastes of today. What seems significant here, is the potential disconnect between generations over this issue, and conflicting norms in general about the person-nature relationship, rather than the assumed disconnect between the young generation and nature. I believe this is due to several reasons.

First, much of the rural and spiritual knowledge has not been passed on, and in cases where it has been passed on, the new generation has not internalized the lessons as strongly as their predecessors, because living in the 21st Century is not conducive to supporting and nurturing those beliefs. Furthermore, in the past a relationship with and appreciation for nature seems to have been cultivated through personal experience. As the majority of people now live in the city, these types of experiences are far less common for today’s youth, except in context of consumerism.

Secondly, people do recognize the value of nature as a source of entertainment or psychological rejuvenation. Life in the 21st Century is so stressful, if not distracting, that nature has become valued as a source of rejuvenation. For youngsters, ‘nature’ can now provide an outlet, in the form of hip entertainment, and in a contemporary style similar to that of popular Western tourism images.

I perceived support for this changed person-nature relationship when I noticed certain contradictions in the winti tradition. Although the nature forces in the winti system are identical to nature and the environment, it seems as if the concept of “nature forces” has become separated from the concept of “nature.” Instead, the winti are often seen as deities in their own right, as opposed to forces of nature.
It is possible then for a person to have a ceremonial feast for *Mama Aisa*, Mother Earth and go all out in spending on decorations, music selection, costuming, and so on, while at the same time having no qualms about dumping trash out in a field. This would seem to be a contradiction. Similarly, those Afro-Surinamese (of which there are many) who believe they are accompanied by an *Ingi winti*, a Native American *winti*, feel very connected with the Native Americans. However, when Native Americans’ ground rights, and other land issues are brought forward, the Afro-Surinamese fail to come forward and support their spiritual brothers and sisters.

I found contradiction in the city as well. For a population that claims to be so proud of its green environment, pollution is a major problem. Trash lines the streets. Numerous television and billboard ads remind people to *Mek’ Sranan kring, do ing gi yu pikin*, Keep Suriname clean – do it for your children. The rules of tradition and the convenience of today’s consumption seem to clash.

On a personal-environmental level, an imbalance in the relationship between self and nature can be restored through making some kind of restitution and taking corrective action. At times this may involve ritual procedures and offerings to appease the nature forces. Thus, for instance, if somebody urinates in a sacred place – whether knowingly or unknowingly, one might need to bring a *pai*, an offering to that site. These kinds of practices and understandings are passed on through family traditions. Family rituals need to take place in nature, preferably on old family (plantation) grounds. This is maintained again, especially through Dutch relatives who specifically come to Suriname to be restored and healed.
Interestingly, a whole industry has risen to accommodate families who need traditional healing. June through August are the summer vacation months in the Netherlands, and thus many Dutch ex-patriots schedule their family rituals during these months. As many families no longer have access to their original family home grounds, because they have moved away and/or sold the grounds, people in the country side have started to make plots of land available for ritual use – at a substantial fee.

In general in Paramaribo, we find people, who even though physically reside in proximity to an abundant natural environment - 70% from Suriname’s surface is rainforest -, have distanced themselves from a relationship with nature. 21st Century living favors city living over rural living, and leads to the losses of ancestral rural home grounds, and a regard for nature for psychological rejuvenation or entertainment. Whereas in the mental well being model the self stands in relationship with and as an extension of nature, today’s people see nature more as an object than as part of their own self/selves. Even those who engage in a belief system in which relational practices with nature are prescribed, do so often in a manner of consumption, rather than in a way of personal maintenance.

5.3 Self and others

Within the model of mental well being, the self stands at the core, followed by the self in relation with the environment and its natural elements. Lastly, the model is completed by the self in relation with other people. Three interpersonal relations that stand out are: 1.) self and family; 2.) self and organizations; and 3.) ethnic self and other, differently ethnic Surinamese.
Self and family

“This is my cousin. We are from the same bere, the same womb.”, is one of the ways my cousin would introduce me. The receiving party would then look me over and nod approvingly. Your connection to your family members legitimizes you, especially the connection to your mother’s family.

The Afro-Surinamese predominately have a matrifocal family system. Many Afro-Surinamese families consist of female headed households. Women usually raise their children with some financial and emotional support from their children’s fathers, but mostly with support from their female kin. Interestingly, the law, which is based on Dutch law and tradition, acknowledges a bilateral kinship system. Legitimization, validation, and inheritance rights are all dependent on the father’s legal acknowledgement of his child. The relatives on the father’s side are considered brudu, blood relatives (Pierce 1998). It is important to know who you come from, on your father’s side as well as on your mother’s side. Still, an extra special bond is felt with the relatives on the mother’s side, the bere, womb family. The bere referred to is generally an ancestral matriarch.

Being part of a family infuses the self in three particular ways: it contributes to the yeye, provides a network of affinity connections and resources, and provides a special connection to land. The family provides the self with a spiritual, psychological, and cultural basis. The yeye of a person is connected to those of the family. Randall explains:
Everybody is born with their own ‘I’, we call it yeye. That’s the first thing you get from God, and nobody can take that away from you. You are raised with it. Two things will then happen. When your mother is pregnant, you will get one from mother’s side and one from father’s side, that is the yeye who will raise you. Your own ‘I’ will give permission to those two yeye to raise you.

Families are connected by blood, but also on a spiritual level. Families have ancestors who walk among and with them, and who are still very much part of family life. In times of trouble, ancestors are called down and consulted. Given that ancestors attach themselves to particular family members, it is important to maintain good family relationships, so that when the family needs to come together, there are no difficulties.

December 2005 fieldnotes:
One of my longtime friends from the Netherlands is here. I have not seen her in years, so it is great to catch up. She is going to have a kabra neti, a ritual evening in honor of the ancestors, with her family. I am going to attend in order to support her.

Last night was the kabra neti. The kabra neti was held outside of the city, on the boiti, rural premises of the bonu man who was leading the ceremonies. I have not attended that many kabra neti, so I was looking forward to it. Everybody was dressed in dark blue and white, the color of mourning. Some community members came to sing and support the event. Apparently, the singers did not know that many of the songs, because at some point the bonu man put in a cd with ancestral songs. Large loudspeakers were well hidden underneath the kampu, the sacred site where all was to take place. I come out of a family of singers, and even though I do not know the songs, I have always been surrounded with family members who know all the songs, and then some. So the cd player threw me off a little, but I got over it quickly. You have to make do with what you have. Songs blared over the loudspeakers and the family danced in a circle. All of a sudden one of the family members was visited, but it was not clear by what or by whom. The entity danced violently, and very different from what is typically seen as ancestral dances. Furthermore, the entity wouldn’t calm down and wouldn’t respond to the questions of the bonu man. The bonu man became angry and at some point became visited by his own winti. He grabbed a machete, held it against his chest and dared the entity to do something. Fortunately, it did not come to that. Ceremonies continued as best as possible, but ancestors that were expected to come down, did not show themselves. The elders of the
family, including my friend were called in for consultation. She explained to me later that there were too many ill feelings, and unresolved issues within the family that needed to be addressed first. Also, there were some important family members that were not present, but that needed to be there. The family agreed to try to resolve their issues first.

As this example shows, it is when things break down that the importance of the respective culture becomes clear. The breakdown of the ceremony was allegedly directly due to the failure of family unity and working together. The family was held accountable, and was asked to address and correct their problems. No new ceremonial rituals would be embarked upon until they addressed their issues. As such, the spiritual and ancestral connection between family members, appears to feed into the self psychologically, by constantly demanding for imbalance to be addressed.

Furthermore, in addition to psychological and spiritual gifts, the family provides the self with cultural gifts that increases one’s sense of well being.

May 2005 fieldnotes:
I had not heard from one of my close friends for well over a week now. He did not answer his phone, and I was worried that something had happened to him. Today he called. He had been op boti with his family. Apparently, his sister had arrived from the Netherlands and needed to have some [spiritual] work done. As her older brother he had to be there. I told him I understood, and that I had just been worried because I hadn’t heard from him in a while. ‘I did not want to get in contact with you because I did not know how bad things were. I did not want to pass anything [negative spiritual energy] on to you and the baby, so I thought it better to stay away.’ ‘I understand’, I said, ‘so how did it go?’ ‘Everything went well.’ ‘Is she okay now?’, I asked. ‘Yes, she is fine, I actually had a good time.’ ‘What?’ I quipped, and started to laugh. My friend knew why I was laughing. My friend is one of the most adamant about not knowing “about those bonu things.” His favorite line is ‘you can never get me to sit in front of a bonu man’. He continued, ‘I even took a wasi, a ritual bath. I picked the herbs myself. I just went out and collected the herbs I felt I needed. It [the wasi] felt so good.’ ‘Wow’, I said. ‘Yeah, who would have thought’, he answered, and started laughing.
Family provides the self a sense of belonging and connection, through ancestral and spiritual bonds, through continuous psychological feedback, and through shared customs and rituals.

Family also provides the self with a set of relationships that provides networks and concrete resources. Access to finances, material goods, job connections, and so on, can all be accessed through family relationships. Membership within the family carries participational duties. Because one is related, one can be expected to get called upon, or to call upon if necessary. From household chores and child care responsibilities to using one’s influence on the job, family members help each other. Families do for each other, but more so, are expected to do for each other, more than a non-relative would. An interaction with the same friend from the last example, illustrates this.

May 2005
I received a telephone call from one of my friends today. He was called out of work because his cousin is in the country. Given that the cousin came unannounced that can only mean one thing; she is here to smuggle drugs. So he has been sent on a mission to find her and straighten her out. You could say he is on a mission to save her soul. As her big cousin he was automatically called to do the job, and he does not question his responsibility to have to do so.

But families are not just about “doing”, they are also about “being”. You are because of who you are related to. And to whom you are related immediately ties you to a place, a particular (former) plantation in Suriname. Family relationships can thus provide the self with some sort of anchoring to a place on earth. Afro-Surinamese people are well aware of their distant connection to Africa, but like most of the African Diaspora, the relationship with the original motherland is mythical and far removed. As such, knowing that you belong to a place can infuse the self with a sense of connection
and belonging, similar to a sense of connection and belonging that is provided by the connection to spiritual forces, ancestors and family members.

This relationship could best be regarded as an emotional or psychological relationship with ancestral land, but there is also a spiritual relationship. I have a special relationship with Para because my ancestors lived there, and are still housed there. If needed, I can call upon them. I can call upon my ancestors at any time, any place, anywhere, but it is assumed that I can have a stronger and direct connection in the place where they lived. I quote from my field notes:

Today we visited our family grounds. It means a lot for me to come here [Saramacca district], probably more so than for the others [my cousins]. I listen with envy how they would spend their school vacations here with my (maternal) grandmother. I missed out on so much. I did not grow up here, and yet when I get here, I feel like I’m finally home, not “Suriname home”, but “home home”.

As we get closer, I am reminded of eight years earlier when we were going to have a big family reunion after the family house had been built. My family had put money together to build a big family house, so that any of us could visit there, any time we wanted. My grandmother’s house had been demolished, but my great-grandmother’s house was still standing. Actually, it was leaning. It was a small wooden house that looked as if it would fall apart if one would lean against it. My cousins told me that when they wanted to tear that house down, a big snake made it’s appearance. They took it as a spiritual message to leave the house alone, and so they did. I wasn’t sure about the spiritual message of it all, but it seemed like a wise choice to me to leave it alone.

When we arrived then, eight years ago, my aunts got out of the car and yelled something. I had no idea what they said. I got out and followed. My aunt turned around and told me. “You have to greet your family members [ancestors] and tell them you are here.” She said it sternly, but matter of factly.

I was reminded of that memory as we got closer. I saw the house and the grounds. My great-grandmother’s house had finally given way, on her own, when she was ready. More neighbors had sold of land to the soil companies in town who come and dig out the valuable shell based dirt, leaving horrible craters behind. The destruction of the land hurt my heart. I got out of the car. “Famiri, famiri un doro!” Family, we have arrived!, I yell to my ancestors, and I enter the grounds.
The relationship with the ancestral land has many dimensions, which intersect, such as the psychological and the spiritual. It is believed that after people pass on, their spirit returns and chooses a specific place to live, such as a fruit tree or a bush. Consequently, one’s relationship with the physical environment can take on special meaning, seen in the deepfound respect for nature mentioned earlier. If a tree is not just a tree, but also a place where one’s grandmother’s spirit resides, than one might look at that tree differently. One would think twice about cutting it down, one might give it more care, because there is a direct connection between person, (ancestral) spirit, and nature force - - or so one would think.

The connection between land and family can also a foster a link between psychological and spiritual well being through the interdependent relationships that have been fostered there. In order to survive, people had to rely on each other and support each other, in a more direct way than in the city, where institutions play a more significant role. In addition, where there was no money, collective blood, sweat and tears were shed to eek out an existence, and the idea of family would often expand beyond blood relations because of communal support. Having this sense of collective living, working, and surviving on ancestral lands provides a greater sense of psychological and spiritual security, as the ancestors are presumed to be part of an invisible support network. One of the many complaints channeled through people from the ancestral world, is a sense of disconnect and neglect as people no longer maintain their ancestral grounds, or have abandoned them all together.
Self and organizations

Another way in which the self stands in relation with other people, is through membership in organizations. The relationship with organization members can be similar to family relations in terms of responsibility, loyalty, and resource sharing. However, whereas family relations contain a strong spiritual aspect, relationships through organizations are based more in concrete transactions.

From childhood on, people are encouraged to become members of organizations. These organizations provide extra curricular activities and opportunities that parents otherwise cannot afford. But it is not only the young who participate. Adults are very active in community organizations, from cultural organizations to lodges. These lodge organizations have a long history, and are rooted in similar principles as the free and service societies of African Americans in the United States. The creation of these organizations was – at the time – a matter of social, emotional, financial survival and identity affirmation. Their function is the same, but things are changing.

Working with NAKS and the mens and women’s lodges, I learned that organizations provide age specific socializing and activity opportunities. Within NAKS, people are grouped into departments ranging from youth theater (ages 8-14) to senior citizen (55+). Organizations are often also grouped according to ethnicity, reflective of a specific cultural emphasis, such as Javanese culture, Indian dancing, etc., but sometimes ethnicity seems prominent while really neighborhood and class are the more salient factors. Organizational membership contributes to one’s mental well being as organizations provide a network of resources, but also as they provide a space of identity affirmation. One can receive status, self fulfillment, and a sense of belonging, regardless
of one’s chronological status. This is different from the family system, where one’s family position is far more difficult to shed, and where identity is ascribed as opposed to achieved. “Once the Benjamin, always the Benjamin”, so to speak.

Field notes 2003
I recall coming to this place [rural district] before and attending a *kabra neti*, an ancestral night. During this ceremony, the ancestors are brought down to converse with family members. Some community members were present as well. A table was decked with all kinds of foods from slavery days. Tobacco was present. Everybody was wearing dark blue and white, colors of mourning. The evening proceeded with songs, Christian songs and *soko psalms*. People also danced in a circle. The dancing was much more subdued than with a *winti prei*. Suddenly, one of the ancestors appeared through one of the family members. Family members gathered to greet the elder and were eager to receive messages. But the ancestor would not address the family. *P’a pikin boi de, p’a de?*, where is that little boy, where is he? The ancestor would not continue until one of the family members was present. Finally the *pikin boi* appeared, it was a 63 year old man. His sisters laughed as he still was admonished as a *pikin boi*, after all these years.

These organizations have taken on the role of extended family systems for their members. They provide opportunities for friendship, support, resources and networking.

I witnessed how the leadership at NAKS would go to bat for their members, especially their young members. When youngsters would get into trouble, they were not dismissed, instead, staff members would support parents, if not speak on their behalf in school matters, legal matters, and the likes. NAKS in particular takes its role as a co-parent very seriously.

May 2005
Today we had a membership meeting for just the youth members and their parents. As one of the leaders of one of the youth groups, I was present. I thought it was interesting when the director addressed the parents about absences. She stood up and said. I know that when your children do not do well in school or there are other problems, your first inclination is to not let them participate in activities here. You shouldn’t do that. Instead,
let us know, so we can help you address the issue together. We will be involved and make sure your child does well. We stand by you and will help with whatever issue you are facing. I thought it was very interesting because I know as a parent that would be my first instinct to do, to withdraw them from extra-curricular activities. It was also interesting because immediately, as a group leader, I felt a whole different level of responsibility placed upon me, rather than mere activity leader.

Resources, intellectual as well as material, are also an important asset of organizations. Organizations in general do not have much material wealth, but they do provide access to opportunities to which individuals or families might not have access. For example, numerous members of NAKS, have been able to travel outside of the country, something they or their families otherwise could not afford.

Another, specific benefit of NAKS and similar organizations, is that they provide a space for people to freely explore their traditional culture. In particular through the arts, song, dance, music, and theater, people are allowed to learn about and express their traditional culture. People take great pride in being knowledgeable in these art form, and these traditional art forms contribute to one knowing oneself. In my own work on traditional Afro-Surinamese dance with youngsters age 16 through 35, I witnessed first hand the pride and self-confidence my students experienced. Through providing them with a collective space where they could talk about, debate and dance their traditional dances, their confidence improved dramatically.

Organizations like NAKS, contribute to well being by trying to be holistic in addressing the needs of their patrons. NAKS initially started as a recreational organization in the late 1940s and expanded by adding the cultural arts. Now they include numerous educational and work programs. As the president and vice president are also active board members of the National Women’s Movement, NAKS pays extra
attention to the plight of women in today’s society. They have special programs to train 
women in non-traditional professions such as brick laying, computer hardware 
technology, and so on, which are aimed at helping women obtain jobs with which they 
can realistically support themselves and their families.

NAKS is a forerunner in this regard, and is not a representative of the average 
cultural organization, but it is a model of the connection between well being and 
organizational membership. NAKS is by no means a utopia. It has its problems like any 
other organization. Being involved in such a great extent in patrons’ lives brings it own 
set of problems. Nevertheless, I think their commitment to a holistic approach in well 
being is commendable, as is their longevity and endurance, in a country where many 
organizations come and fall by the way side due to lack of funding.

The lodge similarly has a specific charter dedicated to well being. As the District 
Grand Master clarified, the goals of the order are based within spiritual i.e. moral 
principles and are exemplified in the mechanics teachings, which each member is 
supposed to practice. More specifically their constitution acknowledges:

- the high value of the human personality
- the right of each human being to seek for truth
- the moral responsibility of each human being for his or her actions
- the equality of all human beings
- the duty of each human being to work with dedication on the well being of the 
  community; and
- the universal brotherhood of man
Besides social activities and identity formation, since their onset, lodges have played major roles in family and community caretaking. Burial funds, death rituals, finance cooperatives, and extended parenting, among others, have directly contributed to the well being of its members. Well being can be compromised within these organizations as the close involvement with and by the organization exerts a lot of pressure on an individual. One is not only a member, one is a representative of the organization at any and all times.

In addition, people are usually members of multiple organizations, and the responsibilities and expectations of all of them can be overwhelming. This is especially true for women, who are more likely to have multiple memberships. Women are also more likely to take their responsibilities toward their memberships more seriously than their male counterparts, and are less likely to say no when called upon. As we look at organizations as extensions or parallel forms of the family network system, we see that women here too play a significant and dominant role in keeping things going.

*Ethnic self and other ethnicities*

The last interpersonal aspect of the self within the mental well being model, is the self in relation with other ethnic groups. Interaction and comparison with other ethnic groups provides additional feedback to the self about being in the world. Dealing with those of another culture forces the self to look beyond a range of cultural comfort and familiarity. To be Afro-Surinamese in Suriname means that one lives in relation with and to other ethnic groups at any given time. Of course there exists a range of stereotypes about each of the ethnic groups. However, it is in going beyond the stereotype, by
exploring how working class Afro-Surinamese relate to other ethnic groups, that we gain some insight into how the Afro-Surinamese view themselves. There are two groups in particular that are of interest, namely the Maroons and the Hindustani.

The Maroons and the Afro-Surinamese have the same ancestors. Early on during slavery, large numbers of enslaved Africans escaped the plantations and formed Maroon colonies in the interior. The relationship between the Afro-Surinamese and their Maroon “cousins” can best be described as “ambivalent”. Within the adult Afro-Surinamese community, the Maroons are appreciated and respected for their African rich heritage, and they are acknowledged as sharing the same ancestry. At the same time they are a source of envy as the Maroons are always heralded as being more authentically African than the Afro-Surinamese. The value and authenticity of Maroon culture is never questioned, and is always publicly heralded and presented, whereas this is not the case for Afro-Surinamese culture.

Prior to the 1980s when one would refer to somebody as a *fos’tron Djuka*, first timer Aukan Maroon, it would be a derogatory statement, connoting the ignorance of somebody from the bush who is confronted with the modern world. As Maroons started to become active players in gold mining in the interior and became more integrated in city life, this term and derogatory attitude disappeared. With the onset of the civil war in the interior in the mid 1980s many Maroons escaped to neighboring French Guyana, while many moved to the city (Paramaribo). A sense of compassion towards this population that was felt by all citizens, soon made way for feelings of reserve as Maroons quickly occupied the bottom rung of society. Ill equipped for city living, many young
people failed or dropped out of school and succumbed to teen pregnancy and crime. Stories of male teen gangs who commit violent robberies are common.\textsuperscript{6}

Although the Maroon population receives negative attention due to their high crime rates, they fare far better artistically. Many young Maroons try their hand at making music videos. Similar to North American hip hop videos, themes of sex, women, cars, and ‘bling bling’ [flashy jewelry] are central to their often self produced videos and cd’s. Rather than rap however, they prefer reggae and dance hall style music. Although these pursuits are more positive, several music artists have been arrested for crimes such as rape and robbery, which continues to place them in a negative light. Among Surinamese teens of all ethnicities however, the Maroon pop artists are extremely popular.

At any government and tourist function, the Maroons are hailed and paraded along with the Native Americans as the true indigenous people of Suriname. Whenever there is room for performance the Maroons are asked to showcase their traditional dances.

The Afro-Surinamese do not deny the rich heritage of the Maroons, but they often feel that people undervalue and underestimate their own African heritage by contrast. This is evident in the numerous Afro-Surinamese cultural organizations who constantly battle for recognition and position. These inter-group conflicts are fueled by a government that consistently supports Maroon artistic presentations, but who selectively supports Afro-Surinamese artistic endeavors.

\textsuperscript{6} The most notorious story is that of “Sampie”, a 22 year old young man who became known as one of the most violent criminals and who committed at least 49 violent armed robberies. He recruited numerous young men in their mid to late teens into a life of crime and was a master of evading police, until he was shot and killed in May of 2004.
As such, the relational comparison with Maroons affects a sense of self, as the self is continuously imbued with messages of being “less than”, “less authentic”, and “not as African”.

The strongest inter-ethnic relationship, however, is with the Hindustani. During interviews, or even in casual conversation, when Afro-Surinamese talked about themselves, more often than not, they would make a comparative remark about the Hindustani, usually placing themselves in a negative light. Some examples:

With the Afro-Surinamese, a part is easily satisfied. I mean the group who does not want to work hard to get ahead. They sit rather than do something regardless of their situation. Then another portion of the Afro-Surinamese is never satisfied. No matter what you do for them, or what you give them, or what their situation may look like, they are never satisfied. You could give them the world and still they would want more. I am not just talking about financial wealth, but about other things too...The Hindustani, they pray and work just to get richer. No matter what you give them, no matter how small, they are usually grateful because it will help in their progress. (41 year old man)

What is ours is not good. When you as an Afro-Surinamese do your things, they accuse you of idolatry, d’en bonu. It’s the Afro-Surinamese themselves who make these remarks. I saw it myself. When a Hindustani is near they are respectful, but they will turn around and laugh at another Afro-Surinamese. Elder man

At other times, when discussing the Afro-Surinamese within the larger Surinamese society, people would consciously hold the Hindustani up as a successful example of a group that does better and is respected more by others. They state:

Hindustani bring their whole family forward. Afro-Surinamese have less family loyalty 70+ year old woman.

We have been brainwashed by the bakra, the white man. The Hindustani are far ahead of us. Elder man
Hindustani work hard, they have a sense of trade. We are too ashamed to sell stuff. 60+ year old woman

Hindustani raise their children with cultural traditions from birth. We do not systematically pass on our cultural knowledge to our children. 60+ year old woman

The Afro-Surinamese participants indicate that Hindustani always seem to do better, from preserving cultural traditions to in-group unity, with one exception: suicide. Hindustani have an extreme high rate of suicide, which receives national attention. And so, in spite of their successes, Afro-Surinamese do consider themselves to be emotionally stronger than Hindustani. The Afro-Surinamese state:

Hindustani cry a lot in their theater and films. They try to get people to release their emotions. Their crying is part of their culture. A Hindustani is always getting the raw end of the deal. When a Hindustani has a problem he will turn to alcohol or drugs. That does not solve the problems, it only makes it worse, with all bad consequences. But that’s their nature... They often do not know what to do. 40+ year old man

Amin: Do you have any thoughts about the issue of suicide among the Afro-Surinamese?
Woman: Well that is really a Hindustani problem isn’t it? They are the ones who really do that.

In general then, there is a tendency to compare the self in a negative framework in comparison to the Hindustani. Similarly to the relational position between Afro-Surinamese and Maroons, the relational views of the Hindustani affect the self, by always receiving a self-imposed “less than” message, or feeling some sense of conflict about one’s own position. This rivalry with the Hindustani is reinforced by governmental parties, which have always been ethnically segregated and competitive.

It is obvious in Paramaribo that the Hindustani are the big business owners and that there are more upper and upper middle class Hindustani then there are Afro-
Surinamese of the same class, which could be an obvious contribution to interethnic envy. However, in daily living Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani get along very well. People may have their prejudices, but they live side by side and in general do not exhibit hostility toward each other, which is very different from neighboring Guyana, where inter-ethnic bloodshed has been known to happen.

In talking with my Hindustani colleagues I was assured that Hindustani do not think as highly of themselves as Afro-Surinamese may presume. As Afro-Surinamese have a tendency to reflect negatively on themselves, so do Hindustani. Several elders who were born and raised in the rural districts say that this divisive and envious attitude towards Hindustani is a city phenomenon and that their rural upbringing provided them with a totally different experience and attitude.

The Afro-Surinamese in the district had a plantation mentality. Families would go out and plant together. They did not make any ethnic distinctions. Everybody was called grandpa, grandma, auntie or uncle, regardless of their ethnicity. That separation stuff is stuff from the city. It’s that racial stuff from those Afro-Surinamese in the city. We used to learn Hindustani songs and how to write the language in the Roman Catholic school in the district. (Two elder sisters ages 60+ and 70+)

It [social connection] was actually something very important, especially where we lived [in the district]. We did not know any of that separation stuff. We did not have that ‘apartheid’ situation with Hindustani or Javanese. Everybody was together, and when we had story nights we all came together. Where we lived were Hindustani, and they would be part of the party. Our social life was very peaceful and that was important for our community. That social element was one of the things you held on to. We helped each other, language was not an issue. You would learn to speak Hindustani and that made you even closer. I always say it, politics forced things to separate. (59 year old story teller)

Living in close proximity to those of different ethnic backgrounds provides feedback to the self about being a citizen in Suriname. Ideally, these exchanges are
positive and contribute to a more secure and confident sense of self of being in a world of different beings. However, if the comparative feedback is predominately negative, founded or not, what are the implications for the self?

What constitutes mental well being for the working class Afro-Surinamese population in Paramaribo? I have presented a model of mental well being that has its origins in an African centered model of spirituality. In this model the self is seen as a container or vessel in and through which numerous forces flow. The self can consequently be referred to in a plural sense. The self is at any time interconnected with other people, all the natural elements, ancestral and spiritual forces. The self has a particularly strong relationship with blood relatives from the maternal lineage. The connection of the self with nature is expressed and experienced differently within the different generations. Other interpersonal relationships that have a significant role in shaping the self are the participation in organizations that provide kin-like structures, and the relationship with other ethnic groups that continually provide comparative feedback to the self.

Mental well being is achieved and maintained through maintaining a harmonious relationship with the self and all these other forces. There is never a level of homeostasis, but a continuous shifting of relationships and adapting and renegotiating of life conditions that provide continuous feedback into the model. This inter-relationship’s model is affected by outside and inside forces, at times disabling or strengthening the system. Which forces strengthen or undermine the system will be discussed in the following chapters.
Florence – mutual support

My relationship with Florence was an interesting one. I had known her before, and thus there was an instant familiarity and informality, at least on my part. We talked a lot, inquiring about each others’ children, families, and well-being. At the same time she provided a service for me for which I paid her. The dynamics of our relationship shifted continuously throughout our relationship; for example after my son was old enough to attend day care on a full time basis, Florence shifted from being his main care provider to caring for him on a far less frequent and regular basis. I continued to support her financially though, while we remained in regular contact. Given the walking distances between our houses, I would stop by to check in and she would do the same, or she would send her son, niece or nephew over with a message. The children would often stop by anyway, especially since I lived across from the Chinese store and I frequently would give them change to buy some candy. I tutored two of the children for a while after school, after which I would always check on their school progress, rewarding them if they made good grades.

Florence’s son was held back after the first year I was there, and his cousin was in danger of going the same path, so I stimulated them as much as I could. A good grade on a test or report card would be rewarded with one of the toys my son had left behind when he went to live with my mother in the Netherlands, or with a monetary reward. The little girl I treated differently. Given that she made straight A’s, and that she was being raised with three boy cousins, I would from time to time treat her to a special “girl’s night out”. Through my work in the community with dance, I would be invited to numerous cultural
events. So I brought her along to a dance recital of my friend’s dance school, and I brought her along when I had to be a judge for the little Ms. Suriname contest. Aunties play an important role in raising children, so I was trying to do my best with the few resources I had.

My financial relationship with Florence also changed. Although I no longer owed her a regular salary, I would give her pocket money when I could, buy her some groceries on occasion, and would ask her regularly about her water, electricity, and gas bills to which I would contribute if not flat out pay them. Before I knew it, I had become a main source of her financial security, something I usually could not afford. I told myself, however, that she had provided safe and loving care to my child, something on which one cannot put a price.

Truth be told, I felt obligated to support her, even when I couldn’t. I felt honored when she would ask me for money, glad that she felt comfortable enough to trust me to do so. Yet when I would need to give her money on repeated occasions for an outstanding electricity bill, it would make me somewhat uncomfortable, wondering how she managed before I came along. As uncomfortable as it made me feel at times, I was clear that no matter how bad my situation (and it was pretty bad), it was not as bad as hers, and mine would after all be a temporary state.

At the same time, I developed a deepfound respect and admiration for Florence. I admired the grace and sense of peace with which she moved through her life, in spite of its hardships. It was something I longed to learn. I have become a master at suppressing the anger and frustration associated with being a black woman in the world, or I channel
it into socially accepted venues such as community service work, the arts, or academic writing.

But who was to say that Florence was truly at peace? Who was to say that she wasn’t going through each day, taking it at face value, because that was all she knew, or because she was oblivious to the gravities of the injustices bestowed upon her? Life is probably harder for us, who are more informed about the institutionalized and globalized injustices and insanities that are thrown our way, to the point that we are continually driven to do something about it. I never discussed this with her and probably should have. Regardless of the “true” matter of the situation, she represented something that eluded me as my life had taken shape as a string of connected accomplishments, yet where true moments of peace were few and far between. She was more about “be-ing” as opposed to my “do-ing.”

In addition, I appreciated the oso dresi, the home remedies she would make for my son. Florence’s grandmother, who was a medicine woman, had taught her about the medicinal abilities of many plants, some of which grew around the house. I wasn’t always too sure about the remedies, but I appreciated her conviction and dedication nevertheless.

A third shift in our relationship was that I became more vocal in giving Florence direction about her life. An outsider might view my relationship with Florence as dominating and rooted in the fact that my western upbringing and education made me feel superior to her. This was not the case, however. I see my directness with Florence as rooted in three things in particular. First, our different personality styles. Florence’s demure, reserved and quiet way of being easily allowed room for me to express my more
outspoken personality. Secondly, and by far the predominate reason, is the fact that I am eight years Florence’s senior. As such I felt like her big sister, and consequently treated her as I would my younger sister. Thirdly, education played a significant role. I come from a community where the legitimacy of one’s education is questioned if not used to benefit the community. “What use are you with all your education if you cannot intercede on X, Y, Z’s behalf?” And indeed, having an educational background in mental health, and standing by while Florence struggles without offering any support, would be unconscionable. I made Florence a promise that I would support her in any way that I could, while present, and so I did.

The main things I tried to help Florence with, were the care taking responsibilities for her epileptic sister and her opportunity to make a living, two things that were closely related. I talked with Florence about coming up with a different care taking strategy for her sister, one that would involve more family members and that would free up some of her time, which she then could devote to a part-time job or taking a course. I told her that I had no idea about how things worked in Suriname, but that if her sister were in the Netherlands or the USA, she would probably be in some type of day program with social activities and job training. What if something like that were available and her sister could go to a program, even if only two days a week, might she be interested? She said she might and gave me permission to do some further investigating on the matter.

I also talked with Florence about her goals and the kinds of things she would like to be doing. We then explored what she thought she needed to achieve these goals. Florence had worked as a waitress and she had enjoyed it. It was something she would like to do again. In discussing waitressing I suggested the option of working in a higher
scale setting like a hotel, which would require training but would also offer better work circumstances, benefits, and salaries. I followed up by passing on advertisements for such positions, whenever they would come available.

Lastly I talked to her about the options offered by the National Women’s Movement (NVB), an organization dedicated to the empowerment of women in numerous ways. One of their programs was a work-training program in “non-traditional-women’s professions” for women who had not finished school. The professions included computer hardware technology, bricklaying, and auto maintenance, among others. Besides work-training, women are mentored all the way through their training and well into their first job experience. The program seemed perfect for Florence and I brought her the flyers.

For a number of weeks we got involved pursuing some options. I met with the director of Paramaribo’s only psychiatric institute who informed me that there was indeed a day program available, free of charge, but that it did not provide transportation or any kind of job training for clients. When I reported the news to Florence she became somewhat excited. She said there was a private taxi service that they could use to transport her sister twice a week to the program. I asked her if her family could be supportive, financially or otherwise. She wasn’t really too sure. Her main concern was that her sister sometimes had spells during which she would not eat. She was afraid that the nurses in the day program would not ensure that she would eat. Given what I had observed and had heard about the staff, that was not necessarily an unreasonable concern. I suggested we’d make an appointment with the director together so we could address her concerns and make some realistic plans.
Right before we were supposed to go, Celeste had another blackout and epilepsy attack, and Florence canceled. Her family told her to tell me that she could pursue a different treatment plan after Celeste had made a full recovery and that she had to take care of her until then. It became obvious to me that her family thought I was pushing her in a certain direction for my sake, so I decided to back off.

Similarly I took Florence to the Women in Business Conference, which was sponsored by the NVB. There they had a sign-up sheet for the back to work programs. Florence signed the sign-up form, but she never received the promised follow-up call. I followed up with my aunt who has a high position at the NVB. She told me to tell Florence to give her a personal call and that she would work with her. I passed on the message to Florence and decided to leave it at that.

It became clear to me that whatever was going to happen next would have to come from Florence. The interest and motivation were there, but I do not believe she ever saw these options as real possibilities, especially since her immediate family could not see another life for her either. Gradually, life went back to the usual. A few more times I passed on information to both Florence and Celeste. I brought back two issues from the Epilepsy magazine from the Netherlands, and brought her information about a support program for people with epilepsy in Paramaribo that I collected at the Youth Educational Information Fair. Again, I left it up to Florence to pursue any of the information, which she never did.

One day I sat Florence down and shared with her my concern about the load she was carrying. What were the reasons that her siblings were not more involved in her sister’s care? The most support she got was from her sister in the Netherlands, but this
was mere moral support. “If I had a way to bring you all over here,” she told Florence repeatedly. But even this had its flipside, as Florence explained that her sister would repeatedly say that she would like for Florence to come to the Netherlands so Florence could babysit for her so she could go back to work. I told her flat out that if she were to go she shouldn’t just go to assist yet another family member, but should try to commit to her own development. She just smiled and nodded.

One week later her grandmother gave her a *luku*, a spiritual reading. The reading said that her spirit was weak and worn down because she was doing too much work for others, thereby neglecting herself. Her siblings neglected her. To remedy the situation she should buy herself a gold ring. After listening to her I told her, that I agreed with her grandmother’s diagnosis 100%, but that I thought the solution was not enough. I avoided addressing the gold ring and her grandmother’s recommendation directly, thinking about how buying a gold ring would present another financial hardship. Instead, I told her that she could do something nice for herself to make herself feel better – which she greatly deserved – but that if she did not make any changes in her life, things would stay the same in the long run. She listened, smiled, and nodded like she always did.
Chapter 6.

Fa a go a go: External Challenges

There is a saying that is often heard in Suriname: *Fa a go a go*, which literally translates into “It goes how it goes.” It is the kind of “shrug of the shoulder” remark that we know as “C’est la vie.” Indeed there are certain aspects of Surinamese society that people shrug off with a sense of tolerance, or indifference. Even though this reaction may give the appearance of acceptance, in fact these issues cause significant tension and/or disturbance, to the extent that one’s well being may be affected. I, therefore, refer to these issues as *fa a go a go*.

The tension that is caused by *fa a go a go* issues can negatively impact mental well being, because *fa a go a go* issues are negative, remain unresolved, and thus provide a continuous and insidious source of disharmony. I identified five major aspects of Surinamese society that stood out as maintaining significant *fa a go a go* issues. They are: Partner Relationship Conflicts, Criminality, Government Ineffectiveness, Dutch – Surinamese tensions and Economic Constraints.

*Partner Relationship Conflicts*

As we are introduced to Florence’s life, we are introduced into her way of “being in the world”. Florence is who she is because of her family and her environment. There is a matrifocal household structure, where the family is centered around a major matriarch, in this case *oma*. Although not a rich woman, *oma* invested in buying and building houses and pieces of land for her offspring. At the same time she maintained a
boiti, a piece of land outside of the city, for her own purposes. Although currently a woman-centered household with oma, her daughter, her granddaughters (Florence, Celeste, and Jaimy) and their children, men played and play a significant role in their lives. Neither one of the young women maintained a noteworthy relationship with their children’s fathers, however.

Jaimy and Florence from time to time mentioned when the fathers contacted the children, but their involvement was always of little substance. If the men contributed to their children’s upkeep and well-being, they did so sporadically. A conversation about an encounter was usually relayed with a rolling of the eyes and a sense of exasperation. The promises made to the children by the fathers were hardly ever kept. I never heard any mention of the father of either Celeste’s son’s or of Florence’s Aunt’s son.

During one of my meetings with oma she told me how she never could live with a man, and how she preferred her independence. Yet, she encouraged her daughter and granddaughters to find mates. She wanted them to have mates, so they would not stay behind alone. In fact, they were quite invested in having a man in their lives. Florence and Celeste both dreamt of having a boyfriend. When I asked Florence about where she would like to be five years from now, she answered that she would like to have “a good life”. When I asked her what that meant, she further explained that she would like to live with a “good” man by her side, have a stable income, live separately from her family, and have somebody who could provide her son with father love.

“Having a man in your life”, usually meant having some sort of financial stability. Florence’s uncle was known to support the family financially from time to time.

Florence was raised by her father, a man who though strict, was very much involved with
the rearing of his children. Shortly after his wife died, he left the children behind, but continued to provide for them financially. Florence’s maternal grandfather, similarly, did not live with her grandmother but was an important relative.

For the Afro-Surinamese, working class community, where economic stability and comfort remain elusive for most, and where a majority of households are run by women, “having a man” may mean financial security, but it also carries certain risks. Many young women are encouraged to make liaisons with men, purely for the financial benefit, sometimes even by their own mothers. This relationship might be a potential option in a dire situation. As a result, women might put up with certain things in a relationship, such as physical and emotional abuse, or sexual exploitation, which they otherwise wouldn’t.

In addition, globalization further complicates matters by making international men more attractive. Seeking out a tourist man, who is always presumed to be wealthier than the local man, is another financial strategy. Many ex-patriots who now come to Suriname on vacation, can live and act like kings for the short amount of time that they’re there. Women are readily available to these men, which has contributed and continues to contribute to an exponential rise in cases of HIV and AIDS.

Even in situations where sexual exploitation and abuse are not the main issues, risks remain. Male/female relationships are usually structured in a reciprocal fashion where sex and caretaking by the woman is expected in exchange for financial support by the man. This reciprocal arrangement gets complicated as both parties often maintain some level of independence and live separate lives. More often than not, living an independent life for a man, includes a non-monogamous relationship pattern, and having
unprotected sex is par for the course. The obvious risk of sexually transmitted diseases is clear, but there are other complications with this system. I identified three specific aspects of Partner Relationships to be considered as fa a go a go issues. These three aspects are closely interrelated and consist of: Independence, Fidelity, and Trust.

The concept of “independence” is one of the biggest enigma’s and contradictions in Afro-Surinamese life. Afro-Surinamese people, and in particular women, are indoctrinated from a young age that “your diploma is your first man”. Time and time again I heard this quote, from teenagers to senior citizens. Young girls are drilled, not just to understand that education is important in being able to provide, but more so that as a woman one cannot count on a man being available. She has to be prepared to take care of herself and her offspring, and thus she’d better obtain an education to have some security.

Throughout the Caribbean the notion of the “independent woman” is common (Bolles 2003). This pattern of independence in Suriname has been traced to folk mythology about slavery days, during which women were presumed to be the sole providers, and where men were minimally available or present due to restricted plantation conditions. However, Lamur (1993) has disputed this, highlighting that in Suriname’s plantation system, men were more likely to be engaged in stable, monogamous relationships, and were strongly involved with their children, even if they lived on separate plantations.

Other theories included an emphasis on the inheritance of matrilineal kinship patterns (Lesser-Bumberg 1975, Matthews and Lee 1975), or Pierce’s (1998) argument that post Emancipation in the late 1800s, Creole fathers were very protective of their
daughters and did not want them to get married for a long time. The memory of being considered as someone’s property was still fresh on the mind, apparently. Rather than their lighter skinned Creole counterparts who were trying to imitate and assimilate into Dutch norms, marriage was avoided. Another theory includes the economic consideration that because of labor immigration patterns women were often left to fend for themselves and their children. Men were lured away to the interior, but also to the islands and even the Netherlands for better work opportunities, as early as the 1930s (Buudingh 1999).

Regardless of which of these theories - either individually or combined - contributed, there is a strong notion that Afro-Surinamese women should be “independent”. The irony is that Surinamese society is not structured to support any kind of independent functioning. One can only function independently, if one is embedded in networks of (inter)dependency. For example, if one were to look for child care unassisted, the first place one might look is the yellow pages. Paramaribo has a yellow pages telephone book, however, there are no listings for child care or day care. As a matter of fact, many businesses are not advertised in the yellow pages at all. The best way to find child care then is to ask around. Preferably somebody you know will inform you and will personally introduce you to the facility staff. It is through personal connections that one might access the resource.

Furthermore, women’s independence remains complicated as they are economically far less viable then their male counterparts. Women are over represented in low paying jobs and informal economic activities. Even if men have low paying jobs, they have more options to “hustle”, and actually derive status from their hustling abilities
(Brana Shute 1979). Although ideologically independence might seem a worthwhile goal, for women economic independence appears out of reach.

The sense of independence is so strong, that marriage is almost fearfully avoided. One woman who had been living with her partner for 12 years, while raising their 10 year old son explained:

I am never getting married. Once you do, you lose your independence. Men change, they think they own you once you get married, they get very possessive. Now I am more free to do my own thing. I live my life and he lives his. Anyway, it is hard to get out of a marriage. The average divorce takes five years, why take the chance.

In spite of the strong Christian presence in Suriname, the aversion to marriage has persisted. When people do eventually get married, they do so at an older age. “By then they do not have to worry”, somebody explained to me. It is not uncommon for a couple who have been living together for over 20 years to get married at the age of 60.

Brana-Shute (1979) in his discussion of men on the corner, illustrates how many Afro-Surinamese men maintain a sense of independence through living separately from the women they are involved with. In order for them to be in a relationship they have to contribute financially to the household. In addition, they might be financially responsible for numerous children, and other female headed households. Many men, if not emotionally involved in their children’s lives, at least contribute financially. However, there are many who do neither. In 2005 this practice is still alive and well.

Here too, independence seems illusive. As many men are raised with traditional models of male and female roles, even those that have been raised in matrifocal and/or single parent households, will often engage in a relationship with a woman for the household services she provides. When a man does not live with his mate, or the
relationship ends, he will maintain a close relationship with a female relative, as she can provide for his basic needs.

My observations were limited to heterosexual relationships, but similar tensions are also present in same sex relationships. There is constant tension as conflicting messages of independence and dependence are played out. There is an ever-present element of distrust within partner relationships. The issue of fidelity, for men as well as women is a sensitive, yet ever present issue. Perhaps because the sense of holding on to personal freedom is so valued, infidelity can be perceived as a possible and or inevitable occurrence.

Secondly, engaging in sexual activities is not severely stigmatized. Sex is seen as a pleasurable activity for both men and women (Wekker 1994). Sexual innuendo and double entendre in regular speech, songs and riddles are common in Suriname. The pursuit of sex then, is seen as natural for both men and women. This free attitude about sex and the pursuit of sex could also be conducive to sexual pursuits outside of a committed relationship.

Thirdly, sex is directly linked to money in many cases, especially when partners are not married. Financial contribution to a woman’s livelihood is expected when engaged in a sexual relationship. The sudden inability to financially provide, can be cause for a woman to seek out another partner, which is something a man is always aware of. But if a woman cheats on her mate, and does it publicly, she is usually seen as loose.

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7 In depth work on the homosexual mati system (women’s same sex relations) is provided by Van Lier (1986) and Wekker (1994). The mati system is a social system where women have mutually supportive and often sexual relationships with each other. There is more public and scholarly knowledge about the mati system than there is about male homosexual systems. Male homosexual culture appears to be more private than the mati culture.

8 For in depth discussion on Afro-Surinamese male female dynamics in relationships, see the work of Terborg (2002).
A double standard exists. Many men maintain multiple relationships, which is a commonly accepted if not acknowledged fact. I have met several people who reported having siblings in the double digits because of their father’s practices. One woman told me: “Nine out of 10 men do it. There is nothing you can do against it.” This was a common sentiment among women, and it would be freely discussed and commented on when women were amongst each other. When a man cheats, it is seen as unfortunate, but not necessarily a negative reflection on him, because after all “that’s just how men are.”

In my interviews, I asked about the lessons people had learned about relationships from their upbringing, and the ideas and understandings each gender had about the other. In general, young and old recall having little to no instruction about relationships from their parents. Nurture, care, and discipline were mostly provided by the mother. She provided lessons about norms and values, but failed to provide any teachings about relationships. The role of the father was even smaller, usually to affirm male dominance, if he was mentioned at all. Instead, people referred more often to the unequal gender status within relationships. They reflect:

In the old days, people did not really talk about those things. It was taboo. You had to discover those things for yourself. My mother talked about ‘your paper [diploma] is your man’. (50+ year old woman)

My mother did not talk easily about those things. I had to learn myself. (70+ year old man)

Teens 6/10/06
Amin: What have you learned from your upbringing about the relationships between men and women?
Boy1: Well, my mother really does not talk about those things. So you really have to learn it from somewhere else. In most cases they say the man is the boss, provider, head of the family. So I did not learn it from my mom, but I always say, from my mother as well as my dad, I did not learn anything about these things.
Amin: But sometimes you learn by what you see or do not see.
Boy1: Yes, that’s what I say, you get it from somewhere else, you take it. And then you think, hey that’s how it goes over there. If you look closely, you see that the man is the provider, and the wife must cook, clean the house, yard work. Those things change a little here and there, so maybe 20% lives differently, but for 80% it is that way. So than you conclude that that’s the way it is.
Girl1: When I look at my mother and father, it seems as if the woman has a lower position in relation to the man. It isn’t like that in our house, but it seems that way. For example, the man can stay out late, until two in the morning. But the woman is never going to say, I’m going out and she comes home that late. And why does the woman not do that? It is not that she is afraid to do so, but she is not going to do it. In most cases, like what he says, 20% might do it, but 80% won’t. Each population group has its own culture, but most things are comparable, especially when it comes to men and women relations. The women usually have a lower position. What the man says, that’s what’s going to happen.
Girl2: The man is really, what I have been taught, the head of the family. But I think man and woman have the same rights. What my father can do, my mother can do too, I think. But my mother knows that what my father does, she cannot do. Not that she can’t, but she does not want to, because it is not appropriate. For example, if my father goes drinking in a bar, and my mother does the same in a bar, then what happens?

People learn about relationships by watching their parents and the people in their communities. But there is a conflict between the notion of equality and independence and actual behavior. People comment:

The way my mother lived with my stepfather, I think my mother was too submissive. She was too obedient and following. The one time she would come home late, he immediately wanted to beat her. She was a good woman, I always tried to be like her. (70+ year old man)

In our society, one man does not keep to one woman. There is always the feeling “maybe he’ll stay”. I think that women who are dependent on their men are stupid. 32 year old woman.

I learned that the man must work hard, and that the woman should not be his boss. But for me now, I want a woman beside me and not behind me, like my father. 30 year old man
The issue of equal rights and independence became especially clear when I asked the question “What do men need to feel self-confident, feel good about themselves, and visa versa for women.” Again, there was a difference in how men and women looked at this issue.

A man needs a steady job, and a house, the house first. He needs to be an example so that his children can look up to him. If he is lucky, he will have a strong woman beside him, and that will be good. A woman really needs the same. She needs a man beside her whom she can trust, and who supports her. Together they can have a house. They both need a job. (70+ year old man)

For a man to be self-secure he needs material wealth and pride. If his woman has a child already and he cannot have a child, then he feels weak. For some, making 20 children with 10 women makes them self-secure. Women are more secure then men though. They have learned how to express their feelings. They have a support network, we men do not have that. (Men in male group interview)

In the first place, he needs the same as a woman. He will need a woman by his side. A woman, a house, I think that because it is the reverse for the woman. She needs a man to form a family. You need a house and everything with it. Besides that he would have to look deep within, how he was raised. Because if his character is not right, he can have all those things, but it might not be what he needs. It is the same for a woman, if she has not been raised well, she can have all those things and still not have mental well being. You feel that there is something wrong. (50+ year old woman)

A man is never sure of himself. When he takes a woman, he could be assured that she is his, but he isn’t, and so he takes one or two more. For a woman to be self-confident, she needs to know that she can work and take care of herself. (32 year old woman)

These views represent gendered viewpoints towards relationships and explain the presence of conflicting tensions and distrust. Women are generally acknowledged as having the same needs as men, yet they are not equal in status. Issues of trust and financial independence have contributed to a relationship pattern where one or both
partners might not be faithful. Although the practice of meandering outside a committed relationship is socially accepted for men, and is considered one of these fa a go a go kinds of things, it is the source of great agony and disharmony. There is a lot of pain and drama for people who find themselves with a cheating mate. Embarrassment, profound sadness, anger, and retaliation, are things that are commonly experienced and expressed.

As one tearful 73 year old woman confided in me about her 75 year old husband who was having a relationship with a woman more than 30 years his junior:

He always had other women, ever since we started dating. I have found pictures of children that look like him. There have been so many. I stayed with him and honored him and our relationship. I thought he would grow out of it. I thought that in our old age, after our children were grown, we could enjoy each other and finally be done with it. Now there is this other woman and he gives all his love and attention to her. I have been so unhappy about this for so long. I cry every night. All I can do is pray.

In general these issues are not addressed and or resolved. Instead they simmer, negatively affecting mental well being, and the only corrective action that seems to take place is to give girls stern warnings to become self-sufficient and independent.

Criminality

In addition to partner relationships, another external challenge to well being comes from the state of the economy. Since the economy in Suriname has spiraled downwards and out of control in the 1980s, the crime rate has risen exponentially. Displacement of thousands of Maroons to the city from the interior has created a new underclass. Life in general has become very hard financially, many people have sought second, third, and fourth jobs; others have resorted to crime. Robberies and burglaries are so common that a house without “thief irons”, iron safety grids, is uncommon.
When I first came to Suriname, I had to get used to people asking me if my house was well secured, and how secure my neighborhood was. Indeed, I received at least four keys to all the different locks on the different grids. Rather than feeling secure, I felt trapped and imprisoned, occasionally harboring the horrifying thought that if a fire were to break out, it for sure would mean our demise. Luckily that never happened. My car did get broken into on at least three occasions, which temporarily made me feel violated and unsafe.

I presented workshops on self-confidence and goal setting at retreats for graduating high school students on several occasions. The inspector of police was also one of the presenters at these retreats. He shared how the rate of crime had not only risen, but that the manners in which crimes were being executed had become far more brazen and violent over the years. People are assaulted and robbed in broad daylight, organized crime is steadily rising, and people are more likely to be hurt and or killed during a robbery. He divulged to me personally that many facts are not given to the media as not to cause panic and fear among the public.

My discussions with teens at these retreats and during research discussions taught me that the fear was already present. Many young people were afraid of the violence and crime that permeate their lives. I heard numerous accounts of sensational robberies that youngsters had experienced or witnessed, all of which left them deeply shaken.

Crime has risen as the economy has gone down, providing a testimony of how desperate people can do desperate things. However, most of the crimes that come to our attention are not out of hunger or destitution. Robberies, especially by groups of young men, are geared toward luxury items and money. Organized crime that involves drugs
trade and smuggling has created a whole new upper class in Paramaribo. So crime is very much about getting rich quick. I had an encounter with a musician who told me about the extensive security and customs procedures he and his band have to go through with embassy and customs when they go to perform in the Netherlands. My fieldnotes reflect:

June 2005
Each time they travel overseas, which can be up to three times a year, they have to apply for visas. Each time it seems like they deal with the embassy as if it’s the first time. Further more, they are treated like criminals every time they go.
On the one hand it is insulting. On the other hand, there are stories of other bands that have been caught smuggling drugs. And even within the group there have been some questionable events.
One member upon arriving in the Netherlands started spending large sums of money, bought a computer and more of such items, which is usually a tell-tale sign.

Similarly to the United States where drug dealers in poor neighborhoods use their nice cars and other commodities to lure new recruits, so it is in Suriname. As a result, crime has become so normalized that people casually discuss safety, security, and which neighborhoods to avoid. However, that is where the conversation ends. Those who live in wealthy neighborhoods can afford to hire personal security guards and systems, and build their houses more like fortified fortresses rather than domestic dwellings. Mansions are surrounded by high walls. Gated communities are the latest trend. They buy their sense of security.

“Actually, crime is not very high here”, one man told me as we left the automated gates to his villa and waived his personal security guard goodbye. “They wouldn’t dare”, he continued. “Now over there – pointing to the adjacent middle class neighborhood – there they have much more trouble.” I agreed. Looking around at all the beautiful mansions behind fortified walls, I couldn’t imagine somebody wanting to
put forth the effort. I felt like I was in Lego land, as the beautiful buildings were shielded by these unflattering concrete walls, and were accented by these dollhouse like guard houses.

Life is a lot less secure in the middle and lower class neighborhoods. Robbers have been known to cut through the grid and find their way in, or more frightening, just walk into the house in the middle of the day. There are some neighborhood watch programs, which came about through people collectively addressing the issues. However, the impact of crime is seldom addressed. After somebody experiences a crime there is initial support, but quickly the support is followed by silence, and the incident retreats to the *fa a go a go* realm. I saw no system in place for counseling, no support group, no victim advocacy. This hit home for me when two of my relatives became victims of crime. They were actually upper-middle class, but they had nowhere to turn to but themselves after their horrific experience.

May 2005

My aunt is at home right now. She was jumped by a gang of Maroon men while trying to leave her work late in the evening. Her job had asked her to come in, like they had asked her so many times before. She was the only one there, no guard, and as it turned out with an alarm system that was merely a siren. They hit her in the face with the butt of gun, so hard that it dislodged her eye. She might go blind. Somehow she kept her cool and managed to get away. But now she is in the house, not sure of whether or when to come out. People have sent flowers and words of support. There is very little support from her work, however. I told her she should sue them. She won’t. “They are my family”, she says. She should have retired last year, after thirty years of service, but decided to give them one more.

A few months earlier a group of robbers broke into her daughter’s house, next door. My cousin came face to face with a robber after she stepped out of the shower. How do you ever take a shower in peace again? My aunt had been helping her daughter get over her experience when this thing happened to her. No professional counseling or other type of support, other than immediate family. How many more traumatized people are there in this city?
The increased rate of crime has affected mental well being. Crime has contributed to people cutting themselves off from other people. ‘Good’ houses are built as impenetrable forts with locks, grates, gates, guards, and walls to keep crime out. In addition, once one has been subjected to a crime, one withdraws within their fortress, and after some initial consolation, there are no systemized or ritualized support systems in place to work through the trauma.

**Government Inefficiency**

Other *fa a go a go* effects come from an overly saturated government. Like other Caribbean countries, Suriname’s government is dominated by an elite patron-client system (D’Agostino 2003). Ramsoedh (2001) clarifies:

In the Surinamese context it is better to speak of political entrepreneurship rather than political leadership. Consequently, administrators are not supposed to serve the common good, but are aimed at confirming political loyalty (clientage or patronage). The political system in Suriname is thus characterized by strongly person-orientated networks (2001:91,92)

Within this patronage system many people have been rewarded for their party loyalty with government positions. As a result the government is the largest employer, and has too many bodies to function effectively or efficiently. More disturbingly, many people have obtained government positions without proper qualifications or abilities. Engaging the system can, therefore, be a rather trying experience. The level of bureaucracy is enormous, and sometimes seemingly impossible to get through. Personal connections and bribes can make all the difference between getting things accomplished eventually and possibly or getting things accomplished expediently.
The government is so saturated that it is laden with “ghost workers”, workers who do not show for work, but who steadily receive a paycheck. In addition, government workers are often aware of their inabilities, with the result that they can be very defensive and on edge with any kind of interaction. Courteous customer service is an anomaly in general. The few instances where one is treated with courtesy and expeditiously – and those instances do happen – one gladly gives a sigh of relief. These type of issues are disturbing, but they are bearable -- they definitely belong to the *fa a go a go* realm. One learns quickly to ask around and seek for personal connections before engaging any type of government transaction.

The government appears to be an adaptive system that has gone awry, and now mostly hurts, rather than helps people. The government is a legacy of the Dutch colonizers, and was adapted to the Surinamese norms of collective responsibility. Looking out for each other, using one’s resources to help those in need as needed – without going through official red tape are at the basis of a system that has gotten out of hand. Lodge members describe how people in government positions used to be of service to fellow lodge and community members, but how the deplorative economic situation has changed things.

Man1: If you needed help all you needed to do was knock. Then help would come. There were so many possibilities because people were on certain [government] posts... Then things changed. Everybody now is trying to survive, with immediate repercussions for the brotherhood. It continues, but becomes less of a priority.
Amin: Isn’t the reverse also true, that because of the hardship the brotherhood becomes stronger?
Man1: If the resources were there, but there are no resources. Everything requires a certain dedication, but you can only dedicate yourself physically. In the early days you could achieve so much more with just your physical dedication. Now you must have money.
Man2: Everybody needs to have money.
Man1: But it is so difficult to get money. It is not that easy. You used to just need your physical effort. And even when there were things you needed to pay money for, you did not need to pay because that would be taken care off. I have another example of physical effort. I was working at the [...] It was five in the afternoon and a Korean came by with a truck. He said, man I have a truck full with fish and tomorrow I have to go to the [...] and throw the fish in the river. So I called a brother. That man came with the biggest truck from the government. [laughter all around] He filled it all the way with the fish. He drove through the city, went to children’s homes, senior citizen homes, and distributed fish. He went so many places, he got tired from distributing fish. He said, man I’m going to throw the rest away. So what was the solution? He drives through the [...] street and there were women sweeping the street. He pulled over the truck ‘who wants fish?’ Within no time the truck was empty. [laughter] That’s how it used to go. You can’t do that these days.
Man2: You used to have certain people in certain positions, who were able to provide services in certain situations.

There is a way that the government does become a much more insidious factor in people’s sense of well being. While the patronage system is imbued with inherent privileges for those involved and or connected, it has given rise to an unprecedented level of corruption. Drug trafficking, money laundering, and embezzlement are not uncommon activities for certain politicians and their connections. In a country as small as Suriname, these types of activities are felt directly. If money disappears from an account, salaries might not be paid the following month, for example. Given that because of the economy, the trickle down effect of the patronage system has become smaller and smaller, the impact of government improprieties has become more pronounced.

As a result people have little to no faith in their government. Much has been written about the political implications of the government structure (Ramsoedh 2001, Buddingh 1999, Brana Shute 1995) but little about the psychological impact on the public. While in Suriname I was able to witness the elections in May 2005. I was
surprised at the number of projects that were started a couple of months before the election. *A fa a go a go* attitude was common:

In the 90s under X’s regime the people en masse went to the streets to protest the government. They just were not taking it any more. I do not think you will see that again. People learned that it did not do any good anyway. 31 year old woman

It’s like this every election. Promises are made and not kept, and right before the next election they try to do a lot. She shrugs her shoulders and laughs. 50+ year old woman

They think we’re stupid. They make a whole bunch of promises that they won’t keep. They hand out food [at the political rally], make music, and give out gifts. Sure I’ll go [to the political rally] and get me some free t-shirts. 30+ year old man

Without a sense of trust in those that govern it is hard to think of a different future. It is hard to be optimistic at times. It is hard to imagine a future where people do not have to struggle so hard to make ends meet and to have some prosperity in their lives. As a result, there is a collective sense of hopelessness and low morale about the government, which can spill over into people’s attitudes about life in general. If one continuously receives messages about not being worthy of being cared for, it is a small step to internalize that message, which affects mental well being. Low moral and self esteem, in turn affects people’s motivation and drive to change their individual or collective lives.

So instead, people focus on what is good about living in Suriname, the climate, easy going life style, family bonds, good food, and so on. And yet there is a sense of unresolved frustration when the issue of government is broached. As one young man told me: “We only have 487,000 people. We should be able to take care of things with a few major decisions.”
Dutch – Surinamese tensions

Although Suriname obtained its official independence from the Netherlands in 1975, ties between the two countries have never been completely severed. Dutch culture and norms are permanently imbedded in Suriname’s culture, and find their way into the culture through the media, language, and relationships with Dutch relatives.

The media daily and continuously presents Dutch news programs on TV. The newspaper has a daily section on the Netherlands. Sunday morning the World News presents a Dutch program specifically geared toward Dutch Antilleans and Surinamese people. Of course these media streams are appreciated and valued as they inform people about the whereabouts of their families. These media streams do something else, however. They ensure a constant influx of dominant Dutch culture, ideology, and imagery. As such the image of the Netherlands as a “superior place” is constantly reinforced. In a land where the Western level of wealth is unobtainable for the majority of the population, the constant reminder of the “other side” and the reinforcement of the other side by Dutch relatives, can be a source of conflict.

One example of how Dutch cultural superiority finds its way to the Surinamese people is through the use of language. When the Dutch started their assimilation politics in the late 1800s, they established Dutch as the required language for the Afro-Surinamese. People were discouraged from speaking Sranan, the lingua franca. Missionaries initially had been teaching in Sranan, but they were required to change their practices to Dutch (Bakker et. al 1993).
Contrary to their Dutch Antillean counterparts, where the lingua franca has been (re)introduced as a formal language, Dutch has remained the only official language and Sranan has been delegated to inferior status, and is representative of “common folk” or slang. Still today there are many people who are raised speaking Dutch at home and who are uncomfortable and or unable to speak Sranan. Since people are not formally educated in Sranan, very few are able to write it, or are knowledgeable about its grammatical rules. All this contributes to its inferior status. Furthermore, given that most of the intelligentsia and elites have obtained their credentials in the Netherlands, the Dutch language has become associated with status. This is especially seen and felt when the government assembly is televised. The Dutch language government officials use is so formal that one needs a dictionary to keep up. All the Dutch news programming reinforce the superior status of Dutch over the lingua franca, the language of the “common folk”. One of my informants discussed the limitations of the Dutch language with me. She states:

Dutch is really not the thing we should [use]...it limits you in your expressions, especially when you are dealing with spiritual well being. Because the status that our elders had..., we cannot address it. We hold ourselves back, because when the ancestors present themselves, their spirit comes through, you cannot say “hallo, here I am.” The yeye speaks in its own language or in Sranan. It must be deep [old] Sranan, so the elders can understand it, or superficially [younger Sranan] so that we may understand each other in communication. Because the whole day we are busy dealing with the Dutch language, and that creates a division between people. Us at least, we afro children, black children of slaves, we hold ourselves back because the whole day we speak Dutch. You must see it like this, when we speak Dutch, often it creates a gap, it builds a separation between us. We do not understand each other, and then somebody may look funny at you. Then the moment you switch to Sranan, you immediately understand me. Then all impasses are chattered and it makes that we get along with each other better. (50+ year old woman)
The second way the Dutch presence is felt is through the relationships with relatives in the Netherlands. Relatives who come to visit and who bring new ideas, desires, and behaviors often bring a very real confrontation with Dutch norms. Since the mass migration in the 1970s, a whole new generation of Dutch Surinamese has been born and raised in the Netherlands, and their relationship to Suriname is very different from their parents. This generation in turn has become parents by now, and their offspring are thus one step even further removed from Suriname.

This distance is felt all too clearly when ex-patriots return to Suriname. In the 1980s, when they returned, ex-patriots were seen and treated as returning relatives. As one man commented:

It used to be that when our relatives would come from the Netherlands, we would think the world of them. 30+ year old man.

They would stay with family members, and would blend in with family functions. For many this is still the case, especially those who have elderly parents in Suriname. However, many ex-patriots now are referred to as “tourists” by their Surinamese relatives, and behave in such a manner, preferring to stay in rented houses with the latest amenities, rather than with families. Tourist trips to the interior are popular, especially for those who are coming to Suriname for the first time. Those who are more acculturated to Dutch culture or those who have little to no experience with Suriname can be rather critical and denigrating in their attitude towards Surinamese life. Because they hear the Dutch language everywhere in Suriname, they can have the faulty impression that Suriname will be an extension of the Netherlands. Suriname is a South American, mainland Caribbean, if not Third World Country, and as such has a totally different
quality and standard of living than what people are used to in the Netherlands. Their

Suriname relatives comment:

It starts at the airport. I was coming back from the Netherlands and we were standing in line, and they start complaining already. I wanted to turn to them and say “Why did you come here, just go back”, but I did not. (50+ year old woman.)

When they are there, than those Afro-Surinamese are Surinamese. They do not refer to themselves as Dutch, no they are Surinamese. But the moment they get here, all that gets reversed. (56 year old woman)

Dutch (Surinamese) tourists often complain about the long lines everywhere, the inefficiency of the government offices, the poor infrastructure, the lack of customer service and so on, to the aggravation of the locals. It is this attitude that causes locals to feel ambivalent toward their returning relatives. In addition, prices of rent, goods, and tourist destination rise because of the tourists’ buying power. Families across the ocean make significant contributions towards the households of the Afro-Surinamese, but at the same time they make life harder through causing inflation.

The other side of the coin is the experience of Dutch Surinamese by the Surinamese government and their relatives. The dynamics between Dutch relatives and Surinamese relatives by far bring the most conflicts. Living in the Netherlands brings its own set of experiences and conflicts. The Surinamese have been praised as being some of the most integrated and assimilated in Dutch society, especially in comparison to the Turks and Moroccans who have been there in large numbers since the 1960s. Although assimilated, they are to a large extent still confronted with being different.

The range of feelings about living in the Netherlands run the gamut, from those who wouldn’t want to be anywhere else, to those who would leave in a heartbeat if they could. One young man comments:
I would love to move to Suriname. I am tired of being in the Netherlands, but what can I do there? Tell me what I can do to make a living there. 30+ year old man

The truth is that the majority of the Dutch Surinamese will not return to Suriname, but they will maintain some type of relationship because of family ties. As the social and economic climate in the Netherlands have taken a downturn over the past 20 years, life in the Netherlands has become hard for the Afro-Surinamese. People in Suriname are well aware that the Netherlands can no longer be considered “the land of milk and honey”.

*D’en pina*, they suffer, is a common expression when people talk about their relatives. In spite of the understanding though, people in Suriname still have many expectations of their Dutch relatives. Consequently, the Dutch Surinamese often feel pulled between two worlds and have many conflicting feelings about their relationship with Suriname and their Surinamese relatives. They state in their own words:

I feel very schizophrenic. In your own land you are seen as a tourist, while here you are constantly reprimanded for being an *allochtoon*, non-native. 40+ year old man

At the airport, you feel how people look at you. You are not one of them anymore. To them you are a tourist.

They act as if we did not do anything for the country, but we did a lot. Suriname survived because of the many boxes we sent. 40+ year old man

The expectations of us are very high. People act as if money grows on trees here. They do not look at the knowledge we have to offer. 40+ year old man

As a Surinamese in the Netherlands you have a problem. You are constantly noticed. Each time you have to explain yourself because you stand out. I ask myself continuously whether it’s worth it… You are a burden and they group you with those who cause trouble. I want to go back. I came here with the intention to get a better life, that was the goal. My daughter won’t go back… In the Netherlands I always have to prove that I am a human. 40+ year old man
The words of the Dutch Surinamese sketch a complicated picture that does not evoke any quick solutions. The Netherlands has many disillusioned former idealists who returned to Suriname to help build up the country, but who left after a very difficult and disheartening experience. Similarly there are those who have left the Netherlands, and who are struggling in Suriname to make a living, but who are determined to make it work. Regardless, as some of these issues remain unaddressed and unresolved, they can cause anguish and tension, which can find its way back to the larger family system.

_Economic Constraints_

_Un’ n’e pina_, We do not suffer, is one of the easiest statements to start a heated debate in any social setting in Suriname. “We do not suffer because we could plant our own food if we wanted to. We do not suffer because here, unlike in the Netherlands, you can call upon your neighbor when you are hungry and they will feed you.” These are common statements that are expressed and heard in public and private conversations. Hard work, relating to nature and collective responsibility are supposed to be the stronghold in the community in times of wealth and scarcity. Theoretically then, times of scarcity should bring people closer together, as they are forced to support and rely on each other. As the economy has steadily declined since the 1980s, family ties and support systems have been strengthened, but more so across the Atlantic Ocean than within the country itself.
People survived because of financial support from relatives in the Netherlands. Locally, however, the lack of resources and finances has significantly changed social relations. Even within this society where collective responsibility is a well established concept, collective support and cohesion can erode, simply because of the scarcity of resources. Where resources are scarce people might exploit each other if needed and given the chance, or people might withdraw socially, because of their inability to contribute.

One of the places where this is obvious is within the lodge system. The economic downfall of the country has significantly affected the lodge. The lodge used to support its members and their family members. It is no longer able to do so. But the lack of available funds extends beyond the bank account of the organization.

The average member has at least two jobs in order to make a living. With the increased workload, there is less energy and motivation to participate in extra-curricular activities. Members explain, for instance, that transportation has become a major issue:

Man1: Because of the lack of material wealth we cannot address mental well being
Man2: You won’t see some people that often anymore, because they live far out. He might have to pay for two or three buses, or he has to pay for a taxi.
Man1: It used to be you did not have that problem.
Man2: You find this problem not just with the lodge but with all organizations. It used to be that people attended three times a week, now they can come only once. Try and get him there three times, than he has to pay for the bus three times. These kinds of things have weakened the organization.

Lack of funds affects many aspects of the lodge. There is no funding to attend international conferences, which can help in rejuvenating membership. “Brotherhood is taking a backseat to material needs”, one member exclaimed. Closer examination
clarified that the lack of material security directly influences the abilities of members to support each other, which is the basis of the sense of brotherhood.

Lack of resources creates less incentive for young people to sign up for lodge membership. Consequently lodge membership is getting older. The lack of new and young membership fails to bring in new ideas and energy, which can keep the group vibrant. It also threatens the stability of the organization. People are used to living with economic constraints, and they make do. However, support systems are significantly affected by the current circumstances. As part of mental well being includes a sense of connectedness with others, these strained relationships can negatively affect mental well being.

*Fa a go a go* are external challenges that threaten mental well being. The most prominent *fa a go a go* presented here are Partner Relationship Conflicts, Criminality, Government Ineffectiveness, and Dutch-Surinamese tensions and Economic Constraints. Although *fa a go a go* issues appear bearable, they are far more damaging than they appear because they are pervasive and persistent. Thus, while they remain below the radar of blatant negative acts, because of their long term and insidious nature, they can cause serious damage to mental well being, nonetheless.
Florence – correspondents

December 2004

When I get to Florence’s house I see a new face. Her cousin is staying with them in the front house with her two small children ages five and two. Her cousin’s estranged husband has burned down her cousin’s house and all her belongings. This was his response to her asking for a divorce. He has sworn to kill her and the children. Her cousin’s neighbor’s house got burnt down as well and the neighbor is staying at Florence’s grandmother’s house also.

The estranged husband has called the family and has harassed them, and he has called his wife at least five times to let her know he is going to kill her. Last night he came to the house and threw rocks and bottles on the roof. Everybody is pretty stressed and on the edge.

This man is a military man, so this is a case for the MPs. I offer my help by calling a friend of mine who is pretty high up in the military and let him talk to Florence. I do not know what can be done, but maybe he can give some advice or offer some protection. He is aware of the situation and tells us the MPs are looking for this man. We can call him if he shows up.

I went home. It so happened that I had a garbage bag full of clothes that were too small for my five year old son. I had selected them to give away. They would be perfect for the little boy. I couldn’t find anything for the little girl, unfortunately. I prepared two children’s book bags, my son had three of them, and put a few children’s books in each
of them. I also went through my closet and found a dress and two nightgowns. I then went back and gave them to Florence’s cousin. I was glad I was able to do something.

Florence and I stand and talk a little more about the insanity of the situation.

“That’s why I am not getting married until I’m old.,” she tells me.

January 2005

Three weeks later Florence’s cousin is still there. Her husband has been picked up. I talk with Florence after I pick up my son. Her cousin is waiting on her “correspondent” who is supposed to come in from the Netherlands and stay for two weeks. He is supposed to be her ticket out of here.

Apparently this is a trend. Many young women find “correspondents” through the Internet, preferably a rich, white man from Europe. If things work out for Florence’s cousin, she will leave her five year old son with a relative, her two year old daughter with another relative, and will leave for the Netherlands. Frankly, I am shocked. No, shocked does not even begin to describe what I feel, horrified is more like it. Images of Russian and East-Asian mail order brides come to mind. Do we even have that here in Suriname?

Florence tells me she had a correspondent herself, but he stopped writing. They corresponded through the Internet, e-mail and instant messages and such. Her sister in the Netherlands sent her a list with names of possible correspondents, in fact, so many that she divided them among her relatives.
February 2005

Florence tells me that her sister Miriam is going to get married to a correspondent. This man is friends with the correspondent of her cousin. The men came to Suriname together. Apparently, they both come from a rural area, and neither had ever traveled outside of the Netherlands. Wedding plans are being made and he is going to adopt Miriam’s two boys the same day. One of Florence’s cousins is also leaving for the Netherlands, his (immigration) papers have been approved.

“Everyone is leaving me”, she sighs. She is worried about the care for her sister. “What if I were to find a boyfriend?”, she says. “My grandmother says you will help me find an organization to help me with her.” An instant panic grips my throat, and I wonder how I got placed in that position, and if ever I could make that happen. I do not really know how to respond, so I say nothing. There is a sadness about her today, a hopelessness. She sighs deeply repeatedly.

The “correspondent” that came for her cousin turned out to be very old apparently, I did not see him. Everybody who has met him has made remarks about how old he is. He had said he was 45, but apparently looks more like 60. We both laugh about it. The visit with him is not going as planned. The ex-husband has escaped from prison, and so they have had to stay indoors most of the time out of safety concerns.

A few days later Florence tells me her sister Celeste has been worrying, which is not good for her condition. Stress brings on epileptic episodes. Celeste says she wants to have a boyfriend too, but she wants to have an old, quiet, white man. Oma responded by saying that she (Celeste) and herself were both written off, and she might as well not worry about it. Of course I couldn’t address oma about this, but I implored Florence
“Please, please, please do not make such statements to Celeste again. She does not need to hear at 35 that she is written off and that her life is over.” She listened to me and said okay.
Chapter 7.

Mek’ muiti: Extreme Decisions

The model for obtaining and maintaining mental well being involves a harmonious and nurturing relationship with the self/ves, the environment, and other people. There are societal aspects of a fa a go a go nature that undermine and chip away at mental well being. They are insidious in that they seem to be bearable, harmless structures even, yet they are continual, never ending flows against well being. Even a small drip of water can erode a rock, given enough time.

I identify the concept of mek’ muiti, literally “to make struggle”, as the next level of violation against mental well being. Mek’ muiti consists of extreme measures of transformation, measures that are radical departures from ordinary options and norms. Mek’ muiti is reflective of the harsh financial and consequent social conditions under which people live. Mek’ muiti also attests to the conscious decisions and extra efforts people have to engage to put forth these strategies, given that the majority of the population chooses not to engage in these types of activities.

“You cannot obtain mental well being without financial well being”, the retired police officer told me. That sentiment would echo on numerous occasions, mostly from men, interestingly enough. But there is more to well being than money, isn’t there? Whether there is or not, dealing with meager financial means is a constant presence in Surinamese life. Mi mek’ muiti, I struggle or I do my best, is a common answer to the question Fa y’ go, How is it going? It is so common now that I remember when the response was different. I do not know when, but some time ago the standard answers of
Ai’ go, it is going okay, or Mi de, I am okay, changed into Mi mek’ muiti. The change is reflective of the worsening economic condition of the country since the late 1980s.

Do people struggle? The economic landscape of Paramaribo and Suriname as a whole is one of the biggest enigmas yet. A 41 year old man explains:

If you would walk through Suriname blindfolded, you would think you were in Haiti. Everybody complains about how bad things are. The prices are high; I can’t make ends meet; I am suffering, etc. Everyone complains, even the rich people. If you were to cover your ears and just use your sight, then you would put Suriname two steps above the US. If you look at the mansions that are being built. Everywhere you go you see relatively new cars. The relationship between cars and people is almost one to two, one of the highest in the world. It makes you wonder, quite a contrast really... I do not think that people are rich, but what is significant is that people first had 10 cents, and now they have eight. You have gone backwards, but you can still make it. I myself say that we do not suffer. If you put Suriname next to Haiti or even Guyana, than Suriname is doing damn great. If you compare us with the period 75 to 80, than Suriname has strongly gone backwards.

Indeed, there is wealth in Suriname, but at least 70 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Life is hard for many and the economic situation is the topic of daily, general conversation. As difficult and as compromised as people’s lives are due to the economic situation, they are creative in transforming their lives. They are not stuck. People hustle and have numerous jobs. They sell baked goods, pickled goods, newspapers, etc. They access their networks and resources in any way that they can. It is not uncommon to see a government official drive a cab after work hours.

Unfortunately, there are those who rely on strategies for “getting out” of a precarious situation that carry high personal risks.

Mek’ muiti, then refers to a struggle for “a way out” than involves high levels of risk of harm to self, family, and or community. “A way out” can take numerous forms,
however. I encountered several, including: a way out of one’s culture and consciousness; a way out of one’s living conditions; a way out of the country, and a way out of life.

**A Way Out of One’s Culture and Consciousness**

A mild form of a way out of one’s culture and consciousness might be those who adopt Dutch cultural norms and prefer them over Afro-Surinamese cultures and values. This is something Dutch Surinamese in particular stand accused of. One 50+ year old woman reflects on her brother who has spent most of his life in the Netherlands:

A lot of times people have no idea about what affects the life of an Afro-Surinamese. Because a lot goes on. Somebody can stand from a far and comment, but you have to see what is actually happening in his or her life.... The reason I say this. I have a brother within my family. He has been raised in the Netherlands since the age of 18. He is 63, so you can figure, 18 minus 63, how many years he has been rooted in the white man ['s land] and visa versa. I believe that that what hurts him is what he avoids. I can talk about it, because what happens with us in the cultural realm, manifests with him in the technical, the scientific. *Dan mi e luku tak a san di e trob’en, na a san di mu hor’ in baka g’ing*, then I see that that what’s troubling him, that’s what is supposed to support him. A lot of times you should hear the nonsense he is spouting, and I tell him to shut up. ‘This is what’s bothering you, you need a strong *wasi*, ritual bath.’ I tell him, ‘man leave me be, because of white man [’s land], that’s why you stay the way you do.’

I consider this practice mild, because in general, other than irritation, preference of Dutch norms does not cause any major rifts. An extreme form of seeking a way out is reflected in the *mek’ muiti* decision of conversion to charismatic Christian religions. Pentecostal charismatic churches are on the rise, in Suriname, and many of the new members are former winti practioners. Whereas Christianity and *winti* have co-existed
among the Afro-Surinamese since the days of slavery\textsuperscript{9}, this new religious movement demands and causes a dramatic split between converts and those who adhere to \textit{winti}. Consequently, there have been rifts not only within the community, but within families as well.

I think the church did a lot of damage to our Afro-Surinamese culture. From Africa to Suriname, the church has had such an influence on us. Everything we had was considered idolatry. I think that had a negative impact on our culture. (60+ year old woman)

Adult group discussion
Woman1: You have a group that goes with the culture. And then you have another group, I do not know where they come from. Let’s look at those people who go to those new churches. Well they go to get converted. I understand that conversion means turning your back on your culture. [Others agree.]…

This girl I know, denounced the African name her father gave her since she joined the church. He was a famous pan-Africanist. He would roll over in his grave if he new. (30+ year old woman)

This \textit{mek’ muiti} decision causes great turmoil in reaction to two areas in particular; harsh and public condemnation of \textit{winti}, and the confusion about the division, yet many similarities between both religious forms. Charismatic churches believe in the presence of demons and possession, and as such denounce \textit{winti} as a practice that involves dealing with lesser spirits. Their rejection of \textit{winti} is rather extreme and hostile in comparison to the other denominations. Television programs are regularly dedicated to exploring and presenting \textit{winti}, and denouncing it as a demonic practice. I write from my field notes:

Today at NAKS all my teens were heated. ‘Did you see that program on TV, last night?’ Indeed I had seen it, and I had to admit, I was astonished, myself. The program seemed to be an informative program about \textit{winti} at

\textsuperscript{9} The Reformed church was the official state church since Suriname’s inception. The Evangelical Lutheran church was established in Suriname in 1741, and the Roman Catholic church since 1785 (Buddingh 1999).
first. It was very detailed, even showed a *winti pret*. It seemed positive at first, especially because they do not show that much about *winti* on tv, but then it turned negative, very negative. That man stood there, burning *pangi*, wrap cloths, talking about how devilish the clothes were! Than he pulled out jewelry, talking about how the jewelry used symbols of the devil. I was shocked, and so were my students. We obviously had to spend some time discussing this and putting it in the proper framework. So we dealt with the feelings of anger and outrage and focused on the work we have to do, promoting our culture in a hostile climate.

It is ironic that that what causes such rejection is what brings the two religious forms together in the first place. Charismatic churches contain many of the elements seen in *winti* religious practices. The use of music, song, and dance to invite the spirits, for example, is a commonality. But more than aesthetic expression, these churches embrace an African world-view where spiritual forces are main causal agents of almost every aspect of life. Natural causes are not denied or ignored, but spiritual causes are seen as primary. This stands in contrast with traditional Christian churches that denied the existence of the traditional spiritual system. Jap-A-Joe explains:

In Pentecostalism intermediate powers of good and evil like spirits, demons, witches and exorcists are perceived as inherent to Afro-Surinamese culture and not ridiculed away as superstition that will disappear in due course under the influence of ‘modernization’... Both religions can be considered religions of possession (2005: 146)

As a result, the division between charismatic churches and *winti*, always touches a strong nerve, and bring forth intense emotional reactions.

I get so mad about these hand-clap churches! I have a few of them [church members] in my class. They think they’re so much better than us. But I tell them, what you do there is exactly the same as what we have! I don’t see a difference! (Teen girl)

Adult group discussion
Woman1: There is a link between both, but you have to know how to handle it. Man1: I choose for both. You do not have to sit in a church everyday, you should be able to pray at home. Woman2: But you have to use it correctly. Woman1: An example of a link. A *luku man*, a seer

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begins with ‘in the name of the Father’. Woman2: For sure. Man1: That is right. Woman1: And all our services start with ‘In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit’. They work from the premise that the winti are messengers. I mean, they did not just come from nowhere. God knows what is happening. Woman2: And God is part of it. Woman1: And the things I cannot explain I just leave for what they are. Who am I to judge?

Man2: So now they have this thing, charismatic, so when I went to follow this training I compared the two [winti and church]. At some point you see in the church and in the bible they say ‘if somebody speaks in tongues and nobody can understand it, then it is nothing’. If you look at the winti that appear, they talk too, in people, and they speak in tongues. It is translated. What stops me from doing that? Because of my [Christian] background I am not able to experience that yet. And I still have to be convinced. After the training I ask them, if you get in trance because of the prayer, then I get in trance through music, rhythm, everything. Then I ask them, why is my thing then bad? Why can I not practice it? What is the problem? And that is still bothering me.

The Evangelical church and the Roman Catholics don’t talk about culture [winti], the other churches are against it. Who wrote the bible? It has been edited. Moses, na kulturu a man ben du, Moses practiced winti. His staff turned into a snake, into a pa winti, isn’t that winti? In the Bible it says that there should be no statues. We don’t practice idolatry, we don’t have statues! (Randall)

This rise in charismatic churches is not only prevalent in Suriname, but throughout the Caribbean, South America and Africa (Mullings 1984, Jenkins 2002). The literature confirms an easy link between traditional values and practices and those offered by the church (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004, Jap-A-Joe 2005). But there are other factors that make this type of church so attractive. These churches facilitate the pursuit of the Western globalized world and culture.

Mullings (1984) places these churches within a clear political-economic perspective, stating that the church in its values and practices supports those that leave the village for the city and aim to participate in the cash economy. Asamoah-Gyadu
(2004) and Gifford (2004) explain that rather than a doctrine that focuses on self-denial, charismatic churches allow for the pursuit of ‘prosperity, progress, and breakthrough’, possibly with instant (healing) results. Gifford states:

…blessings were proclaimed to have been blocked by demonic influence. Remove this blockage and the success and wealth naturally ensue. Charismatic Christianity is normally marked by the world-view in which spiritual forces are pervasive and dominant. It is these spiritual forces that are holding me back form the success and wealth that are my right as a Christian (Gifford 2004:172).

These charismatic churches then, provide a drastic, yet familiar window of opportunity to leave one’s culture behind and step into a new world.

A Way Out of One’s Living Conditions

A way out of one’s living conditions involves *mek’ muiti* decisions that place oneself at great risk for personal harm. These type of decisions usually are aimed at short term, direct gain. Two *mek’ muiti* practices that illustrate this particular way out are sex tourism and drug smuggle.

Unequal sex relations have always been a part of the Caribbean (Kempadoo 1997). Sex tourism in Suriname differs from the Caribbean, however. The average Dutch tourist is not a white tourist coming to look for a “hot brown or black fantasy”. The average Dutch tourist is of Surinamese descent and is to an extent coming home. This tourist feels at home in most cases, and rather than coming to relax or be in awe of the tropical environment, comes to relax with family and friends. Those who live and struggle in the Netherlands on a daily basis, with some small savings can act like kings
and queens for the short time they are in Suriname. Remarks about these types of tourists are common:

Those men that come here [from the Netherlands], they come to chase after young girls. They tell them all kinds of lies, and those women who go with them, allow themselves to get used. (41 year old man)

While there might be a financial benefit, there is a great risk of being exploited, and acquiring sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS. The monetary exchange rate always works to the benefit of those coming from the Netherlands. And thus for a short while people can live out their fantasy, not of being in paradise, but of being a big spender in a place where one is likely to be recognized. This attitude and behavior is very common among the young Dutch Surinamese, and is easily recognized during the months of June through August when they take over down town. It is this attitude that leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of the local Surinamese. Randall states on the subject:

Those men lie like dogs, they lie like dogs! Those men come here and the first thing they talk about is pikin meid, young girls. I hate it when people lie. And those women here in Suriname, they do not use their heads. A man cannot live in the Netherlands and then he approaches you with all kinds of sweet words ‘I do not have a woman’. Can you imagine? Just say, ‘I have a girlfriend, what do you think you like to get together or not’. ‘Will you accept it or not?’ Two things can happen, ‘yes’ or ‘no’. But they give those women false hope. And most young women between 15 and 25 say, ‘my boyfriend lives in the Netherlands’. Well, kiss my a.., sorry I have to put it like that. My a.., my boyfriend is in the Netherlands, what does that do for you? If you would tell me, Randall, my friend is in the Netherlands and he has left something for me, he rented a house for me. Then I will accept it and say, hey you used your head. But when these men come they use a lot of sweet words. I tell people, what do you think this man will do for you? You live here in Suriname, saying ‘I do not have a boyfriend’. Now who is fooling who? Some people have been so disappointed that they do want to stay by themselves. They get happy when they finally meet somebody who will [financially] support them [from the Netherlands], but use your head. You only get the support when the man comes to the Netherlands. He could send a package sometimes!
He comes, hey baby I brought you some flowers, and sometimes not even that. Randall

Randall highlights women’s vulnerability to exploitation, which he directly links to the exchange or the lack of exchange of material goods. Furthermore, these practices violate mental well being as they directly go against *opo yu yeye*, which requires a nurturing and taking care of the self mentally, physically, and spiritually. The sexual act itself goes against *opo yu yeye*, as it involves sharing intimacy with somebody who is not dedicated to nurturing and respecting his or her partner’s spirit and body, but merely uses the body.

The other danger is the spread of AIDS. The Caribbean has the second highest rate of HIV/AIDS behind Africa (Inciardi et al. 2005, The Lancet 2000). Confirming Randall’s assessment of female vulnerability, the PAHO reports that the primary mode of transmission in the Caribbean is heterosexual contact and that “the face of HIV in the region has become increasingly young and female (Inciardi et al 2005).”

AIDS is a serious problem in Suriname, and regular messages fill the media, alerting the population that Suriname is on the brink of an epidemic. Dutch tourism by Dutch Surinamese has been identified as a particular vector of infection. Young men who are infected come to Suriname and live up the life, infecting numerous young women in the process. Of course the same goes for same sex relations and women infecting men, but the rate is far lower.11

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10 In Suriname the ratio of male to female infection was 2.7:1 in 1990, and by 2004 was 1:1 (PAHO 2004). The region encompassing the English, Dutch, and French Caribbean have a heterosexual infection rate of 79.3% and women ages 15 to 24 have an incidence rate of HIV three to six times the rate in comparison to males of the same age group (Inciardi et al. 2005).

11 Same sex – men who have sex with men (MSM) – ratio accounts for 12.6% in the region and is second after heterosexual transmission (Inciardi et al. 2005).
Culturally one could say that the status of HIV and AIDS in Suriname is about where it was in the United States in the early 1980s. I met several times with the director of an HIV/AIDS outreach program. I learned from her that the disease is highly stigmatized, and people are shunned if their positive status is known, which makes tackling the disease very difficult. Information campaigns are ever present and ongoing in the media, yet among people HIV and AIDS are silenced. A retired police officer commented:

HIV, people do not talk about it easily within the family. If you notice that there is somebody like that within the family, than the person is isolated, just like the old days with lepers. They used to keep those people away from everybody. They provide so much information, and yet. People talk about what happens to other people, but what happens within the family people do not want to discuss.

The director of the AIDS organization echoes his sentiment:

We deal with many people who suffer in silence. They will not let anybody know that they are sick. Often we are the only support that they have. They are too afraid of being shut out.

Suriname is a very small community. Everybody knows everybody. There is such stigma on HIV/AIDS. That’s why people keep silent and keep it to themselves. They would be treated differently if people would know, and news would spread fast.

The impact of AIDS on the family can be quite devastating. The high degrees of stigma can cause them to become isolated from the community at large. While I was in Suriname, I was told of a woman who was having a Bigi Yari celebration. Her daughter had tested positive for AIDS. She purposely used a catering service for the food, as opposed to having the family cook, yet nobody attended. For reasons like this, affected individuals often choose to suffer in isolation, without their family’s knowledge. The
director and her staff told me about the many clients they serve, of which the family is
totally unaware of their health status, even those who are close to dying. The director
comments:

Sometimes the family gets mad at us for not telling them. I can’t help it
that their loved one chooses to shut them out. One lady cried, she was so
mad. She felt robbed. She told me that she did not have the opportunity
to share with her daughter during those last days of her life the way I had.
If only she had known.

The disconnect from family and/or the disconnect from a family from the
community at large, are both actions that counter mental well being. From a spiritual and
physical perspective, the effects of engaging in prostitution carry high risks from the
individual to the family, to the community at large. Still, both men and women choose it
as a mek muiit strategy.

There is an invisible world in Suriname, the world of drugs. Suriname is a
transport point between Columbia and Amsterdam. As such it is a drug trafficking
paradise. 12  I joined in a conversation with my uncle and three of his friends who were
discussing this “hidden” world. They mentioned names of people who had tried to
smuggle drugs as mules and were caught. One man explained to me that a man he knew
considered the risks beforehand, but his living conditions in Suriname were so dire that
he was willing to risk getting locked up for three or four years. His situation would not
be any worse than what it already was. As a matter of fact, the treatment he would
receive in prison in the Netherlands would offer a higher standard of living than what he
was used to.

12 It is estimated that at an average upwards of 10,000 kilograms of cocaine is smuggled yearly into the
Netherlands from Suriname (Texel 2005).
I am not aware of the statistics of the categories of people who smuggle drugs, but I do know that not everybody that smuggles drugs is in dire straights. Life is hard, but the majority of the population chooses not to engage in drug smuggling to improve their situation. However, some people, lured by a world of Western goods, see a get rich quick opportunity, and once successful, crave more. Wealthy Western life styles that are promulgated through the media and the nouveau rich, are envied and desired. I personally know of four people who attempted to smuggle drugs, all of whom were caught. One of these people was a woman my age who was a single parent, and whose elderly mother had died doing the same thing. As she was caught, I thought about her child who was left behind. I wondered how she could have done it after her mother died doing the same thing. Was she that desperate, that naive, or just greedy? Due to lenient Dutch drug policies, the incentive to keep trying is provided. After all, this might be your lucky shot.

Again, modes of globalization seem to provide quick, yet risky answers to a complex situation. Drug trafficking is an obvious reflection of international connections and exchanges, but drug trafficking also has a strong local impact. As one 31 year old woman told me:

It used to be that in the folk neighborhood everybody had the same status. Somebody could improve their house by working hard and saving money. Now all of a sudden you see instant wealth, nice cars, home improvements in short time, and things like that, right in the middle of these poorer neighborhoods. It creates a feeling of division. It creates a feeling that we are no longer in this together. People become suspicious and more secretive. People become envious. You lose community solidarity.

Other than the immediate risks of incarceration and death, there are communal and social risks, which in turn affect the cohesion of one’s social networks, and thus
mental well being. With both these examples of sex tourism and drug smuggle, a certain gambling mentality seems prevalent. The risks are high, but if you are lucky you can land a “big one”. With one lucky shot one can make more money than it would take several life times of hard work in the Surinamese economy. Given these odds, we can assume that this type of risk taking will continue.

A Way Out of the Country

On any given day one can walk by the Dutch embassy and see a long line of people waiting patiently. They are waiting for a visa. Although the trend has diminished over the past five to ten years or so, getting an opportunity to emigrate to the Netherlands is still one of the most popular ways to pursue a better life. Strategies to obtain Dutch residency status have taken a variety of ventures ranging from patiently applying in a legal matter and waiting for years, to finding somebody in the Netherlands to marry you, or even hiring somebody in the Netherlands for a temporary marriage. Usually, through friend and or family connections, one might find someone willing to engage in such an arrangement.

I discovered a different, more extreme mek’ mui’i effort to leave Suriname. Florence introduced me to the concept of ‘correspondents’. Many women obtain correspondents in Europe, preferably the Netherlands or Belgium. Lists of names are circulated of men who might be willing to get married and provide the “golden ticket” out of Suriname. Interaction with the correspondents takes place mostly via the Internet. These types of encounters appear different from the ‘regular’ Internet romances, as they are specifically geared toward a fast marriage trajectory. In addition, women exchange
names with each other the way children exchange play cards. It has something very
impersonal to it. Florence told me:

My sister gave me about twenty names of correspondents. They were
too many so I divided them between my cousins. It is easy to get lists
with names.

Another woman told me:

Oh yeah, you did not hear about that? Women try to get correspondents
to try to get them out. It has been pretty popular for quite a few years.
They get them over the Internet. A lot of women do it. (42 year old
woman).

Engaging in correspondent exchange is like playing the lottery. You never know,
your lucky shot might be among them. Stories of lucky shots are few and far between,
however. Florence told me one story that had a happy ending, all the other stories were
quite horrific, from women who basically ended up in indentured servitude to women
who ripped off their new husbands and disappeared as soon as they got the chance. One
exchange I had with a man on the topic informed me:

Man: My ex-girlfriend got with a correspondent. She is in Belgium.
She’s been gone for about seven years now.
Amin: So how has it been for her?
Man: Horrific, he beats her black and blue. Has been doing it from the
moment she got there.
Amin: And she did not leave?
Man: She couldn’t, had nowhere to go, especially in Belgium. She used
to call every now and then. Pretty sad. Oh well, that’s some of the
choices people make. She wanted to get out. [He shrugs his shoulders]

In spite of these types of stories, the practice is alive and well. Florence told me
about a correspondent with whom she was communicating, but he suddenly stopped
responding. While I was there she picked up another correspondent and they conversed
through the Internet and sometimes by phone. He was a widower and a pig farmer with
well over a thousand pigs. We would joke about the pigs, but I asked her if she seriously thought about being able to live on some remote farm with all those pigs. She just laughed and said she did not know. He suddenly stopped responding too. It seems that these relationships are easy to turn on and off, at least it was for Florence’s suitors. I could tell she was hurt, which makes one wonder about the ease and frivolity of these Internet encounters and the real emotional repercussions for both parties. The potential for deception and abuse seems high as these relationships are approached as a quick fix solution to a complex situation.

The Correspondent Exchange system is an example of how globalization is a significant force in people’s lives. Globalization contributes to a level of hardship for many people as its international relations and policies have marginalized countries such as Suriname. At the same time, globalization facilitates “a way out”. The deceptive positive aspects of time and place compression facilitate a quick exchange. The Internet connection provides a shortcut in interpersonal relations where women desperate for a way out do not take enough time to get to know their potential mates. Given the stories of European men who have been duped by women who merely used them to get out of the country, we can assume that these European men are driven by the same desperation and are consequentially equally as vulnerable.

In addition, the family role in relationship building has been eliminated. The exchange and plans to move forward are individualized and family members are informed after the fact, as was the case with Florence’s sister. The practice of

\[13\] According to Merkle & Richardson (2000) Internet relations in general have been known for the potential to quickly escalate as there are no distractions, physical or visual. Instead, words can directly make an impact on the vulnerable soul of whoever is on the other side. At the same time, the potential for fraud and abuse are also exponentially high.
introducing a potential mate to the family, which serves in strengthening family bonds and as a protective measure, is abandoned in this new dating process. As a result, women are left vulnerable. Another family detriment is that as women are desperate to find a mate, when they do find a mate who is willing to marry, they sometimes opt to abandon their children.

I have illustrated the exchange across the Internet between males and females because this is fairly publicly information. I have no doubt, however, that these types of practices exist in the same sex community as well; however, I did not engage in this community enough to know the extent.

_A Way Out of Life_

Near the center of Paramaribo is one of the most massive and controversial monuments. The Wijdenbosch bridge, crosses the Suriname river and establishes a link between Paramaribo and the Marowijne district. Erected by one of the most controversial leaders of Suriname in the late 1990s, it was erected with enormous Dutch loans by a Dutch company. Yet, this bridge is a symbol of modernity, and a symbol of national pride. It is also a place where people choose to end their lives. The bridge is so high, that a jump or fall will guarantee instant death. And so the bridge has accrued an additional un-expected symbolic meaning, that of “a way out” for those who choose to take their own lives.

Suriname has the highest rate of suicide in the world (Waagmeester 2005). This is mainly due to the Nickerie district with predominant rice agriculture, where the economic situation is extremely dire. The Nickerie district is predominately populated by Hindustani, and unlike the rest of the world where the rate of women committing suicide
is higher than men, in Nickerie the rate is one to one. Because of Nickerie, people in Suriname still often refer to suicide as “a Hindustani problem”, but the truth of the matter is that suicide among the Afro-Surinamese is and has been steadily on the rise. The newspapers are regularly filled with tragic accounts of people who commit suicide. Young, old, male, or female, nobody is immune.

The high rate of suicide was very troubling to me, and the dismissive attitude Afro-Surinamese people had about it as a mere “Hindustani issue” troubled me as well. What is the cause and what does the high rate of suicide say about Afro-Surinamese life? Listening to how people think and talk about the issue is an important first step into coming to some understanding.

Suicide happens a lot among the Creoles, it is a big problem. You do not hear about those who tried but weren’t successful. There are quite a few in the hospital due to failed attempts. The nurses do not know how to handle it, it is emotionally very taxing for them. (AIDS organization director)

People do not talk much about it [suicide], but it happens. Suicide is a very difficult issue. There are all kinds of reasons that can cause it. I saw that tv program recently and the expert talked about the economical situation, but I do not agree. Most of the suicide reasons were principal reasons for the committers. I love that person and my parents do not approve. I want to have that thing and my parents won’t let me. In certain occasions it is for economic reasons, but usually it is for personal principal reasons… Sometimes it can be that somebody is in debt and they know that they are not able to pay it off. There might be a chance that they get locked up. They get discouraged and then there is the chance that they commit suicide. You have people who are heavy gamblers and casino visitors. So we can’t really just blame it on the economic situation… (70+ year old man)

The Hindustani, they just kill themselves and then the problem is over and done with. Am: But isn’t suicide also on the rise among Afro-Surinamese? Lately yes. Look at the […] bridge and the people jumping off it. It all has to do with acculturation, the taking over of norms and values of
another culture. Black people did not use to kill themselves. (40+ year old man)

Suicide? Well that is a Hindustani problem, isn’t it? (42 year old woman)

All male discussion session 4/19/05:
A: What do you think about suicide?
M1: Well, people suffer from a lot more stress these days.
M2: It used to be that it was predominately a Hindustani problem, but not anymore
M3: I think it can also be a result of domestic violence

The thoughts and ideas about suicide are as diverse as there are people. The most common explanations are in the high level of stress people suffer, especially economic stress. This sentiment is echoed in the media. But I think there is an additional, less obvious explanation, that of silence. Brushing suicide off as a “Hindustani problem” allows for a nice escape into the realm of ‘cultural difference’, and allows it to be silenced. It becomes “their” problem. But even if it were just a Hindustani problem, in this multi-ethnic society where people live together, everybody ultimately is affected and should have some sense of interest in addressing and resolving the problem. The most profound words on this subject come from the young people. They state:

Teen discussion 6/05
Amin: Lately, you hear more about young people committing suicide. Why do you think that is so, and what could help the situation?
Girl1: That is kinda heavy. I know for myself, I talk. I can’t speak for others, because perhaps they have a weak spirit. Maybe that’s why, because you see it a lot with the Hindustani. For example, in the old days Hindustani had to be virgins when they got married. Now that has totally changed. For example, a girl comes home, and she is a minor. She explains to her mother, mom I met a boy and I really like him… I think, you should take her feelings into consideration, even if she is young. Because that’s what happens in most cases. Because she cannot bring a boy home she starts thinking of crazy things to do, like suicide.
Boy1: What you have a lot among young people, today you hear two persons have committed suicide, and then a girl, and then another boy. I think it is more about love relation problems, love problems and social problems. Living conditions in Suriname today are not that good anymore. Like today you have a girlfriend, and tomorrow it’s over. You were so crazy about each other. Then you think, my God I can’t tell anyone. If I tell my friends, they will laugh. My mother won’t want to hear it. So, let me kill myself and then I won’t have anymore love problems, no more socio-economical problems. I think that that’s it. Life conditions in Suriname here plays a very big part. When I talk about social problems, I am talking about money. These people have no money, so what are they supposed to think? I have no money so what should I do? I can rob somebody, but I might get killed. How am I supposed to feed my children? And then you just worry and worry and worry, and finally you commit suicide. You have a bottle of pesticide there, and you just drink it. You think I have these many problems. I can’t tell anyone, even if I told, nobody can help me, so let me go ahead and end it. And that what it is in Suriname. The government should really, really, really step in because it gets worse everyday. They have no money, where do you see some stability? These people are suffering.

These young people highlight the intersectionality of culture, (economic) stress, and silence. Stresses suffered are greater when there is no room for dialogue, no venue to address the issue. People suffer in silence, which drives them over the edge. The confrontation between old cultural norms and new cultural norms causes stress, and there is no room to address these issues. The young people give insight into a culture where great emphasis is placed on independence, and where the emotional needs of young people are often ignored.

Look, we are talking about Creole culture here. Creoles are usually like this. When you tell them the teacher did this or that to me, they go iya mek’ a du yere, well, [let them do] whatever. You probably did something. Not all parents, but you really do have quite a few who are like that. (teen boy)

Our parents don’t talk to us enough. (teen girl)

Amin: If there was one thing you could change about your upbringing what would it be?
Boy1: Talk more about sexuality. I am not talking about sex, I mean everything about sexuality. Then I want to get rid of the dominating attitude of parents. Young people should be able to speak. We have a mouth, we have to talk!
Girl1: Yes, that parents would speak freely with us. They would sit down with us.
Girl2: They would be more open.
Girl1: They would say, this is going to happen.
Girl2: They shouldn’t use coded language. They are really afraid to talk to their children. My mother talks openly with me. But you hear from people. They are afraid to use that word, vagina, or penis, or anything like that. They are afraid to express that, I don’t know why.
Boy1: But I’m talking more about the dominating position, because in my family my mother is the dominant one and what she says has to happen. There is no room for anything else… We need to get rid of their dominating function. We should be able to talk too. We should be able to express our feelings and with this we could lower the suicide rate. We couldn’t stop it, but we could diminish it.
Girl1: The parents should be more open. You should be able to talk freely with them when something is wrong. You should be able to go talk with your mother.

There is not just a culture clash between *winti* and Christianity. There is also a clash between an old way of doing things – which is based in a colonial legacy, and a new way that needs to address challenges of the 21st Century. People make *mek’ muiti* decisions, not for the thrill of the risk, but because the their lives are so compromised by harsh living conditions. Within social sciences these conditions are collectively considered structural, and are referred to as structural violence (Galtung 1969, Anglin 1998, Kent 2003). But young people show us that it is the intersectionality, the compounding of structural violence, stress, and spaces of silence that can drive people to make *mek’ muiti* decisions. The intersectionality of structural violence, stress, and spaces of silence are a direct reflection of the intricacies and pressure of the globalized world of the 21st Century.
So, even though there is a system in place to support people’s mental well being, it is insufficient in many cases. Similar trends are seen in Africa and throughout the Caribbean. Suda (1997) highlights, for instance, how research on African families has emphasized stability, networking, and mutual supports. The truth is that these systems are weakening under today’s pressures and this weakening compromises mental well being even further. She states:

The extended family system is gradually weakening as a result of the larger social, cultural and economic transformations that are underway in contemporary Kenya. As changes in the family and family relationships occur, many other aspects of family life and the situation of many children have been profoundly undermined and compromised (Suda 1997:202).

From looking at the *mek’ muiti* examples given in this section we learn that in order to ensure mental well being, one should not just look at mental well being practices and resources that are available, but one should address larger structural forces that continuously counteract it. Given the size, the institutional forms, and longevity of these structures, individual or even familial effort will not be enough, and probably will require an organized effort.
Florence - oma

November 2004

For a couple of weeks now, Florence has been telling me that her grandmother is not well. She has actually been staying in the big house up front. Florence and Jaimy stay with grandmother in shifts because they have to tend to her around the clock. Florence keeps telling me how weak oma is. I stopped by Florence’s house to hear how her grandmother is doing. She is the same, very weak and in a lot of pain. She won’t eat. I ask Florence if they are going to take her to a doctor or to the hospital. “My aunt does not want us to take her”, Florence says. She says that she wants to wait till things get really bad. Oma is afraid to go, she says that if she goes to the hospital she will die there. I plead with Florence one more time, to take her. How bad do things have to get? I say to myself.

December 2004

They have moved oma downstairs. I can stop in from time to time to see her. Oma asks me how my son is doing. She tells me how a few weeks earlier my son was laying beside her and all of a sudden tried to breast feed. She got a hearty laugh out of that one. She talks a lot and is sometimes hard to understand. She looks more sad than sick and she talks a lot about her children.
December 10, 2004

Today when I went by Florence to pick up my son, she told me that oma is dying. She is still sick and is steadily getting worse. I spoke with oma tonight. She talked mostly about her four children who have died and how it has been too much to carry. She wants to die because she is in a lot of pain. She suffers, but not only physically. “It is too much for the mind and the spirit”, she says. She has fears, she says. She hurts over her children and wonders what she has done wrong to have had such a hard life.

She does not eat solid foods anymore, only some soup and porridge. She pees blood and when you give her medicine, she spits up blood. Florence thinks she might have cancer. Her grandmother refuses to go to the hospital and the doctor won’t come to the house. He prescribed meds once for kidney infection, but they did not help. I have offered to let my friend who is a medical resident come and talk to the grandmother. She might be dying, but perhaps she could get some intravenous medicine against the pain. Nobody should have to suffer like this.

December 14, 2004

I was driving home from work, on my way to the daycare to pick up my son, when I received a phone call. It was Jaimy. She was calling me from the emergency room. They had finally been able to convince oma to go for some medical attention. Now that they were there, the doctor wouldn’t treat her. She asked me if I could come and talk to the doctor on her behalf. I immediately drove over there.

As I walked over to the emergency room from where I was parked, I could see that it was very crowded. People were sitting and standing outside the building. I found
oma sitting on one of the benches outside. She looked small and frail. Jaimy gave me a piece of paper. On it stood the recommendation of the emergency room doctor, that oma be seen by her own physician first before coming to the emergency room.

I walked in, trying to find the doctor. People were everywhere. As I walked further to the back there were more people, lined up against the wall. I finally met the doctor. She was impatient and rude. I did not quite appreciate it, but given her workload I decided to let it slide. She explained to me that there were too many people to be seen and that they were short staffed. Since oma did have a regular doctor, she should see him first.

I went back to Jaimy and told her that I was not able to get anywhere either. It turned out the doctor was on the same hospital premises and within walking distance, but they would have to wait a couple of hours for office hours to start. Oma said she wanted to go home. I told them, they came this far, they might consider waiting. It was time for me to go pick up my son, so I couldn’t wait, but I gave them the number of my friend who is a resident doctor at the hospital. You never know, maybe she could be of help. I left, hoping she would receive some care, finally.

I visited Florence’s house later that evening. Her grandmother was seen by the doctor and was referred to the hospital. She was admitted and released the same day. They did all kinds of tests and couldn’t find anything wrong with her. My friend helped her. They did find that her colon was fully clogged with feces, which would probably explain the stomach pain and the inability to hold food down. I talked to grandmother for a while. She says we’re family and is very grateful for my support. Apparently I look
like one of her daughters who died. She says we have the same aunt and that our relatives are from the same area, Saramacca, which is true.

I talk to her about her grief. I tell her that grief can really hurt you and she agrees. She talks on and on about the children she has lost, about her career as a medicine woman. She received a working *winti* from her grandfather. But she is old now and just wants to go to church and deal with Jesus.

December 16, 2004

I saw Angela and asked her how *oma* was doing. I asked if she took her suppository yet, and she told me she did. I promised to stop by a little later.

I stopped by to see *oma*, she was happy to see me. “My friend is here”, she told her daughter. She laughed and told me she was doing better. She has been taking her medicine and has not been in so much pain. For the first time she did not talk about her children who have died. Instead she talked about two of her living daughters.

March 05

I am in the Netherlands. Two of my sons have been living with my mother in Amsterdam since May 2004. Since I wasn’t able to make it financially in Suriname, my mother and brother offered for the boys to stay with them for the second year of my research. It has been hard, but it has been a blessing in many ways. I know they could not have been better taken care of. I earned some money organizing the city wide dance festival. I saved that money and bought tickets for myself and my youngest son, so we
could go to the Netherlands in February since mine and my children’s birthdays all fall within a three week span from the end of February through early March.

I received a message from my aunt today that Florence’s grandmother has passed away. I went to a ‘bell house’ and called her that same day to give her my condolences. She sounded so sad. Her grandmother had passed two days earlier on Tuesday in the hospital.

I asked Florence how she was doing. She says she’s holding up. She then tells me about the family members that have come. Immediately after she lists the people that have come, including her sister from the Netherlands, she says: “Now I have nobody left, now I am all alone”.

I thought that was the most curious thing. I immediately responded with “Oh no, you still have all those family members, you are not alone”, a statement I regretted the moment I said it. She was entitled to her feelings, especially at this moment. She replied that after her mother had passed, her grandmother had taken them in, and now that she was gone, she felt like she did not have anybody.

I told her I understood it was hard for her and her family, but I was glad that the suffering had stopped. She agreed. She had always said that if she were to go to the hospital it would be the end, she reminded me.
Chapter 8.

Tak’ taki: Power of The Word

*Fa a go a go* and *Mek’ muiti* are two structures that undermine mental well being. I identified a structure that strengthens mental well being and is based in a rich cultural tradition.

While in Suriname, my aunt’s *kweki ma*, the mother who had raised her, not her biological mother, passed away. This lady lived well into her 90s and was as alert and sharp as ever, to her last breath. She was always at the house, and always made conversation. She would ask about relatives, and because of her involvement, people of all ages would regularly stop by to talk to her. Losing her was definitely a great loss. She lived a good life and we welcomed her time to rest, but it is and will be strange not having her sit at the window everyday. I observed all the rites that are involved. Placing an ad in the paper, having a radio announcement. Cooking food, making arrangements, having *singi neti*, singing night, where at least 150 people showed up at the house and sang religious songs all night long to day break, and so on. After the funeral had taken place and some time had passed, I talked to my cousin one day. I told her I had been thinking about her mother and wondered how she was feeling. I felt I needed to give her a call to check on her.

“You do not need to do that”, she told me. She said: “We do not really do that, calling to see how people are feeling. They might mention the person in passing as in ‘Oh, if she were here right now, she would say this or that’, but that is about it. They do not really dwell on their feelings.” I thought about what she said and realized that indeed
I had not noticed the type of emotional display associated with personal loss I was used to. What did this mean? Do people deny themselves and repress certain emotions? Do they only express them in private? Or are they just fine?

My cousin and I talked about it some more. We came to the conclusion that the whole ritual process is so extensive and thorough that people are guided and supported through the whole mourning process step by step. We did not come to a conclusion as to whether we thought people were really ‘fine’ or not, but we did agree that the whole process normalized death and loss, and that the whole intensive process must expedite a restoration to mental well being.

Indeed the process is very extensive, and also very social. Death rituals involve ceremonies for cleansing the deceased, saying goodbye to the deceased, spiritually separating the living from the deceased, celebrating and honoring the deceased, helping the deceased transition into the ancestral realm, supporting the bereaved, ritual meals, singing services, prayer services, sermon services, and so on, not necessarily in that order. There are numerous rituals prior to the burial, eight days post burial, six weeks post burial, a year post burial. All of these are woven together with music, singing, story telling, joke telling, riddle telling, and even dance as the drageman, pall bearers, dance with the coffin on the way to the grave in the last honor. My aunt herself commented:

“You know, as many death ceremonies I have witnessed and participated in, I never realized how helpful some of these things were. We went and got to talk to her [the body] before they did anything to her. Then, later, after they did everything to her, and made her up, then we got to see her again. Somehow it helped to see the before and after. It makes it more gradual. We have some good things in our culture, it really helped.”
As such, there is a ritual knowledge available to address mental well being. I consider this knowledge to be embedded within, and be embracing of oratory culture. Knowing what to say, when to say it, and how to say it are essential parts of the mourning rituals. Knowing how to call upon or sing for the ancestors, how to address the elders, which songs to sing at the respective rituals are all part of this knowledge. *Yu e mus’ taki*, you must talk, is one of the phrases I was told on several occasions, stressing the importance to ask for help, talk to my ancestors, and so on. Talking as essential to connecting was demonstrated to me as I participated in a *Tai Anyisa*, folding traditional head pieces, course.

Field notes 5/30/05  
Tai Anyisa class  
Our teacher is also a member of the guild that lays out corpses. She is an *aflegger*, which poorly translates into a ‘out-layer’. The six ladies are very interested in what they do because it is always shrouded in a cloud of mystery. They listen intently to what she has to say. *Yu e mus’ taki na dede*, you must talk with the dead, she says. One woman tells how she washed and dressed her mother herself before the *afleggers* came. She felt badly that she did not go with them to witness the official laying out of her mother’s body. The teacher talks with her: ‘You did the most important thing for your mother. You do not need to feel bad. The most important thing is when your loved one passes over, you wash them neatly and lay them out neatly before the *afleggers* come. You did that.’ I could see that her words gave some consolation. The others were very interested. She further explained: ‘Some people are afraid, but the best thing you can do is to bathe the person yourself. You have to talk with the person and you will see that they will help you. They will roll over more easily, move limbs that are becoming stiff.’ ‘Really?’, one woman says. ‘Sure, you just ask them to help you and they will. *Yu e mus taki*, you must talk.’

Afro-Surinamese culture is rich in oral tradition. This tradition has generally been studied from a folklore perspective (Herskovits 1936, Comvalius 1949, Helman 1978), with the exception of Stephen (1990) who links the *winti* tradition to psychiatry.
I refer to this ritual knowledge here, with its richness of oral tradition, and as it pertains specifically to the address and maintenance of mental well being, as tak’ taki. Tak’ taki, which translates into ‘talking’ or ‘language’, directly refers to the power of the Word. I learned about tak’ taki from the elders. Many younger people might engage in the respective art forms, but few have done any research into the meaning or origin of their practices. I supplemented the information I received from my elders with literature research. There wasn’t much, but the little I found was helpful.

Diène (1999) describes how in West Africa, the Word is central to a culture rich in oral tradition. Language is part of every major and minor ritual. More poignantly, language is an essential part of mental well being. He states:

For us the power of the word is such that in some groups people believe words can kill: when they are spoken in a certain way at a particular time, they can paralyse someone. But they are also believed to be able to heal. The West has recently discovered music therapy – that is, treating psychiatric patients using music – but in my culture we have practiced it since time immemorial. We treat mental illness using sound. Indeed we believe that each person consists of a basic sound (Diène 1999: 12).

In this segment Diène not only addresses mental well being directly, he also highlights the fact that the Word refers to more than just the spoken word. Here he refers to the vibratory essence of the Word, which is found back in the vibration of music all the way down to our vibrations on the molecular level. In Africa, the drum is the most prominent instrument where the connection with ritual language is made. Bebey (1975) explains:

It [the drum] is not merely used as an accompaniment to the ceremonies, but has its own well-defined role to play. A particularly striking example of this role is to be found among the Adiukru of the Ivory Coast. During
the graduation ceremonies from one age-class to another, tom-toms assume the attributes of real human beings; they speak to the young men who answer them. Then, the young people talk to the tom-toms who ‘listen’ and reply. A real conversation takes place between the musical instruments and the men who made them, a dialogue between music and its creator – man (Bebey 1975: 12).

The language of the drum is one of the ritual languages that made its way to Suriname from Africa. Through the use of symbols, ritualized and artistic language forms provide means for addressing mental well being. I will highlight three forms of *tak’ taki* here, namely Storytelling, Dress, and Song and Drama.

**Storytelling**

Field notes:
My dance group has been invited to participate in a family event. The youth theater group at NAKS has their recital and the other youth organizations have been invited to participate in their evening performance. The youth group will headline an *Anansi Tori* theater production. But before they go on, the audience receives a special treat. The story teller who has been their teacher takes the stage. He swaggers with a cup in his hand, and addresses the audience as if he is drunk. He talks about some of those ‘idolatry’ practices his wife believes in, that *winti* stuff. But… he shares with the audience, there was one experience he had… He goes on and gives account of how he attended a *winti prei*, a *winti* ceremony, and how the *winti* spirit had descended on him. He ends up singing and dancing vehemently across the stage, forcing the audience to experience his journey. He reaches a climax, after which he oh so slowly returns to his state of belligerent drunkenness. The performance is amazing, the audience is enthralled. A man standing beside me taps me on the shoulder and says: ‘There are not many people who can do that anymore’.

Storytelling is a prominent form of *tak’ taki*, that has healing and restorative powers. It also plays an important role in fostering a sense of community. Stories teach morals, values, and provide opportunities for social bonding. *Anansi Tori*, stories of the infamous spider, for instance, have made their way to Suriname and other countries.
throughout the Caribbean from West Africa (Courlander 1996). As Anansi Tori are being told, anybody in the audience can interrupt the story with the announcement Bato mi ben dape, Stop I was there, or a Kri Kra, no translation. The interruption announces the interlude of a song, a kot’ singi, in which all participate. Afterwards, the tori continues as is. The storyteller shares how telling stories was an essential part of his upbringing in the rural district. People didn’t have tv’s. They would gather after work and share stories to entertain and teach each other. Different generations would sit together and enjoy. There were strong values communicated as to what was appropriate for children and adults. As such, storytelling contributed to the mental well being of the whole community.

Dossa (2003) highlights the importance of story telling as an essential tool for establishing and maintaining mental well being for a community of people as well. Her approach comes from the perspective of a silenced, oppressed and marginalized population however, which is a little different. Still, her work resonates with this example as she stresses how the healing capacities of story telling and narration have been overlooked and are underused. Communal story telling such as described are rare today in the days of television and video games.

Dress

Fieldnotes 3/05
As I return to the NAKS compound after having visited the Netherlands, I eagerly go into the new store. The store was under construction when we left, but had a grand opening in our absence. In this store, one of NAKS’ women’s groups sells traditional and tradition inspired clothing. They sell the Afro-Surinamese koto,angi, anyisa, Maroon embroidered pangi, handcrafted items, and more. Everything is made by the women, some of whom have been trained in classes at NAKS. The colors and designs are exquisite. As I go through the racks, a costumer comes in. She oohs and aahs over the clothes. I smile at myself at her audible enthusiasm. She
shares her excitement with the sales woman. ‘I can’t believe you even have the traditional underwear! I have been looking for this everywhere, but you can’t find it. You can find all kinds of koto, but not the underwear!’

Women’s traditional dress, which is called the koto, dates back to the days of slavery. The wearer of the koto is called a kotomisi. The koto dress consists of a big skirt (koto) with a short jacket (yaki), and a headpiece (anyisa) [Figure 5.2].

With the traditional koto the woman wears a roll filled with either straw or cloth around her waist, which makes the koto stand out. The koto has particular type of underwear, an embroidered blouse, and is accentuated by ribbons, a scarf and handkerchiefs. The koto itself speaks a language. Henar-Hewitt (1997) illustrates:

On the yaki, there are 2 ribbons folded like an accordion. If they are folded to halfway, that indicates the Kotomisi is unattached. If folded part loose and then part folded again, she has a man but she indicates he is far away. A tapuskin panyi [piece of fabric] is worn over one of her shoulders; if it is over the right shoulder, her heart has not been given
away; if it is over the left shoulder, she’s not unattached (Henar-Hewitt 1997:96).

The *koto* is important in the promotion of mental well being, especially for women. The *koto* utilizes symbolic language expressed through the different items of clothing, but more importantly, the *koto* and the *koto misi* serve as symbols of empowerment and pride, not just Afro-Surinamese pride, but national Surinamese pride in general.

There are several stories about the origin of the *koto*, ranging from an invention by the Moravian Brother Christian Order to compensate for scantily clad bodies, to independent creative invention inspired by French couture and African decorative techniques in the 1800s (van Putten & Zantinge 1988). The most popular and readily accepted version is that of a plantation owner’s wife forcing the slave woman to wear bulky clothes to cover her curves and hereby divert the attention and advances from her husband. The Afro-Surinamese women in turn, turned the dress into something positive by developing and elevating it to a national dress by the 1930s and making it a major symbol of Afro-Surinamese culture. Whether true, or the only correct story or not, this is by far the most popular version.

The *kotomisi* has been embraced as a symbol of empowerment and defiance. She is a symbol of status and class, exemplifies the strength of Afro-Surinamese women in the face of oppression, and her skill at subverting negative forces directed against her. On July 1, Emancipation Day, the streets of Suriname are crowded with women of all ages and ethnicities dressed in *koto*. Similarly, there is not one official depiction or presentation of Suriname without the image of a *koto misi*. The *koto misi* has become a national symbol of Suriname.
Likewise, the *anyisa* is the traditional headpiece that complements the *koto* and tells its own story of identity affirmation through the use of *tak’ taki*. The *anyisa* consists of starched fabric folded in different styles [Figure 5.3]. I took a *tai anyisa* course at NAKS with a group of women to learn how to fold the *aanyisa*. In its original days, once the *anyisa* was tied, it was “baptized” with a proverb. According to Herskovits (1936) the practice of naming designs and methods is directly traceable to West Africa. The proverb attached a message to the respective headpiece (Henar-Hewitt 1997, Herskovits 1936). Using double entendres, the true meanings of the messages were only privy to the privileged few. Through wearing a particular headdress one could as easily flatter or insult someone. The proverbs were not directly based on the shape of the headpiece, but certain styles were definitely linked to certain meanings. Henar-Hewitt calls the *anyisa* a “beautiful method to keep all kinds of emotions under reign, or a means to express what one cannot utter in words (1997: 21)”.

For example, the *anyisa* style, which has the ends of the knot in an upright position, is called *feda* and expresses anger and resistance. Some of the names accompanying these types of *anyisa* are: let them talk, kiss my a..., get lost, and do not touch me.
After slavery, anyisa were baptized in the store and depending on the popularity of the name, the anyisa would sell in large numbers and the name would stick. The names were mostly proverbs, but commented on any and all events, ranging from personal gossip to commentary about the Dutch royal family. Creativity went as far as modeling the tying style after the grills of automobiles.

One example of a gossip anyisa name with double entendre is Big’bigi dé datra Zeiler kis asema na en oso. The proverb translates into: On a big day, doctor Zeiler caught an asema (bat that comes out at night) at his house. The story goes that doctor Zeiler’s wife had an affair with Mr. Azijnman [pronounced “assignmon”]. His name was twisted in the proverb to “asema”, adding the double entendre. One night Dr. Zeiler came home and caught the two. Because of the double entendre there are two meanings to the proverb, and only those “initiated” into the personal knowledge about Dr. and Mrs. Zeiler’s affairs would know the whole truth (Henar Hewitt 1997).

Like the koto dress, the anyisa has taken a prominent role in creating a space of self-esteem and mental well being through accentuating women’s creativity and power through the use of tak’ taki.

**Song and Drama**

Song is another important form of ritualized language. Randall explains:

It used to be in the old days that a man might have a girl on the side of which his woman has no knowledge. Then, one day, he might be out somewhere with his wife, and his girlfriend will come walking down the street. Now the girl will start singing songs in coded language, addressing
him. His woman will be right beside him, but will have no idea about what is going on.

The use of song as *tak’ taki* stems all the way back to the days of slavery when the enslaved used coded language in song and *odo*, proverbs, to sing their woes, create psychological spaces of self esteem, deliver social critique, and shared plans for escape. The *soko psalms* were religious songs that the enslaved sang. Elders explained to me, that these were called *stichtelijke liederen*. The word *stichtelijk* was used to denote membership of a *stichting*, which translates into ‘organization’. The Africans were not deemed worthy or suitable to join a church, so they became members of organizations. Denied religion, they created their own and would sing these songs at the openings of special occasions. Secondly, the word *soko* also relates to the Sokko Africans who were known to have elaborate funeral songs (Weltak 1990). It is possible that they were significant in creating this tradition.

The *banya* was a social performance spectacle among the enslaved that served many purposes. *Banya* consisted of several acts including singing, games, and several types of dances. Sometimes for the entertainment of the enslaved, sometimes forced to perform to display the plantation owner’s riches, *banya* had many functions. *Banya* served as a creative and social outlet, yet was filled with coded expressions of critique and criticisms. The *Prodo Banya* in particular, is said to have been an outlet for criticism and coded messages of escape (Weltak 1990).

*Banya* provided a means to access the spiritual and ancestral realms. *Winti* songs were and still are used to address and facilitate the *winti* and often use *odo*, proverbs, in their forms (De Bruin 1999). The children’s games played during *banya*, the so-called *kanga* used songs to teach children norms and values their community deemed
appropriate. In general, there existed an elaborate oral tradition in which messages good, bad, and ugly were communicated, often through songs and odo.

The *banya* spectacle evolved into a sponsored Du theater, an opera like performance, which plantation owners used to publicly attack and ridicule each other (Buddingh 1999). *Du* theaters reached their high post Emancipation. As the plantation economy dwindled, the Du theaters disappeared. The Du theaters did develop into another singing spectacle, the *lobi singi*. *Lobi singi* are mostly known as public venues where homosexual women sing each other love songs, accompanied by a small orchestra (Herskovitz 1936, Comvalius 1949). The *lobi singi* were not limited to same sex relations, and the songs weren’t always positive. The *lobi singi* continue to this day, albeit in much smaller fashion (Wekker 1994).

When we look at these forms of *tak’ taki* we see the use of ritualized and artistic language to create spaces of self-esteem, to learn about and process through certain issues, to strengthen social relationships, to create social awareness and illicit social support, to channel negative feelings in a creative manner, and so on. These *tak’ taki* were not perfect by any means. There are plenty of stories of women whose displayed *anyisa* insults led to physical altercations, for instance. Similarly, elders have complained that some rituals are created for ritual sake, rather than having a productive purpose. Still, they provided socially sanctioned means to address mental well being.

As such, it is unfortunate that many of these *tak’ taki* are no longer being practiced, or have been transferred from being an ingrained part of Afro-Surinamese culture to becoming entertainment. Since slavery days, the colonial regime played a
critical role in suppressing cultural traditions. Explicit assimilation laws and prohibition laws post emancipation contributed to a climate where own traditional cultures were downplayed and kept in secrecy. As a result, things were not passed on systematically. Today, lack of knowledge of tradition is one of the main complaints of the elders. It is also one of the most salient aspects of our culture when compared with the other ethnic groups.

My oldest maternal aunt is a lead singer with NAKS and is nationally and internationally known for her skill and breath of repertoire of cultural songs, in particular *soko psalm*. For any occasion she ‘knows’ of at least ten songs to sing. I say ‘knows’ because in the family it is believed that her singing is a gift from the spiritual and ancestral realm. That means that often she does not know where she got the songs from, they just come at the right time, at the right place. She speaks of her own upbringing:

But the people in the old days, I do not know of all places, but those from *parnassi*, the plantations (rural district). When those people went to do their things, [winti practices]... my mother never taught me anything, neither did my grandmother. One night my grandmother called me to her, telling me: ‘I’m going to teach you a song’. I said ‘yes ma’m’. ‘Oly is our God’ [laughter all around]. I laughed because she sang ‘oly’ instead of ‘holy’, but nothing, nothing did they teach us. It wasn’t until I joined NAKS that I learned these things, really. Well that family [...] We used to go and they would have those games, those *banya prei*, ancestral games. You were not allowed to go outside, and if they would catch you peeping, they would beat you. You wouldn’t dare sing one of the songs. And for me to say that I ever heard my mother sing one of those [cultural] songs, I have never heard it. I always heard church songs, really. Not until I came to NAKS [did I learn]. That’s why when somebody asks me something. I sing soko psalm, some people say I am soko psalm [laughter all around], but I do not know those things. Some things I learned from the radio, I would hear it, listen closely, and write it down. Sometimes they would explain the meaning, you understand, than I would write it down. But to say that I was homegrown with these songs, other than ‘My Father’, and ‘When I see God’ [laughter], oh no. Ma Es age 78
Although she is gifted and the right songs come at the right time, having a forum and resource to be taught and learn played an important role in her tak’ taki development. Among the elders in NAKS, almost everybody expressed the lack of formal instruction of cultural knowledge. Rituals were learned by doing, participating, if they were done at all, but even so then not until at least in teen age years. One lady gives an example of how her own mother claimed no knowledge of cultural practices, but her denial was expressed through tak’ taki format.

But most of us, you hear that they received nothing [in cultural knowledge] from their mother. [others agree]. I come from a family. My mother, well, I think she must have been the dumbest woman when it came to cultural knowledge. Sometimes when they gave my mother a gourd [with water] to hold and they told her yu mus’ tak’ nanga den pikin, you must take with the children’s spirit(s), she would say: Baya, mi na ma fowru, ma fowru ne trap’en pikin, I am mother hen, a mother hen does not trample her chicks. So as a mother you cannot kill your children [do them spiritual harm]. Then she would say, ‘well I do not know what to say.’ And then you were there too. Now, my sister, she knew stuff, but she went outside of the family to other people to learn.

This woman’s mother might not have wanted to acknowledge the cultural ritual, but she did know how to use an odo, proverb to express how she felt. In spite of an oppressive climate, in spite of the lack of explicit teachings, somehow tak’ taki knowledge and rituals were ample about. This was possible in a society where social connections were a basic part of community living. One cannot help but pick up stuff through osmosis, so to speak, whether it is from the living realm, or the spiritual/ancestral realm. And thus, the culture itself did not demand a structural and consistent passing on of information, as it facilitates learning through indirect measures, either through dreams, visions, or other spiritual intervention. The woman who taught my tai anyisa class at NAKS states:
From home, I did not learn anything. My mother and grandmother were deceased. But it came to me in dreams. I went with my dreams to someone and told them ‘I dreamed such and such thing.’ They would answer me ‘Girl, you must have eaten something wrong, maybe you are hungry.’ Where I gained knowledge was at NAKS. If you all can remember, I became sick for a month. I became very skinny. First I was big, and suddenly I was so skinny. That’s how I became aware of what it was [spiritual illness]. I received dreams but I did not understand them. I do not have a mother, nor father, nor grandmother or grandfather, nobody. When it comes to cultural knowledge, I learned that at NAKS. (40+ year old woman)

Things have changed however, as the contemporary world has gradually altered communal societies into individually oriented societies. Storytelling presents a clear example of a tak’ taki that has been significantly affected by contemporary living. Whereas storytelling used to be a critical aspect of teaching morals and values and community building, now it is generally used for entertainment. Families do not gather anymore to tell stories after a hard day’s work. Houses are no longer built in compound formation with a common yard, but instead as single units. Most homes have televisions, if not vcr’s, dvd players, or other forms of technological entertainment. Children’s attention spans have shortened and are being lured and fed by computer games and or television games. If the technology is not available at home, Internet café’s are in ample supply to fulfill the need for fast paced entertainment. In general, 21st Century living facilitates people engaging in more individualized endeavors and activities.

The storyteller comments on the changes:

Amin: You clearly have a certain knowledge about the role of community, maybe a little more traditional, where people really work together. You describe something that I think is very nurturing to mental well being. You talk about plantation living, a different atmosphere, your relations with elders. How could that be applied to city life? Do you think that is possible?
A: Well, I think that... the situation in the city was quite different. People were surrounded by a lot more things. On plantation there wasn’t much else, you had to rely on each other. But I think that you had many more different situations in the city. If you look at how things have come along through the years and all the developments. You see that we are much more into ourselves here. In the situation on the plantation there was very little need to collect material wealth and those kinds of things. No need to build things around you, walls. You had few situations like you do here. For instance, you used to have social control in the city. That social control was there. If you were in the streets, any elder could warn you, even reprimand you for something that wasn’t right. You can’t do that today, because you will get laid out. So people hold back and they do not want to get involved. They commonly say, do not get involved with other people’s children, it’ll get you in trouble. You could not imagine such a thing on the plantation. Anybody could reprimand you. It would even be worse for you at home if they found out somebody had to reprimand you. That meant you did wrong, so you were reprimanded again. What you see in the city is that different things matter. People are more in a closed off situation here, more protective.

Many of these practices that were conducive to mental well being, have not just been lost, they have also not been replaced. In a culture where tak’ taki is ever present, there are also deafening silences. As much as Afro-Surinamese like to talk, there are some things that are not discussed. “If you call upon certain things then you call them to life, that’s why certain things are not discussed”, one young woman told me. It might explain why certain diseases are addressed by nicknames, or rarely discussed at all. Takru man, ugly man or bad man stands for cancer. Matansera, the name of a dance or Cuban band stands for leprosy. Cellulair, cell phone, stands for AIDS because anyone can catch it. Through using nicknames we avoid having to deal with the real illnesses, and silences remain.

We do not talk about suicide, HIV/AIDS, how crime affects us, domestic violence, and so on, and people suffer in silence. Whereas the person who has lost a loved one, by an acceptable cause, is supported by a host of people and is allowed to
express and explore any emotion possible in the safety of nurturing support, the woman who is trying to cope with the infidelity or abuse of her husband is left to praying and crying herself to sleep at night. “I just pray” was a comment I heard over and over again when I asked women how they coped with some of the difficulties in their lives.

*Tak’ taki* developed in forms that were aesthetically creative and appealing. More importantly, *tak’ taki* developed out of a necessity. *Tak’ taki* were safe ways of expression for a people who were oppressed by a colonial regime. These people were conditioned into understanding that they could not freely express themselves. The *tak’ taki* forms have gradually disappeared due to a world that has changed and has provided alternative ways of coping. The colonized mindset however, has been far slower to catch up and has not yet transitioned into the 21st Century. Spaces of silence still exist, which are compounded with new 21st century stressors. Where there was once *tak’ taki* to cope, process, and work through issues, there are now temporary escapes, or merely suffering in silence.

Even in the case where public health is addressing HIV and AIDS in the media, people have yet to learn to cross the silence barrier and engage in the discussion. As a result, people continue to suffer and die in silence. The AIDS organization director clarifies this best through sharing about her own struggle. As an HIV positive person herself, and as being the spokesperson for HIV/AIDS she is one of the most well known persons in Paramaribo, yet her struggle is a lonely one, even within her own organization. She shares with me:

Field notes 12/07/2004
I spoke with […] she is the director of the […] AIDS organization. She has been HIV positive over 25 years. She used to live in the Netherlands,
and purposely moved back to Suriname because she wanted to break the taboo about HIV and AIDS. She tells me about her healthy lifestyle, she grows all her own vegetables, does yoga and practices meditation everyday. I wish I were as disciplined. I asked her what her biggest dream was. She told me she wished one person would stand beside her. I was taken aback by her answer, it totally caught me by surprise. In the five years that she has been running the program, nobody else has been willing to come forward and publicly take a stand for AIDS as an HIV positive person. She says it is very lonely. She tells me how at times she might counsel people, but when they go outside people ask her not to walk with them. She is so visible and well known that people are afraid to be seen with her in public. ‘So I just let them be’, she says. ‘What can you do.’ We both sit in silence. I let things sink in, feel that any words I could offer here would be trite. ‘So how do you recruit your volunteers’, I finally continue.

This director is a tower of strength, and became a source of inspiration to me, as she is to many others, I’m sure. However, as public as her life is, her suffering has been silenced. According to Dossa (2003) these silences are significant and breaking the silence brings healing. Dossa states that the retrieval of voice, and sharing the story with others, so that others might become aware and connected on a deeper level, are part of healing.

An important lesson from Dossa that can be applied here is that tak’ taki can and should be brought back, not just to cover the silences, as they did before, but to break through, shatter the silences and bring healing. Note that tak’ taki embodies many different forms of language. Tak’ taki is centered in the Word, which on the most elementary level refers to molecular vibration. Engaging in tak’ taki then, means connecting on a deeper level. The drum is an excellent example of a form of tak’ taki which allows us to connect on a deeper level. People do not just listen to the drum, they feel it. The arts in general allow us to express, experience, and connect in levels where
our conscious reasoning ability fails to deliver. In his book *The Drummer’s Path* (1992), Sule Greg Wilson describes the power to connect as follows:

> Listen: after a presentation of Western ‘classical’ or pop music, the acculturated audience speaks of being ‘moved’ by the performance; in fact, to be touched, to ‘be one’ with the performance is lauded as high art. Now, extend that principle beyond the confines of the anonymous concert hall. Take it to a down-home church service, or a bembe, where the music, the words, the movement extend themselves into the minds, the bodies, the souls of everyone present and you breathe, you perspire, your eyes bat, and you tingle in your toes or in your palms or in your belly or your crotch and you do not sit still, you’ve got to MOVE! The music’s with you; you’ve got the Spirit. You have been so moved. Spiritually ‘touching’ the attendees of a service – ‘performance,’ if you will – is standard in a non-Western religious context. It’s part of what you go to service for. And it’s not just African; it’s not exclusive. Tapping into one’s emotions is utilized by all people: dervishes and playwrights (1992: xiv).

We have plenty of examples of ritualized and artistic languages that have been used effectively. The challenge is to find balance and to use *tak’taki* appropriately to address some of these issues of mental well being that have been silenced.

How do we bring some of the *tak’taki* back, yet have it suitable to 21st Century living with all its noise, hurriedness, and individualism? From listening to my informants it became clear that the organization NAKS and organizations like it play a significant role in introducing and reintroducing some of these *tak’taki* that are so vital to our mental well being. The Surinamese Museum highlights the value of NAKS’ efforts stating:

> The organization NAKS plays an important role in maintaining the kotomisi-tradition. Along kotoshows she organizes courses in tying anyisa, a technique unfamiliar to the younger generation. The courses not only teach tying techniques, but alongside maintaining the tradition stimulate the development of new tying fashions. Some ladies have specialized in dressing kotomisi and tying anyisa. This provides them...
with a nice extra income. Currently there is the trend to celebrate the bigiyari elaborately in fosten [early days – kotomisi] style. Honoring the kotomisi in this fashion is living proof of the ode that is still presented to former slavewomen (van Putten & Zantinge 1988: 48).

The director of the AIDS program is already leading the way as she in her determined way uses everything in her power to turn the suffering of AIDS around. She utilizes *tak’ taki* on a regular basis, by continuing to speak out as a spokesperson, but also through using *tak’ taki* with her clients. My field notes reflect:

Field notes 3/5/05
I am at the […] AIDS support organization and am in discussion with the director. The director talks of a young man. He is 23 years old and is possibly HIV positive. He does not know the results of his test yet, but he is so worried that he almost made a suicide attempt. He refrained from doing so at the last minute. She says: “I went to talk to him. I told him, your *yeye* did not want to go yet. I told his mother to wash him with a little bit of blue (cleansing ritual). She said ‘I can’t, I’m from the church’. Well, he is 23 and he can do it himself. I told him to talk with his *winti*, his spirit. He said he couldn’t because he was with the church. I explained that there are things that walk with you that protect you. You have to thank them.”

*Tak’ taki* are ritualized and artistic language forms that are used to help restore and maintain mental well being. *Tak’ taki* are based in the abstract concept of the Word and developed during the days of slavery out of African principles and concepts. *Tak’ taki* provided safe outlets for a people who were not allowed to express themselves openly and who lived under structures of oppression. A lot of *tak’ taki* have disappeared, were not passed on, and have not been replaced by equally effective measures. Living in the 21st Century no longer offers the same oppressive living conditions as those days of colonial rule, but the 21st Century has brought new structural pressures and living conditions for which the use of *tak’ taki* could still be very effective.
Florence – school/breakdown

A relative of Florence’s ex has offered to take Florence’s son with her on vacation to the Netherlands during the school vacation. Once there, he will be able to spend time with his father whom he hasn’t seen since he was a year old.

This is the first separation for both of them and even though both are looking forward to it, I can tell they are anxious too. I share with her stories about my experience with my children visiting their relatives in the Netherlands for months at a time over the years. It is a very common practice, yet always accompanied with mixed emotions. Florence confides in me that she hopes his father will keep him, because it is not easy raising him by herself. As a woman, he only listens so much to her. He needs a strong father figure, she’s convinced. Eventually the day comes and Florence’s son leaves for the Netherlands.

I ask daily if she has heard anything, most of the time she does not. The few times she does hear from her son, she is notably relieved. She is happy he is enjoying himself, but she misses him. She no longer talks about wanting him to stay away. She looks forward to him coming back.

Then one day it happens. I hear a knock at my gate and I find Florence with a panic stricken look on her face. “What’s wrong?”, I ask. She has received a phone call from her son’s father. The relative who took her son to the Netherlands has decided to stay and thus there is some difficulty as to how her son will return. One option is to pay for flight attendant accompaniment, but her ex finds the cost too expensive. They have thus decided for her son to return with an acquaintance three weeks later.
The fact that they did not consult with her in coming to this decision is the smallest problem of this scenario. The fact that Florence’s son is written off from the school register because he is now returning too late, is by far the biggest. I tell her we will work something out as I grab my car keys and shoes.

We drive around in the neighborhood and visit three different elementary schools. Neither one of these schools is within walking distance, which would mean that he would have to take a private bus if he were accepted, but we will cross that bridge when we get to that point, we need to get him enrolled first. As we are driving she tells me how, while being informed of his dismissal, the principal felt the need to remind her that “…after all, he had broken a toilet at the school when he was 5…” It did not have anything to do with the current situation. The ridiculousness of the conversation made my anger rise. She on the other hand seemed even smaller and quieter than she normally was. She looked so sad and so alone.

Three schools we visit. Each time we get the same response, “Sorry no room.” That leaves us only one thing to do; to go back to his original school and get him re-enrolled. I again assure her things will be okay, even if I’m not one hundred percent sure of it. I know I will have to take the lead.

A few weeks earlier I had visited the school as I escorted Florence’s son to school. He was late and Florence was afraid he would get humiliated or otherwise singled out by the teacher, so she asked me to walk him to school. I met with the principal and his teacher that day and introduced myself as the aunt from the Netherlands. In my kindest, yet strongest Dutch accent I explained the unfortunate circumstances of his tardiness. The response was nothing but pleasantries.
I was ready for them again. If they would dare to mention the broken toilet, however, I would not be so sure about being able to stay pleasant. The toilet never came up, thank goodness. We talked with the principal about how beyond Florence’s control this situation had presented itself. I did most of the talking. The principal described his dilemma at length, and how his actions were according school board policies.

I assured him repeatedly that we totally understood, and that we would like to know in which way we could help to rectify the situation. I sat right in front of him, Florence sat further to the back. We went back and forth like this, a couple of times. Money was mentioned, the fact that school funds would have to be paid for a second time. I assured him I would take care of it. Suddenly I heard this voice from behind me. Florence jumped into the conversation. I got quiet and gave her the floor. We continued to battle him like tag-team wrestlers.

Finally something changed. The principal gave in. He would allow her son back into the school, “…after all, this is a good mother. We know her and will support her. And we will figure out a way to cover the school fees so she will not have to pay them a second time.” Florence is quiet, but obviously relieved. I am relieved too, not sure about how much longer we could have gone on like this. Someone had to give in, I’m glad it was him.

We walk out, drained from the ordeal that has just taken place. I begin talking, just to release some tension. As I look over to my side, I notice tears streaming down Florence’s face. I stop her and ask her if she’s okay. She inhales deeply, and as she exhales the floodgates open. She sobs vehemently as I put my arms around her. And with the tears, so come the words and the deeply pent-up emotions about being tired of
having to raise her son by herself; about her brother and sisters abandoning her with the
care of her sister; of having so many burdens and having to face them alone, about so
much more.

I listened. There it was. I had wondered where she put it all, all the hardships and
insanities. She did not have creative outlets, that I knew of. She was always pleasant,
always smiling, always reserved. Did she let it roll of her back? Did it not face her? I
had wondered these things, but there it was. “I’m sorry. Things will be okay. As long as
I’m here, I will help you best as I can”, I told her. It was the one and only time I saw her
break down.
Chapter 9.

Hebi Sani: Internal Challenges

The last structure to be discussed that significantly influences the mental well-being system, is the concept of *hebi sani*.

From early on during my stay in Suriname, I noticed that in general, Afro-Surinamese tend to reflect very negatively and critically on themselves. It was a trend I had noticed in the Netherlands and which I generally ascribed to association with and acculturation into Dutch culture, thereby causing people to look down on Surinamese culture. I had not expected it here, and I wondered what the reason could be. For sure it could not be due to a constant comparing of oneself to Dutch culture?

Early on in my stay I had one particular experience that confronted me with the negative self-attitude among the Afro-Surinamese. Shortly after I arrived in Suriname, Carifesta VIII was to take place. Carifesta is a week-long Caribbean festival of arts and culture, where delegates from countries throughout the Caribbean region and a few mainland countries come together and participate in a series of artistic and cultural festivities. It is a large and popular event that takes place about every three to four years, and has been in existence since 1972. This year, 2003, it was Suriname’s turn to host. There was excitement in the air as the city was getting ready.

One day, about a week before the festival was to start, I took the bus from downtown to go to NAKS. As I took the small bus at the starting point, it was completely filled with 25 passengers. At the starting point, the bus does not leave until it is filled up. Two people, who were not together, started talking about Carifesta. Before
long, others joined in the conversation. The overall tone of the conversation was rather negative: how Suriname would not do a good job hosting; how Suriname did not have the capacity to pull it off; how Suriname would make a bad impression, and many more such comments. Nobody seemed to disagree about Suriname’s lack of ability to do well. I was taken quite aback by the negative attitude.

After I got off the bus, it hit me that I had been acculturated to American culture, more than I realized. In the United States, no matter what happens, no matter what kinds of mishaps or atrocities take place, Americans always think of themselves as number one first. Especially with these types of events, whether they be arts, culture, or sports oriented, nobody would speak so badly about the US. What really struck me was the matter of fact consensus as people nodded their heads in agreement or added their uh huh’s, as if their country’s inferiority was a given fact.

I shared my experience with my uncle who told me he was not surprised. He said:

You know, people look up to us because of our multi-ethnic society and because we have been able to hold on to our different cultures. But you know, I think all the different languages that we have contributed to us not being unified. When you look at our neighbors in Guyana, they fight like cats and dogs, but when it comes to things like this, they are always unified. I think the fact that they all speak English might have something to do with it. They sacrificed some things by getting rid of people’s traditional languages, but it also worked as a unifier.

So far we have looked at a model of mental well being and the forces that challenge it. The forces we looked at were external (fa a go a go), or personal but in response to structural forces (mek’ muiiti). We have also looked at structures that were supportive of mental well being, but that are no longer being used, or not used to their
full potential (tak’taki). I lastly would like to look at internal forces that challenge mental well being, in particular attitudes, thoughts and feelings that shape behavior.

“We do not trust ourselves. We look down upon ourselves. We tear each other down.” These are some of the comments I would hear more often than not during my stay in Suriname. There are those things that we carry with us, emotional baggage, spiritual baggage, psychological baggage. There are those things we hold on to that affect how we view and deal with life. If given enough time, these things can become part of our personality and difficult to shed. In Suriname, the term hebi literally translates into “heavy” or “burden”. It can refer to a physical weight, but also to an emotional burden. I thus will look at the hebi sani, the heavy things or burdens we carry and that affect us as Afro-Surinamese people. I label this category as hebi sani as opposed to hebi, to connote a more categorical identification.

Through the words of my informants I will present three types of hebi sani. They are respectively In-group, Traditional, and Out-group.

In-group

The in-group hebi sani reflect the views that relate to how the Afro-Surinamese view themselves. The views are varied, but all stem from conscious awareness and contemplation. Some views include:

The biggest hebi those Afro-Surinamese have are the Afro-Surinamese themselves. Something you would praise another people for, you would look down on your own people for. …The hebi is the way we deal with each other. One other hebi is the fact that we allow ourselves to get misguided easily. Look at crime. If somebody makes a bad suggestion, before they finish talking, [Afro-Surinamese] people will be ready to join in. I think what is critical here is that Afro-Surinamese think they are the
strongest and can go up against anybody. That breeds a sense of recklessness. (41 year old man.)

The way we accept each other leaves much to be desired. We do not love each other, we pretend. We are often very jealous of each other. If two friends associate with each other and one moves ahead, it’s trouble. He will not receive any support from his friend any longer. One will go this way, and the other will go the other way. That’s how problems get bigger. They start visiting a bonuman, medicine man, and stuff like that. They are not the kinds of people who talk things out. They are quick to harbor animosity toward each other. 41 year old man

It never fails, whenever you have to deal with an Afro-Surinamese person in these type of [government] positions, it is always a headache. One of the others [ethnic groups] wouldn’t do you like that, but with our people there is always something. (50+ year old woman.)

In comparison to our Dutch relatives who are constantly being confronted with Dutch “otherness”, the Afro-Surinamese can focus just on themselves. They do not always like what they see. I would often hear expressions about the lack of trust in one’s own people. The attitude goes beyond feelings however, and affects how people treat each other.

Traditional

Traditional hebi sani encompass those hebi sani that are perceived to be originated outside of conscious awareness, in the spiritual or ancestral realm, or that are related to traditional cultural practices.

Hebi are things we get from our ancestors. Everybody is born with their own ‘I’, we call it yeye. That’s the first thing you get from God, and nobody can take that away from you. You are raised with it. Two things will then happen. When your mother is pregnant, you will get one from mother’s side and one from father’s side, that is the yeye who will raise you. Your own ‘I’ will give permission to those two yeye to raise you. During the birth, those two will stand guard for you, because everyone [spiritual & ancestral forces?] wants to come in. They will have to ask for
permission from those two [yeye], and those two then will ask for permission from the ‘I’, because your yeye will have to give you permission to progress. Randall

Group discussion
M2.: I have been able to visit a few countries, where there are also people of my skin color, and there is not much difference. Then I feel ashamed. It makes me wonder, do we really have a problem? When I look at some of these colonial countries here in the Caribbean, it makes me think we have a problem, but what is it? The problem is we cannot really come together. We cannot come together to really create something together. It is terrible. W2: I have been thinking, maybe the Creole has a kondre fio-fio, country spiritual disease [laughter all around], because this cannot be. W1: But you must have diversity. It is typical for a Negro that we are this way [divided], and the Hindustani another way [united]. W2: I think I am going to stand in the middle of Suriname, than I will break of some fio-fio wiri, fio-fio herbs and do a ritual. [more laughter] M2: But than you have to do it in French Guyana too. W2: Well, than I will do it there too. We have to do something about it! [still hearty laughter]. No, but look at it this way. I live with […]. He and I argue, we argue all day, then all of a sudden we go to bed we make peace. But you have created something. Than you wonder after a while why our life does not go well. That is a piece of culture. We have not done anything to cleanse ourselves. The moment you do a ritual cleansing, then there will be some relief, because the hebi will be lifted. Because if you keep creating hebi, they will build in your body and will wear you down. M2: But that is true, because you have the same thing in the Word. In one of the parables He says: Your mouth will set you free or punish you. W2.: Here people say mofo e tai yu, mofo e lus’ yu.

I do not know, son yuru wi las’ un’ ede, sometimes we just lose our minds. Often when we are around those light skinned, those high yellow ones, than we forget where we came from. Then you should see how we act toward each other. But when it is just us, there is no problem, everybody knows themselves and acts like themselves. But as soon as a yellow one shows up, we act like ‘who me? Oh no.’ It makes me wonder sometimes, what are we doing? And then you notice the separation, how we grow apart. That one supposedly has not been raised with it [cultural traditions]. But you see them coming in at the back door, while we just walk in through the front. Punishment for contempt and denunciation [of cultural traditions] will come later. So what are we doing? Because than you think, hmm she is somewhat stuck up. Those are the hebi we have. (50+ year old woman)
The *hebi sani* generated in the spiritual or ancestral realm are not necessarily negative. They can be gifts, as in talents, or protective, as Randall’s comment demonstrated. They can also be conceived of as gifts to the extent that they provide lessons. The acquisition of these kinds of *hebi* can be beyond one’s control, such as through birth. It is also possible to purposely acquire them. People in fact do not seek out to acquire *hebi*, but they seek out to obtain personal gain through negative means, which inevitably invites *hebi*. Randall explains:

> Somebody sells [cultural] things at the market and you go and buy something from that person. But you do not see what they give you. Because the man can say it is something good and you take it. You work with it and make money with it, but you never saw exactly what he gave you. So you work for years and know what to do so things go well, but the problem comes when [this person] the mother who bought the thing is no longer alive. She never told her children, ‘listen I sold things on the market, but with additional [supernatural] forces.’ So what happens after a couple of years is that her offspring will start to get problems. Then they go to investigate and then they find out that ‘your mother used to work with negative forces’. Then it’s a problem because they will have to do a lot of [ritual] work to calm things down.

I have asked people on several occasions why they think people would engage in seeking out negative spiritual forces if they know there will be some type of negative repercussion in the long run. The answer repeatedly emphasized that the key lay in the concept ‘in the long run.’ I was told that people who seek out these services are dealing with short term objectives. The fact that in 5, 10 or 30 years from now one might suffer a negative consequence is not enough of a deterrent to refrain from engaging in negative practices. With any luck it will not happen at all, a spiritual cure or protection might be found, or one will deal with it when the time comes. The reasoning behind these negative
practices seem very similar to the *mek’ muiti* strategies. *Hebi sani* from the ancestral and spiritual realm are usually passed on through generations.

The *hebi sani* associated with the involvement or lack of involvement with traditional culture, provides insight into the amount of shame and stigma that are still associated with traditional cultural practices.

*Out-group*

Out-group *hebi sani* involve a reflection of the Afro-Surinamese views of themselves, but in relation to and at times in comparison with others.

Often when we are around those light skinned, those high yellow ones, than we forget where we came from. Then you should see how we act toward each other. But when it is just us, there is no problem, everybody knows themselves and acts like themselves. But as soon as a yellow one shows up, we act like ‘who me? Oh no.’ It makes me wonder sometimes, what are we doing? And then you notice the separation, how we grow apart…The moment another one enters who looks a little bit different, but her hair is as kinky as mine [denoting same ancestry, but probably mixed with European ancestry], than they start. ‘Oh no, my grandmother, my whatever did not raise me like that’ [with cultural traditions]. And there you have it, immediately they renounce their heritage. That is the problem we as Creoles have, *unu dungru skin wan*, us darker skinned ones. (50+ year old woman)

Group discussion:

M2: If you talk about the Hindustani, if you look at the degree of organization, than I will agree with you that in that aspect they are better organized. For years they have been able to reflect themselves in one leader. That was […], who is now gone. Just like she says, the Hindustani has been able to practice his culture beautifully. So where that is concerned they have an advantage on us. And the fact that their religion is joined with their culture has so much influence on their well being, because they are still divided in castes. We enjoy being split up. W1: You see some [Afro-Surinamese] people who go from neighborhood to neighborhood and they always end up in neighborly strive. Sometimes you have to take a hard look at yourself and say, what am I doing wrong? M1: That is my problem, because it is my goal to form one nation, so the Hindustani is also a leader to me. When I am in Africa I know who I look
But here in Suriname I have a problem because I have to deal with different [ethnic] population groups. That’s why I refuse to speak in terms of *blaka man*, *kuli*, *jampanesi*, colloquial forms for Afro-Surinamese, Hindustani, and Javanese. Instead I talk about ‘the Surinamese.’ But still I must not forget that I have a different color and a different culture. But I cannot reflect myself to somebody who says, ‘hey that’s it, and I can get something there.’ Who is going to help me to build this nation? We do not have that. We are terribly divided. We are divided in thought, I think in everything, on all human levels. Really, it is very difficult. W2: Something needs to be done about it. Or we will stay back. One time I asked a Hindustani, how do you all come to be so unified? He said ‘You think we are, because you do not understand our language. You have no idea how much strive there is among Hindustani.’

Afro-Surinamese people do not live in isolation. The cultural distinctiveness between the different ethnic groups sometimes aggravates an already low opinion of one’s own group. As stated earlier, the Hindustani are always a source of comparison. Lack of a clear understanding of other groups’ historical experiences misinforms the reasons why differences are present. As the one example about stigma and cultural traditions demonstrates, who belongs to the in-group and out-group is not always as straightforward as Hindustani, Javanese, or other. Apparently, within group distinctions are also made based on skin color, class, or other.

*Causes*

The belief in *hebi sani* is common among the Afro-Surinamese. People identify different forms of *hebi sani*, and consequently hold various views on their causes.

The distrust [within the group] has been there since the beginning. Forget the relations with the other groups for a minute. We came with our personal *hebi* from Africa. Look today there are still all kinds of *hebi* in Africa. Look at how parts are busy just murdering each other. I am not talking about a little yelling back and forth. But the way they are inflicting all those atrocities, that speaks for itself, does it not? And that is
why the youth grow up with those kinds of feelings. (40 something year old man)

I think it started from the time when we came here, were brought here and originated from different regions. All those differences were brought together. Because even in Africa there were the differences between the people and they did not trust each other. You also had this created situation of slave trade and conditions. Different creeds were brought together and united as one nation. I think nature manifested itself in that situation and it has developed into this distrust. The betrayal by the Maroons for instance, to this day that lives. I think the different mentalities make that we pull on each other… [Gives an elaborate example of how the different Afro-Surinamese organizations cannot work together because they do not trust each other.] That’s one of the hebi that we have. (59 year old storyteller)

I think it is typical for us [Afro-Surinamese]. When you look at black people in England. The English had an empire. They still are very much a class based society. In England you know where you stand in terms of class, there are no doubts. But the Dutch were different. They disappeared after colonialism and acted as if nothing happened. Even in the Netherlands they do not talk about their slave history. It is as if it never existed. So you have no clear enemy, and without that enemy you turn on yourself, you turn inward. In England it is really clear who you are up against. (31 year old woman)

Afro-Brazilians have a very different mentality than Afro-Surinamese. They live in poverty too, but they do not have relatives in Europe they can rely on. Afro-Surinamese are used to a handout, since way back when. It creates a certain attitude. (32 year old woman)

These expressions attest to an attitude and a level of frustration with one’s own group. My Hindustani, Javanese and Native American colleagues at the Department of Cultural Studies assured me that negative self reflections and divisions are abound within their own respective population groups as well. This makes me wonder, whether the negative self view is perhaps a ‘Surinamese problem’, rather than an ‘Afro-Surinamese problem’, and if such, whether this attitude might be representative of a colonial legacy?

Secondly, the level of frustration people express, generally lacks an understanding of structural forces and conditions that have contributed and continue to contribute to
some of the behaviors people might see. The link made to slavery dynamics, or the comparison between the British and Dutch colonial systems, provide some structural insights, but in general people do not think in structural terms. When people do refer to slavery, as they tend to do at times, they still do it in an essentializing manner. ‘It is because of slavery that we are the way we are’, so to speak. But there is no further thought as to what specific conditions or dynamics from the slavery era contributed and contribute to the way people behave today. To others slavery is a distant past, which no longer holds relevance. More recent developments, as the comparison between Afro-Brazilians and Afro-Surinamese indicated, may be more prevalent. More than likely, a combination of a number of factors contributes to the *hebi sani* the Afro-Surinamese carry.

The lack of the acknowledgement of structural contributions to who Afro-Surinamese are as a people, can exacerbate a negative sense of self and one’s group. Structures can be addressed, challenged, and altered. A bad self is a bad self. Hence mental well being can be negatively affected. In thinking about solutions, I am drawn to the woman who proposed a cleansing ritual for the whole nation. Even though received as comic relief, there might be some truth to her reasoning. There are *tak’ taki* ceremonies to honor and commemorate the ancestors. Perhaps it would be helpful to utilize *tak’ taki* to forgive the ancestors for the ways they have failed their offspring, and for the *hebi sani* they have passed on. In this *yeye* framework of interconnectedness, forgiveness of ancestors would imply extending forgiveness to the self/ves, and perhaps bring some relief from the *hebi sani* people carry.
Chapter 10.

A Kaba: Conclusion

10.1 Tori Sabi: Understanding the Story

10.1A Summary

In this research I set out to investigate mental well being among the working class Afro-Surinamese people in Paramaribo, Suriname. I investigated how the Afro-Surinamese population define mental well being; what challenges mental well being, and what maintains mental well being.

I found a system of mental well being that consists of a number of interlocking and interdependent factors, which, when kept in a harmonious relationship with each other, are presumed to bring mental well being.

At the core of the model is the self. The self contains an inner core and is shaped and guided by nature forces and ancestral forces. The self further stands in relation to the extension of nature forces, the natural elements, and in relation to other people. The most salient relationships with other people are represented in family relations, organizations, and relations with other ethnic groups. Relations with family members are especially of importance as they provide a genetic, spiritual, and psychological foundation for being in the world. Interaction, confrontations, and comparisons with others continuously reflect back onto the self and into mental well being.

There are several forces that work against mental well being, and there are some that work in support of it. *Fa a go a go* is an attitude of acceptance and tolerance of things that take place, but in actuality prove to be damaging to mental well being. *Mek’*
much multi behaviors are reflective of high risk choices people make in response to the intersectionality of structural violence, stress, and spaces of silence, that also have a negative impact on mental well being.

Whereas fa a go a go and mek’ multi are either outside forces or behaviors in response to outside forces, there are inner forces that challenge mental well being as well. Hebi sani are emotional, psychological, and or spiritual gifts or burdens that people carry with them and hold on to. These hebi are acquired through normal relations with people; through nature violations; through engaging purposely in negative affairs; and unconsciously through negative actions of relatives and ancestors. Hebi sani can also take the form of psychological or spiritual characteristics, which are passed on from one generation to the next.

Structures that support mental well being are embedded in the Word. On the most elementary level, the Word consists of people’s connection to each other and the Universe through our molecular vibrations. In the concrete world, the Word is accessed through engaging in language. Yu e mus’ taki, you must talk is the common expression encountered in Suriname, to remind one of the need to stay connected. One gains access to the transformative power of language in Afro-Surinamese culture through what I term as tak’ taki, ritualized and artistic language structures that are part of every day life. Proverbs, prayers, storytelling, fashion, knowing what to say and sing at specific occasions, and so on, all make up tak’ taki. Some of these tak’ taki can be traced back directly to Africa and have been present in Afro-Surinamese culture in one form or other since the days of slavery. A lot of tak’ taki methods are not being used to their potential
or are not being used at all, due to a lack of passing on this information, and competition with a 21st Century lifestyle.

10.1B Theoretical Implications

From the onset of this research, it was clear to me that the concept of mental well-being for Afro-Surinamese working class people did not resemble a Western bio-medical model of mental health. This finding was similar to my findings in my thesis on African Americans in the East End of Lexington, Kentucky (Baruti 2001). Similar to their African American counterparts, Afro-Surinamese included connections to people and community as a significant aspect of their mental well-being, in particular relationships with family members and the religious community. Although in the African American literature there is ample research on non-religious social organizational membership, I did not find this information integrated with or connected to mental well-being information. This is a stark contrast to my Afro-Surinamese findings where social organization membership is a very obvious and salient part of mental well-being. I believe this difference might be due to the fact that the Afro-Surinamese population is just a far smaller and more concentrated population, and thus membership in social organizations is more noticeable and visible. Further research would be needed to confirm this theory.

well being literature, where similar models are identified (Odejide et. al. 1989, Waxler 1977). My findings acknowledge the significance of forces unseen, either through nature forces/spiritual forces or ancestral relations, as an essential part of mental well being. I see this strong reference to spirituality as connecting more to the African rather than the African American mental well being literature, where spirituality is acknowledged but remains mostly theoretical and descriptive (Nobles 1986, Akbar 1984). Nobles (1986, 2006) for instance, does present a detailed spiritual model of the self, according to ancient Egyptian spirituality, but his emphasis is on the description of the model, rather than placing spirituality in a functional context.

In looking at both the African and African American mental well being literature, there is one finding that stands out to me more now than before. My Afro-Surinamese experience alerted me to the fact that there is an important difference and relationship between rural and urban mental well being. Those that migrated to the city remember a different way of being and dealing with mental well being, while living in the rural districts. This recognition of difference affects their state of mental well being as they continuously keep comparing their current situation to that of the past. African literature identifies transitional institutional structures for coping with mental well being for those who have migrated from the village to the city (Jahoda 1979, Twumasi 1979, Mullings 1984).

We find examples in both health oriented (Jahoda 1979) and religion oriented (Twumasi 1979, Mullings 1984) institutions. The spiritualist or charismatic churches in particular have played a transitional role, as they are able to accommodate traditional beliefs and practices without denouncing them (Jap-A-Joe 2005). Binitie (1991) goes as
far as stating that people utilize new, Western methods in the city for their mental and
spiritual well being, but in times of crisis return to their village ways. Hence, ways of the
past continue to be a resource for the present, even if contemporary methods appear
markedly different. Interestingly, the few times that a spiritual model of mental well
being is mentioned in the African American mental health literature is in the discussion
of rural and/or marginalized people (Snow 1983, Dein 2003, Morrison and Thornton
that spiritual beliefs that influence mental health in the Southern United States are
particularly influenced by voodoo, slave religion, and evangelical Protestantism. This
limited literature further stresses, that spiritual beliefs are a far more common significant
aspect of mental well being for black Americans, than acknowledged, and that clinicians
should start paying more attention to these issues (Wilson 1982, Wintrob 1973, Snow

There is one particular way in which Afro-Surinamese mental well being sets
itself apart from both the African and African American models. There is a level of
comfort with self as a cultural group that escapes the others. Whereas mental well being
in both African and African American literature is presented usually in some comparative
format to European concepts or presence, the Afro-Surinamese model is less antagonistic
in doing so. Instead, it fully acknowledges that the foundation of the model is rooted in
traditional (West) African and slavery traditions. Even those who have converted to
Christianity and who denounce participation in winti practices, acknowledge basic
principles such as opo yu yeye, raising your spirit, or saka yu yeye, lowering your spirit,
without stigma.
Even though the Dutch are an invisible presence that influence ideology, standard of living, and so on, in general comparative acknowledgement of the “other” is less experienced and expressed in terms of power differentials, such as the emphasis on racism and cultural incompetence in African American literature (Cooper 1993, Flakerud et al. 1992, Bell and Mehta 1981, Cheung and Snowden 1990), and models involving the “colonizer” as seen in African literature (Asuni 1991, Ademuwagon et al. 1979, Tsey 1997, Mustafa 1991, Binitie 1991). For the Afro-Surinamese, comparisons between ethnic groups are either positive or negative and a continuous source of reference, yet are usually not based in power differentials. Instead, they are representative of a concept of self that is always interconnected with and stands in relation to others. Relating and comparing to others seems to be a normal part of an extended sense of self. I think that this comparative element of the self is a true reflection of the specificity of the Caribbean. Caribbean scholars like Mintz (1996) agree that the matter of factness with which other ethnic groups are always included when one reflects on the self is representative of a Caribbean way of being.

Given that the data on Caribbean mental well being is mostly limited to statistical reports on the prevalence of mental illness, there is very little need for comparison with this literature. Surinamese mental well being data is also limited either to statistics, descriptions of its short comings, or European migrant deviant behavior. For both Caribbean and Surinamese mental well being literature then, lies the opportunity to receive the greatest contribution. I chose Florence as the representation of a typical Surinamese and Caribbean woman, who struggles with issues many people in this region face. Florence’s obligation to her sister exemplifies how people’s lives are affected.
stifled, and sometimes sacrificed when few resources are available for appropriate
treatment. Florence’s story shows how the lack of resources impact families and the
mental health care system itself. In addition, it shows how much stigma still surrounds
mental illness and the ramifications it brings for treatment. Public awareness and
education, apparently also have suffered from a lack of resources, which causes people to
suffer out of the sight of the public.

The information found in this work is not all negative, however. Hopefully this
work makes a contribution through highlighting a model of mental well being that is rich
in complexity rather than in mere deviance. There are unique Afro-Surinamese measures
available for strengthening mental well being, entitled tak’taki, that are based in rich and
historical cultural traditions. They are currently under-utilized, but have the potential to
be revived and introduced for the benefit of people’s mental well being. Comparative
research needs to be done with other populations with a similar history of colonization
and cultural suppression and oppression, whose traditions have survived and have
developed into new adaptive practices for mental and spiritual survival and well being. I
am aware, for instance that among several Native American populations, the Hawaiians,
and Maori, mental well being services are being offered that include or are based on
cultural traditions. A comparative exploration of mental well being practices might
definitely be a worthwhile effort.

My findings have most obviously resonated with globalization to the extent that
the conditions under which people live in Suriname, have been largely created by
globalizing forces. Governmental challenges, privatization, and a booming international
drug infrastructure have contributed to a disproportionate number of people living in,
near or below poverty, and a small group becoming very rich. Caribbean economic survival strategies have been discussed and explored in the literature (Bolles 1996, Wardle 2002, Safa 1995) but generally not from a mental well being perspective. The economic constraints bring obvious psychological stresses. In addition to stress, however, Suriname is plagued by other negative aspects of globalization, not unlike other poorer nations, including high migration, drug and alcohol abuse, a rise in poverty and inequality, a rise in HIV/AIDS, and so on (New Vision March 29, 2001, PANA April 6, 2001, Brundtland 2002, Navarro 1999; 2003, Trager 1999). This research has shown that the intersectionality of these issues significantly impact mental well being. As throughout the rest of Latin America and Africa, even though the need is present, limited resources are allocated to address mental well being by the government (Gureje 2000, WHO 2000; 2001, Mesa-Lago 1992).

In my findings, the globalizing conditions contributed to various means of coping. *Fa a go a go*, exemplifies a “C’est la vie” attitude about things such as ineffective and corrupt governmental practices, a high crime rate, Dutch-Surinamese tensions, or economic constraints. Closer investigation shows, however, that although people consign themselves to these situations, often frustrations remain and destabilize mental well being. Similarly, life conditions can be so harsh that people opt to take drastic measures to change their lives, often with great risk to themselves, their families, or communities. These drastic, high risk measures are referred to as *mek’ muiti*.

The concept of *mek’ muiti* also provides insight into another aspect of globalization. Globalization is not only a way into difficult times, it might also be a way out. Hence, we see the use of the Internet to seek out potential international suitors,
prostitution with international tourists, or people serving as drug mules. The biggest
globalized resources, however, are by far the family members who live in the
Netherlands. For many Afro-Surinamese in Suriname, the family members across the
Atlantic Ocean have kept and continue to keep them financially afloat during hard times.
Visa versa, a connection to place and family in Suriname has contributed to the mental
well being of the Dutch Afro-Surinamese, who struggle in the Netherlands on their own
terms.

Globalization forced me to make adjustments to my concepts of the field and
target population, while in the field. This resonates with Gupta and Ferguson’s (1992,
1997) work, which explores various new ways of engaging fieldwork because of
globalization. The borders of my target population were not as solid as I expected.
Assuming that working class Afro-Surinamese in Paramaribo were the only ones who
could contribute to a working class Afro-Surinamese model of mental well being, was an
oversight on my part. I quickly recognized that I had to expand my vision and include
the relatives across the Atlantic Ocean in the Netherlands. I thus included interviews
with Afro-Surinamese in the Netherlands to my data.

As inspired by Lewellen (2002), I chose to consider globalization as a context of
living conditions; studied from below rather than above, and stressed the personal
experience as exemplified in Florence’s vignettes. In these vignettes, I show how
globalization affects her life directly, ranging from her ex-boyfriend who left for the
Netherlands smuggling drugs, to her seeking a way out of her life through Internet
relations. Globalization also directly affected my relationship with her as my foreign
education and Dutch accent allowed me to negotiate certain things for her.
From Giddens (2000) I borrowed the concepts of time-space distanciation, tradition, and family. I closely paid attention to how time and space affected family relations. The pursuit of international correspondents for instance, caused Florence’s sister to introduce a fiancé to her family and marry him within the same week. The family had no input into her sister’s decision. These kinds of practices are counter to family traditions, they weaken family bonds, security, and hence mental well being which is based in family connections.

Traditional practices are an important part of identity formation and family cohesion. Family traditions also change to accommodate families that now span the globe. Winti prei ceremonies for instance, are in high demand from June through August when the Afro-Surinamese relatives in the Netherlands have their summer vacation. A whole industry has developed during these months when people, who no longer own family grounds, now rent space, video documentary specialists, and so on.

This research also highlights a culture clash between tradition and the contemporary world. This is demonstrated in the rift between winti practice and Christianity. This is also exemplified in the clash between a traditional, colonized way of being – which included being silent about numerous issues, as opposed to a need to be able to address the compounding stressful issues of living in the globalized 21st Century.

In line with the more current African Diaspora literature, this work highlights the lives of a population of African descent, while paying attention to the forces that condition their lives (Marable 2002). It highlights the uniqueness of the Afro-Surinamese experience and an Afro-Surinamese model of mental well being. Contemporary African Diaspora literature stresses flexibility of identity and the need to think internationally and
globally (Patterson and Kelly 2000). Although in particular Gilroy (1993) and Hall (1990) stress the hybridity of identity, I have gone through great length explaining how the Afro-Surinamese see themselves, and how this concept of self is based in a particular historical experience and a contemporary experience in which they live in a multi-ethnic society. Afro-Surinamese often refer to themselves in an essentialized manner, yet in practice they always negotiate their identity based on respective situations, conditions people face, and interactions people engage in.

In the past, when African Diaspora theory addressed mental well being it usually focused on the experience of racism from a psychological, experiential perspective (Fanon 1984, Nobles 1986, 2006, Akbar 1984, 1985, 1998, Baldwin 1981, 1986). The psychological approaches to racism proved insufficient for my analysis, as they provide insight into people’s sense of self within a system of inequality, yet are limited to a black and white paradigm. Race theories addressing the Caribbean and South America have been presented (Warren 2001, Wade 1993, Harrison 1995) that point out additional models of looking at racism that go beyond the US black and white binary, and take ethnicity into consideration. When looking at Brazil for instance, Sherrif (2001) highlights how multiple discourses on race exist. The public discourse of race is silenced due to cultural censorship, but additional discourses that shape informal discourse and behavioral codes are abound. Sherrif is part of the newer scholarship (Harrison 1995, Vale de Almeida 2004) that provides alternatives to early scholarship that described Brazil as a racial democracy, where class and color were assumed to be more salient than race. Throughout Latin America and Caribbean a tri-racial, rather than a bi-racial model of race relations exists.
Other theorists have emphasized the need to look at the structural implications of racism (Bonilla – Silva 1996, Shanklin 1999), and how patterns of inequality have been racialized and normalized. Here too, the experience within a racialized system did not provide enough support for analysis, as inequality in Suriname, though institutionalized seems to be comprised by a myriad of structures, and not merely by color. It is difficult to use Brazil or a general tri-racial model for comparative analysis for Suriname, given that Suriname has at least 10 different ethnic groups who live together, and with subgroups taken into account, can be as many as 22 groups. In addition, white, visible representation is minimal, yet more indirect and invisible, which is an interesting dynamic worth exploring on its own. Bonilla-Silva makes a distinction between race and ethnicity, which convinces me that my use of ethnicity, which is born out of historical and contemporary context is the most appropriate tool for analysis. He states:

Races and Racisms (ideologies accompanying racial structurations) are historically linked to the history and consequences of colonial encounters; ethnicity is connected to the history of nation-state formation (1997:902) [emphasis by original author].

This easy distinction does not apply to Suriname, where ethnic stratification practices were prevalent since the colonial era. This complexity is what sets the Caribbean apart from other regions (Trouillot 1992, Mintz 1996, Khan 2001, Robotham 1996, St. Hilaire 2001) and keeps serving as a theoretical stumbling block for anthropologists.

In my research, then, I found racism not to be the most salient factor. Perhaps, my work might be a reflection of what Mullings (2005) highlights as a “new racism” that is shaped by global capitalism, and where qualifiers of nationality and citizenship supersede biology. Structures of inequality are not merely reflected in and expressed through antagonistic relations among populations groups, but are present in the multitude
of obstacles to functioning within the world at large. One of the life conditions that significantly affects mental well being is a “diasporic consciousness” (Levy 2000). Being in touch with a globalized world provides continuous images which influence people’s *mek’ miti* choices. In a globalized world where the emphasis is on consumption and immediate gratification, people can be influenced to take drastic steps in order to belong to those who are living in prosperity. Hence, Florence’s ex-boyfriend was not deterred by being caught smuggling drugs. Once he saw the possibility with few negative repercussions, he soon tried again, hereby drastically affecting the lives of Florence and her son.

Another significant aspect of the model that might have special implications is the concept of *hebi*. *Hebi*, are the psychological and spiritual burdens and gifts that people carry with them. Some of these *hebi* are passed on through ancestral relations. As such, it might be interesting to see if others in the Diaspora with similar roots of African traditions and slavery survival, have similar concepts in mental well being. This might also be an entry point for comparison with other Diaspora’s. “Blackness”, for instance, is an issue that might be considered a *hebi*. Throughout the African Diaspora, even in cultures where race and racism are publicly denied or silenced, the lightening of the skin either through miscegenation or cosmetics, remains linked to improving one’s social status (Harrison 1995, Wade 1993, 1995). Similarly, in numerous societies, those with the darkest skin colors occupy the bottom rung of society, and connect with the political struggle for change associated with black status (Reddy 2005, Eade 1995).

As described earlier, in acknowledging the Afro-Surinamese as a population of African descent, yet with unique qualities, I have discovered a model that is reflective of
their uniqueness, yet understandable to all. I believe this research makes a significant contribution in providing an account of the ‘lived experience’ and can be used in future research for connections with other Diasporas.

Black Feminist Theory has guided this work in providing a specific methodology (Hill Collins 1991, Slocum 2001, Rodriguez 2001). This journey is written with a reflexive voice. I have situated and included myself in this ethnography. I have made a concerted effort to include people’s voices, as being heard is one of the most important contributions we as people of color in the Academy can provide for the once voiceless people. I speak for the Afro-Surinamese people, and their lessons, but hopefully, their voices are heard alongside mine. In using Sranan language, I have tried to validate the voice and the language of the Afro-Surinamese people. I have also made a concerted effort to contribute to a production of knowledge that is based in experience, rather than using an imposed model.

I have chosen Florence’s experiences to exemplify the living experience of mental well being. However, I have tried to provide a balanced view of mental well being, as experienced by both men and women. From Third World and Caribbean Feminist Theories, I have heeded the call to base my writing and lessons learned in the lived experience. Activism might be considered the passion with which I have determined to do right by my people and to provide a clear account that can be helpful to anybody who will read it. On a personal level, I have already included some of the lessons from this experience in the design of a mental well being program, entitled Opo Yeye, that uses an awareness of spirituality, a connection to ancestors, and artistic expression. Spirituality
lastly, is something I hope to address and develop as an anthropological methodological concept as a result of this work.

10.1C  Lessons learned

When I introduced this study, I presented the notion that there is something to be learned for the world at large from this small country on the coast of South America. Taking a close-up look at this particular culture of the working class Afro-Surinamese, would reveal some insights about a marginalized people living under the burden of globalization. And indeed, some lessons have come to light. The first lesson, is that the Afro-Surinamese people should not be regarded as a representative of “those people”, meaning Third World, marginalized, formerly oppressed and colonized people.

Surely, these aspects have influenced and continue to influence the course of Afro-Surinamese life, but these should not be the defining aspects of Afro-Surinamese life. Through using these categories a distance is created between observer, and those living under dire conditions. Our first lesson in understanding the self, is that we are all connected. Through creating a distance between “us” and “them”, responsibility for action and change can easily be projected unto others or otherwise remove it from ourselves. The lesson then is that this ethnography addresses the plight of a population, one of our populations, whose lives are shaped by globalization and a particular history, causing them to live under harsh living conditions. This particular population’s ability to fight off the negative aspects of globalization, such as an inability to get a strong economic foothold or the lingering dependency on the former colonizer, is limited as their political and economic status is highly unstable and has been for many years.
So how do these physical constraints and limitations affect and shape mental well being? I found mental well being to be imbedded in a basic model for being in the world. This model is neither particularly gender or age bound, however is expressed and experienced differently between genders and generations. Given the notions of a multiple self, and a basic connection to all living things, which we find in many spiritual traditions across the globe, I will even dare to proclaim that this model is also not bound to ethnicity, but is expressed and experienced differently because of cultural differences. And thus, in Suriname, a winti prei, winti ceremonial event, might be opened with honoring the nature forces by singing to each of them, whereas the Lakota in North America might acknowledge the four directions as part of their sweat lodge ceremony. How we connect with the natural elements might be different, but the fact that we acknowledge our deference and connection to the universe is the same. And thus another lesson teaches us that mental well being is about being well in the world.

Ultimately, what seems to matter in obtaining mental well being is simply the fact that one matters. Starting with the premise that the self is an entity composed of, and connected to multiple forces, the network of multiple forces within which the self is housed provides continued feedback to strengthen the self. You matter because the Creative Force has ordained for you to be here on Earth. You matter because you belong to spiritual and ancestral forces that surround and traverse you. You matter because you are connected to and are embraced within a family system. You matter because you belong to a place and have a sense of connection with a physical space on earth. You matter because you are connected to all people and the natural elements that surround, traverse, and in effect are you.
It is exactly within these realms that a compromised sense of mental well being is experienced. People experience problems with mental well being when they are unsure about the value of their lives, when they feel disconnected from family, when they have no connection to a place, when they feel isolated and silenced, or when they lack self-confidence and self-knowledge, and so on. This disturbance can be seen from the personal, to the social, to the global level.

Isn’t a great deal of our suffering based on the message that one does not matter? Differential treatment of people based on race, gender, class, political affiliation, religious conviction, sexual orientation, age, ability, and so on, are all based on the premise of a message that ascribes people to a lesser status. People do not matter, or matter less than… is the message on which any form of discrimination, oppression, and or exploitation are based. As a result, we see great suffering in all kinds of forms all over the globe. These connections which affirm our sense and value that “we matter”, are consistently being challenged by certain aspects of contemporary living. We no longer matter because we are, we matter because “we have”, or because “we do”.

But this issue of “mattering less” is not an issue that has been introduced by globalization. Globalization is merely one structure of this day and age that strongly enforces it. As far back as we have been able to record global history, and for as long as there have been people conquering, oppressing, dominating, mistreating, and exploiting other people, this message of “mattering less” has been alive, perpetrated and perpetuated. In doing so, we as global citizens have created *hebi sani* for ourselves. These *hebi sani* stem back for thousands of generations. And thus the *hebi sani* we
struggle with today, are merely the continuation of the lessons still to be learned from our ancestors.

From that perspective then, globalization is not the issue. The governing structure in itself ultimately does not matter. Whether it is imperialism, colonialism, or globalization, our understanding of the oppressive force is not what is at stake, what is at stake is our humanity. These governing structures shape our lives in numerous ways, and provide us with many challenges, but however, they are merely challenges. The question ultimately then is whether we can maintain our humanity in spite of globalization, colonialism, sexism, racism, ageism, or any other oppressive force. Can we treat each other in a way that affirms our connectedness? Can we create living environments that communicate that we matter? In order to obtain mental well being, we have to be well in the world. How will we ensure that we collectively are well in the world?

*Hebi sani* are burdens that we acquire or inherit, but they are not necessarily negative burdens. They are loads we carry, so we can learn from them. It is when we engage our *hebi* that they dissolve and we grow. *Yu e mus’ taki* is not merely a call to use language, ritual or otherwise. *Yu e mus’ taki* is a call to action, a call for engagement and to connect on the most elementary molecular level. *Yu e mus’ taki* involves being alert and recognizing that events ranging from omission from the history books, to domestic violence, to valuing making profit over ending world hunger, to environmental degradation, to being left to fend for oneself in a Hurricane, all perpetrate the message that some people matter less than others. These are our *hebi sani* to address in our lifetime. They are our lessons to learn, and our ancestors’ *hebi* for which we can atone.
In my theoretical layout, I stressed the opportunity and the need to make connections to other Diaspora populations. I am clearer that, indeed, those populations that utilize tak’ taki methods, and that are diligent about keeping those methods alive, can be our teachers. However, it is also clear, that the lessons from Diaspora people apply globally, for in effect even the concept of Diaspora now seems like an anomaly to me.

I sought to find out about the mental well being of the Afro-Surinamese people. I believed I could find lessons and inspiration about how to maintain mental well being in a hostile world. What I have found instead, is the understanding that we all, as global citizens, live in a perpetual state of non-mental well being. In fact, we have been doing so, for as long as we have recorded our history.

My people provided me with a framework for understanding. They also provided me with insights for improvement. Un’e mus’ taki, U’m’ taki, we must talk, act, and become engaged as if our lives and the world’s life were dependent on it. We must not be side tracked by the distractions that are thrown our way. If we focus on connecting with our humanity, all those issues that seem so large and oppressive will dissolve. They must, because love of the human spirit and oppression are mutually exclusive.

I want to thank my people from the bottom of my heart for the lessons they have taught me. Gran’ tangi

I will close with the words of the 59 year old story teller, who happens to be my uncle:

I do not believe in integration, I believe more in brotherhood. You have to experience and live your culture in all of its aspects. It will enlighten you. An enlightened person can understand all people and walk with anybody. As a result we will become more human friendly.
From the beginning of starting to write this dissertation, I knew that I had to have a section on spirituality. I knew that spirituality was an essential part of the mental well-being model. I also knew that spirituality guides our work process; it affects how we do things. Spirituality is never discussed in class, however, not as a part of methodology. It is discussed as a research topic, but is never mentioned as something we as anthropologists experience or use ourselves in the work that we do.

I decided thus, early on, that I would add a section on spirituality, but I would place it at the end, as a reflection. After all the work is done, I would reflect on the spiritual aspect of the work, and would list some suggestions. I felt it necessary to do so, because it is a concept that is silenced, yet used by everybody on some personal level. I present this exploration of spirituality as a concept to be considered as an important complement to the standard methods of ethnographic research, not as a replacement.

I initially approached spirituality as an educator and as a mental health therapist. “If this is what we use, and what works for us, let’s use it. Let’s look at how it works for us, and how it can even better work for us if we truly understand it. Once we understand it, we can help our students use their respective forms of spirituality in their work. Spirituality is an undiscovered and untapped resource in our striving to be good anthropologists.” This was my reasoning behind wanting to write about spirituality.

I made an outline with issues that I felt addressed spirituality as part of anthropological work. I tested my outline at a conference for Women in the Arts, where I talked about my dance work and the role of spirituality in my work. The presentation
was well received. I saw that people were very interested, and yet a little uncomfortable. I had expected that, yet was satisfied. I was on the right track.

In preparation for this piece I have pulled out that outline, and I have been staring at it for days. The words have been staring back at me, empty. Nothing has come to me, cannot think of anything to say or write. So, as many times before, my supervisor came to me with the right words. “If you are serious about this spirituality, than you need to read on it, and place yourself within the literature,” she told me. “Your spirituality is all throughout this work”, she reminded me. She caught me off guard. Was it that obvious?

So, I started to read. I found very few pieces of literature that addressed what I was looking for, but I found some. And then I found the one piece, that rare piece that rocks you to the core. Islamic Shahjahan, who was born to Bengali parents in the United Kingdom, was raised in Kuwait, and was completing his dissertation in Canada held up a mirror to me and revealed all my thoughts and ideas about spirituality in the academy. It was as if he had recorded my every thought. He presented them back to me on paper, more eloquently, than I ever could. He took it one step further, however. He thoroughly mapped out the dynamics and the contradictions between a true pursuit of spirituality and interacting with spirituality within the academy. Using a spirituality framework within the academy brings great risks of exclusion, marginalization, or even expulsion.

As such, he opened my eyes to what I had been trying to do. I had been trying to address spirituality from an intellectual framework. I had been trying to play it safe. I had been trying to suppress my own spirituality, while addressing a general sense of spirituality, but the words would not cooperate. Spirit would not let me perpetrate a fraud.
Shahjahan explains that in order to bring about a spiritual way of knowing, one has to have a certain level of awareness of one’s own spirituality. He states:

As academics we need to be aware that spirituality is not a part-time thing but rather it is something that penetrates who we are. To have a spiritual way of knowing, we need to constantly work on ourselves to maintain our life in the spirit, during the process of knowledge production. But I raise this point to highlight the point that our spiritual worldview should permeate everything we do, which it does, but we forget and need to reclaim and remember that (2005: 698).

As others had pointed out, spirituality in academic work involves purpose, mission and commitment (Dillard et al. 2000, González 2003). These were not an issue for me. But as Shahjahan clarified for me, my bravery, or rather the lack thereof, was. And thus before I can write about my model of spirituality, I have to reflect on my own spirituality first. This seems as a simple, yet frightening task, as it fully exposes my Alienness, and leaves me vulnerable in the academy. However, as Shahjahan explains, true spirituality starts by letting go of the ego, and is about connecting to the truth within.

In reflecting upon my own spirituality, and thinking about my own rituals during this journey, I think about the conversations I have on a daily basis with the Creative Force and those in the spiritual and ancestral realm. I think about their consistent message of more rest, more water, and turning off the t.v. As simple as the messages are, when I comply (and I do not always do) I am always rewarded with more energy and more clarity in my writing.

I feel how from the ancestral realm, my maternal great grandmother is clearing a path for me, while my paternal great aunt, another dya-dya uma, nudges me in the back. All the while my father keeps addressing my biggest fear, of not being able to provide for my children, reassuring me that they will be taken care of.
I realize that the one time when I am most open to Spirit, and when I have no doubts, no insecurities or any fears, is when I dance. Dancing has been my saving grace throughout this process in Suriname and in the United States in so many ways. Dancing has helped me get back to myself, while sharing with others. Dancing has helped me maintain my sanity, and has provided financial survival on many occasions. Throughout this process I have and continue to make time to dance.

Love and support come from family and friends, arriving always at the right time, often from all the way across the ocean. Looking back, I see how the hardships I endured in Suriname, provided me with first hand experience and appreciation of the struggle of survival for the working class Surinamese. At the same time, I learned to appreciate the gifts I had received in place of the things I had missed out on for not having been born and raised in Suriname. My level of education made all the difference between struggling and being destitute. No matter how bad things got, my education was my safety net. No matter how limited the finances, my children still attended some of the best private schools in the country.

I met all the right people at the right time. I received all the information I needed to receive to write this work. I was provided with the right supervisor to guide me through the writing process. As I reflect I am struck by gratitude, awe, and amazement about the possibilities when you open yourself to spirit.

In reflecting on my own experience then, I can now share some insights about how spirituality guides our work.
Part of something larger

First is the acknowledgement that our work is part of something larger. As dedicated and absorbed as we are in our work, it is easy to regard it as the “end all” of knowledge production, but our work and the potential contribution of it, is part of something larger. That means that your control is limited, and that the concept of control is in fact an illusion we use to build our self-confidence in the field. We should create our projects with the best intentions, preparation, and skill. We can have some foresight as to how the project might be beneficial to the community, academic, social, or otherwise, but in fact we have little knowledge as to how and when our work will be put to its best use. Who knows, one hundred years from now somebody might take our work of the shelves and use it for some great things. The impact of my work for instance, might not be in the academy, but might be in the single woman, who by watching me struggle with three children to do this work, might decide to return to school.

What this forces us to do is to work from a sense of humility, understanding that forces work through and with us, not just because of us. It forces us to park our egos by the door.

Tuning in and out

We have to use our senses to turn inward and to scan from time to time where we are. We also have to learn how to tune outward, to connect with those invisible forces outside of us that are at any time at our disposal for assistance. So we start by checking our heart. Do we come to our work with an honest heart? Do we come with the right intentions? Do we respect our subjects of interest? We are not always treated with
respect in the course of our work. Do we harbor the resentment and hold on to those negative feelings and let them become hebi, or do we look at them, acknowledge them for what they are, and let them go? Just because we think and know we are doing great work, does not mean others around us think so. And so the best confirmation and affirmation of ourselves might have to come from within. Listening to your heart and keeping it “clean” requires letting go of one’s ego, yet again.

It also requires attention to language. We have to be mindful of how we speak, out loud as well as internally. There is power in words. Once spoken, they cannot be retracted. Once spoken, they breathe life into intention. Spiritual icon Iyanla Vanzant says that every word spoken is a prayer, and that every prayer is answered with a “yes”. And thus, thoughts like “I can never do this”, “This will never work”, “There is no way people will talk to me”, and the likes, will all be answered by the spiritual realm with an affirmative “yes”. Using your words conscientiously and thoughtfully; holding true to one’s word, all these things contribute to the course that you help lay out before you as you try to walk this research journey.

Likewise, words can be a source of strength and inspiration. Whatever favorite biblical passages, proverbs, quotes, jokes, or songs, inspire you, carry them with you in the field, post them somewhere when you can see them as you come home and start to write, or read them before you go to sleep. My godmother who is Choctaw and African American, taught me to sing spirituals and freedom songs whenever I get to point where I start to doubt myself. She also taught me several Native American chants to help me clear my head, when my mind starts racing, or when I get too overwhelmed.
Furthermore, we have to learn how to ask. We have been raised in the academy to be independent, competent thinkers and knowledge producers. The truth is, you know very little about very little. You have a lot of specific knowledge, but it is minimal in comparison to the amount of information that is out there in the universe. Asking is not always rewarded in the academy. It is encouraged, yet can be punished with unspoken judgment. Do not be afraid to ask, and be specific in your questions. Ask people, or the spiritual realm. You always get an answer, not always in the way you expect and when you think you want it, but an answer will come.

This leads to listening. We have to learn how to listen. “I just had a hunch”, “My gut tells me”, “Something tells me”, these are the signals we have to learn how to listen to. My friend Nikky Finney always talks about how if you “listen to your belly”, you will never go wrong. The academy has taught us to use our cognition and deductive reasoning skills. In doing so, we have forgotten how to listen to the rest of our body. Messages are trying to reach us at all times, but we do not know how to pick up on them. Zajonc (2003) highlights academic programs where the art of contemplative listening is included as an essential part of the course, such as the course on “Contemplative Practice and the Art of Medicine” at Penn State University College of Medicine, or the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Jazz and Contemplative Studies major at the University of Michigan School of Music.

Nurture and nourish

We have to nurture and nourish ourselves. The bible talks about treating the body like a temple. We have to be mindful what we put into our bodies and how we treat it.
We cannot expect to do great, serious work, without replenishing our strength. What do we put into our bodies? What do we eat, drink, listen to, or watch? Who do we have intimate relations with and who do we allow to come into our personal space? We have to protect ourselves from things and people that harm us. We have to learn how to say no, when something is not in our best interest. Sometimes, saying no can be as easy or as difficult as turning the TV off, getting enough rest, or saying no to junk food.

My friend Tom Ball, a Modoc/Klamath, told me how, when Native American women sing while cooking, they are in fact imbuing the food with prayer. Similarly, my family, Mama Kibibi and her husband Baba Kauna from the Sankofa Dance Theater, taught me at a KWANZAA gathering about the nourishing value of food that has been prepared with love and care, and how you cannot get that from a fast food restaurant.

*Creative power*

We are familiar with the power of prayer, and that questions propelled into the universe will be answered. Prayer is about more than communication and communion however. Prayer is about sharing. It is not just about sending your list of requests into the universe, and faithfully waiting for things to be fixed. Different scriptural texts tell us that the answer lies within, meaning that many of the tools we need to achieve our goals, have already been provided. We have to access our resources and use our tools. We do not always recognize our tools, or fail to see that we have them at all. Sometimes a tool might be, knowing when or who to call for assistance. Sometimes a tool might be, knowing how to calm ourselves down so we can face whatever it is we have to face without falling apart. When we use our tools, we become part of the creative process and
set things in motion, which will lead to an outcome. If we are willing to do the work, all of the work, things will happen, will fall into place – not always in the form as expected – but what you need will come. And thus we have to check our list. Have we done everything in our (creative) power to bring about that what we need?

‘Pro’ instead of ‘anti’

When we tap into our creative powers, there is no limit to what we can achieve. However, in order to access our potential, it behooves us to work from a ‘pro’ rather than an ‘anti’ perspective. Part of my difficulty with feminism for instance, is because it is usually framed in an “anti-hegemony, anti-patriarchy, anti-oppression, anti-whatever” perspective. I do not deny that these forces exist, and that they limit the potential of people’s lives, but I believe there is a danger in approaching everything from an “anti” perspective. First, it gives the illusion that we are living in an ‘us vs. them’ world, meaning women against men. Whatever negative societal structures exist, they exist because we as human beings created and maintained them. We collectively created them, and we collectively should alter or eradicate them if they are harmful.

In using an ‘anti’ perspective we identify and focus on the hurdle, obstacle, or enemy we have to overcome. In doing so, we divert precious energy that could be used to create something that is better. The longer one focuses on a hurdle, the bigger it gets, and the more insurmountable it becomes. Using an ‘anti’ perspective creates a division between us and an illusive ‘them’, and consequently the care and responsibility to correct an issue becomes divided. The plight of justice for women is relegated to the feminist realm and is fought predominately by women. The plight of historical slavery and
subsequent structures of racism and discrimination are plights of people of color. The list of examples can go on. These issues should be everybody’s concern and responsibility, regardless of gender, color, etc.

Working from a ‘pro’ perspective focus on the creative possibility of what could and should be, regardless of the hurdles that are in place. There will always be hurdles and obstacles, but these are to be stepped over, not focused on. From a spirituality perspective, as we have the creative power to open up the way, so do we have the power to block our own way. Focusing on our hurdles and obstacles does exactly that, as it zaps our creative abilities, and strengthens our insecurities and self-doubt. It separates us from those we are connected to (seen and unseen) and makes us feel alone and vulnerable.

*Rituals*

The first house I stayed in, in Suriname was a very nice house, but I had difficulty sleeping there. The moment I would close my eyes, it were as if different people were talking to me, and my mind would start racing uncontrollably. My aunties came over and explained to me that wherever you go, there are spirits connected to the location. They instructed me to do a ritual, pouring libations and giving thanks for the hospitality. I had to speak on what I wanted, request for everything to go well, and announce my positive intentions. I did as they told me, and slept like a baby ever since.

My aunties forced me to take notice and connect with the world unseen. They also forced me to take a good look at myself and my intentions for being there. Using ritual, I took time out to focus and affirm, not just to the world around me, but also to myself, my reasons for being there. The ritual reminded me of the respectful relationship
we should have with our surroundings. The ritual also helped me to refocus my resolve about who I was, and what I wanted to do. After planning, packing, running, organizing, traveling, and settling in, getting back in touch with me might have been the difference between a mind that wouldn’t stop, and a good night’s rest.

One of the ways we look at ritual in anthropology, is for its communal purposes, it’s role in confirming and reaffirming a bond between participants. Hence ritual is usually discussed within the realm of religion and religious practice (Laing 2002, Prorok 2000, Turner 1969). But ritual can also be private. As such, it can serve as a meditative moment for getting back in touch with yourself and who you know you are. It helps you refocus your thoughts and energies, and it helps you clear your mind from unnecessary clutter. When you take the time to refocus the energy, you open the way for things to come through that are supposed to happen.

Trust

Probably the hardest thing of all, in stepping forward with a consciousness toward spirituality, is the issue of trust. You have to trust your capabilities and your ability to use them to the fullest. You have to trust in what you believe, your skills, and in your ability to face and cope whatever may come your way. We cannot see the bigger picture, or the outcome of our work, but whatever it may be, we have to trust ourselves to be able to deal with it.

Trust is not a blind faith, but it is based on self-knowledge and self-reflection. In order to know what your capacities are, from time to time you have to take a self-inventory. “I know I can do this, because in the past I have…. I know this is my
weakness, therefore I will…” You have to trust the process, in spite of the fact that the environment will give you continual messages to do the opposite, to doubt yourself.

Courage

Lastly, Spirituality involves courage. Having a framework of spirituality while in the academy, means that one is walking in uncharted territory. Having been trained in empirical techniques and thinking, can make you doubt yourself every step of the way. Be aware of your doubts and know where they come from, but be confident in what you know and what you stand for. It is okay to be afraid, just know that you are not alone in this endeavor. Forces seen and unseen accompany you on your journey. All that rests is to have faith, trust yourself, and be brave.
## APPENDIX A: Sranan Glossary

(Words with a * are Dutch words)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sranan Word</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aflegger*</td>
<td>someone who ‘lays out’ a dead body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allochtoon*</td>
<td>non-native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anansi tori</td>
<td>story of Anansi the spider, well known figure from West-African folklore tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anyisa</td>
<td>headpiece of folded, starched cloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apinti dron</td>
<td>cone shaped drum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakra</td>
<td>white person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakru</td>
<td>man-made spiritual entity, to help the ‘owner’ gain some type of advantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>banya</td>
<td>wooden bench played as instrument, or highly carved and decorated wooden bench to display the plantation owner’s riches during the banya prei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>banya prei</td>
<td>entertainment event of slavery days, consisting of dance, music, storytelling, song, and games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barbacot</td>
<td>barbeque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bere</td>
<td>belly, womb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bigi yari</td>
<td>“Big Year”, lustrum birthday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blaka man</td>
<td>black man, black people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boiti</td>
<td>piece of land somebody owns outside of the city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bonu</td>
<td>winti practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bonu bonu</td>
<td>winti, traditional cultural practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bonu man</td>
<td>medicine man, uses traditional, winti medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brudu</td>
<td>blood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buku sabi</td>
<td>book knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>denki fasi</td>
<td>thought processes, theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dya-dya uma</td>
<td>strong, straightforward woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drage man</td>
<td>pall bearer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dungru</td>
<td>dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyuka</td>
<td>Aukaner Maroon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>famiri</td>
<td>family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faya siton</td>
<td>hot stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feda</td>
<td>style of anyisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fosten</td>
<td>early days, long ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fos’tron</td>
<td>first time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frede</td>
<td>afraid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>futu boi</td>
<td>young boy slave who served as his master’s lackey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fyo-fyo</td>
<td>spiritual disease</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hebi</td>
<td>heavy, weight, burden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hebi sani</td>
<td>heavy things, burdens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingi winti</td>
<td>Native American spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kabra neti</td>
<td>ancestral night, ritual event to ‘bring down’ the ancestors for consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kampu</td>
<td>compound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kankantri</td>
<td>silk cotton tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kawna</td>
<td>music form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kondere</td>
<td>country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kot’ singi</td>
<td>a song that ‘cuts in’, interrupts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koto</td>
<td>skirt, traditional Afro-Surinamese costume consisting of a skirt, jacket, blouse, undergarments and headpiece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koto dansi</td>
<td>dance where the attendants wear the koto dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koto misi</td>
<td>woman dressed in koto dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koto show</td>
<td>Koto fashion show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kra</td>
<td>personal soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuli</td>
<td>colloquial term for Hindostani,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kulturu</td>
<td>culture, winti spiritual system, winti practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kumba tere</td>
<td>umbilical cord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kunu</td>
<td>curse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kweki</td>
<td>raise, nurture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kweki ma</td>
<td>foster mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leguana</td>
<td>iguana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lika</td>
<td>liquor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lobi singi</td>
<td>love songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luku</td>
<td>spiritual reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luku man</td>
<td>seer, medicine man who specializes in divination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mama Aisa</td>
<td>Mother Earth, head in the winti pantheon in certain regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matansera</td>
<td>Cuban dance or band, pseudonym for Leprosy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mati</td>
<td>friend, homosexual partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>napi</td>
<td>a kind of tuber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>odo</td>
<td>proverb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oma</td>
<td>grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ondrofeni tori</td>
<td>experience stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oso dresi</td>
<td>home remedies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pai</td>
<td>offering, pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>panyi</td>
<td>wrap skirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parnassi</td>
<td>plantation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pikin</td>
<td>small, little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pikin meid</td>
<td>young girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pina</td>
<td>suffer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prodo banya</td>
<td>‘flaunting’ <em>banya</em> event, in which the emphasis is on parading one’s flair and beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saka</td>
<td>to lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sabi</td>
<td>to know, knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>singi neti</td>
<td>‘singing night’ customary singing all through the night after someone has deceased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sipi meid</td>
<td>ship’s broad, loose woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>soko psalms</td>
<td>sacred songs from slavery days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sranan</td>
<td>Suriname, Surinamese language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sranan Tongo</td>
<td>Surinamese language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>susa</td>
<td>male battle dance from slavery days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tai anyisa</td>
<td>folding a traditional head dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taki</td>
<td>talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>takru man</td>
<td>“ugly man” pseudonym for Cancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tori</td>
<td>story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wai</td>
<td>blows (as in the wind blows)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wasi</td>
<td>to bathe, ritual bath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>winti</td>
<td>wind, traditional spiritual belief system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>winti prei</td>
<td><em>winti</em> ceremonial dance event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wroko fasi</td>
<td>work method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrokope</td>
<td>worksite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yaki</td>
<td>jacket worn atop a <em>koto</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yampanesi</td>
<td>colloquial term for Javanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeye</td>
<td>inner spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yu</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: Discussion themes

ADULT THEMES

MENTAL

Know who you are
- battle: church – folk knowledge
- celebrating the self
- Opo yu yeye
- no self doubt
- no self loathing
- no negative comparisons to others
- no looking up to others (Dutch, other ethnicities)
- being strong
- being able to laugh

Words
- know how to use them (odo, spoken language)
- language
- gossip
- have to communicate in order to make connections to get things done

CULTURAL

Cultural knowledge
- know rituals
- practice rituals
- pass on rituals
- role/relationship to the church?

INTERPERSONAL

Parenting
- supported
- lessons about relationships
- lessons about male/female roles
- belonging

Relationships partner/romantic
- lot’s of independence for both parties
- multiple partners?

Relationships with other people
- getting things done
- family => obligations, rituals
  o affirms who you are => lineage
- organizational membership
- other ethnicities -> prejudices?
- unity among Afro-Surinamese
- fun

**INTER-WORLDLY**

**Economics**
- no worries?
- dependency on family in the Netherlands
- hustling -> how many jobs?
- which professions – how many & why
- work ethic

**Netherlands**
- love/hate
- family relations
- ideology/media influence
- remains the large invisible presence that people look up to

**Internationals**
- ever presence, yet ignored -> normalized?
- unaware?
- dependency

**Membership**
- organizations => connections/networking

**NATURE**
- natural environment – pollution?
- living environment – pollution?
- Nature forces -> rituals
- leisure/vacation
- oso dresi, home remedies

**HEALTH**
- practices – oso sani, home remedies
- no mention
- AIDS

**CONFLICT ISSUES**
- church vs. winti
- romantic relations: dependence <-> independence
- Netherlands: love/hate
- nature: emphasis on relationship, yet high pollution

**QUESTIONS**
- health never mentioned, yet AIDS very high
- relationship with other ethnicities – prejudices but how serious?
- international presence: dependency, yet unaware/norm?
- work ethic
- abuse within relationships not mentioned

Unspoken issues
- Suicide
- HIV/AIDS
- Domestic violence
YOUTH THEMES

PARENTING FAMILY
- one parent households
- absentee fathers
- little support
- little guidance
- poor communication
- emphasis on independence
- lack of love
- different treatment boys vs. girls

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS
- unequal
- independence
- using for status

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS
- parties, fun
- acceptance
- peer pressure -> $ especially for boys
- wanting to be seen
- organizations, activities
- interethnic -> prejudices, envy?

WELFARE
- media influence -> consumption
- leisure
- parties
- if you want a better career you have to leave (Suriname)

SCHOOL
- incapable teachers
- no rights
- no support from home
- want a good education
- violence
- corporal punishment
- abuse
- Netherlands

FEARS
- criminality
- violence
- future
HEALTH
- little faith in the doctor
- prefer oso sani, house remedies

QUESTIONS
- inter ethnic relationship – prejudices to what extent?
- little awareness of international influences
APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

General Interview questions (adults)

What special lessons did you learn from your father?

What special lessons did you learn from your mother?

What did your upbringing teach you about the relationship between men and women?

What are some important lessons you learned about maintaining your health and who taught you?

What are some important lessons you learned about maintaining your mental health and who taught you?

What role does the Netherlands play in your lives?

What role do Dutch relatives play in your lives?

What role do foreign countries (other than the Netherlands) play in your lives?

How does the economic climate affect your mental well-being?

What does a man need to feel self-confident?

What does a woman need to feel self-confident?

What is the biggest misconception that Afro-Surinamese women have about Afro-Surinamese men?

What is the biggest misconception that Afro-Surinamese men have about Afro-Surinamese women?

What does the expression “Opo yu yeye” [Raise your inner spirit] mean to you and what do you need to do so?

What are 2 things that can cause a disturbance in one’s mental well-being?

There are 3 things on the rise in Surinamese society that are hardly discussed. These 3 things are suicide, HIV/AIDS and domestic violence. How do you view these things within the Afro-Surinamese community?
Extra questions

How important is it to have knowledge of traditional Afro-Surinamese cultural practices? Who teaches you these practices?

How important is religion for your mental well-being?

What things cause stress?

How do you view the conflict between church and winti?

What lessons did you learn about nature and who taught you?

What does the expression “Yu mus’ sabi yu srefi” [You must know yourself] mean to you?
General Interview Questions - youth

What special lessons did you learn from your father?

What special lessons did you learn from your mother?

What are some important lessons that you have learned about maintaining your health, and who taught you?

What are some important lessons that you have learned about maintaining your health, and who taught you?

What kinds of things make school enjoyable/not enjoyable?

What has your upbringing taught you about relationships between men and women?

Lately you hear a lot about young people committing suicide. Why do you thing this is so? What do you think could help them?

If someone within your family were to have a problem and it would affect the whole family, how would your family deal with it? Can you give an example?

What do you do when you feel unhappy and lonely?

What is something your parents can do for you to make you feel very good?

What kinds of crime and safety issues concern you?

What are some of your favorite things to do with your friends?

Do you ever choose to listen to your friends instead of your parents? In which situations?

How important are international countries for you?

What is the biggest stereotype about the Surinamese?

If there is one thing you could change about the way you were raised, what would it be?

What do you need – as a young person in the world – to feel self-confident and strong?

Who supports you the most during difficult times?

How does your religion help you to feel good about yourself?
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WHO

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Williams Crenshaw, K.
Wilson, M.

Wilson, S. G.

Winters, C. A.

Wintrob, R. M.

Wooding, C. J.

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Yelvington, K. A.

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Zeleza, P. T.

Zajonc, A.

Zeleza, P. T.
Vita
Aminata Cairo

BIRTH
February 27, 1966 – Amsterdam, Netherlands

PERSONAL
Other names used: Aminata Cairo Baruti and Sandra C. Cairo

EDUCATION
1999-01 M.A. Medical Anthropology, University of Kentucky
1988-91 M.S. Clinical Psychology, Eastern Kentucky University
1984-88 B.A. Physical Education and Psychology, Berea College

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS
2007 Transylvania University Department of Anthropology
Part-time Instructor - two courses

2006-07 Kentucky Community and Technical College System, Bluegrass Campus:
Department of Social Sciences
Part-time Instructor – three courses

2006 Transylvania University Department of Anthroplogy
Part-time Instructor – one course

2005-06 Kentucky Community and Technical College System, Bluegrass Campus:
Departments of Humanities
Part-time Instructor – two courses

2005-06 University of Kentucky, Department of Anthropology
Part-time instruction, T.A. position – two courses

2004-05 Department of Culture, Ministry of Education: Department of Culture Studies, Paramaribo, Suriname
Anthropologist, Researcher, specialist in Afro-Surinamese culture

2003 College of Cultural Sociology Anton de Kom University, Suriname
Adjunct instructor – one course

2001-02 Adjunct Faculty College of Social Work, UK
Adjunct instructor – four courses
2001-03  **University of Kentucky, Department of Anthropology**  
Part-time instruction (T.A. Position) – four courses

1998-02  **Adjunct Faculty Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion, UK**  
Adjunct instructor – four courses

2000  **University of Kentucky, Department of Anthropology**  
Teaching Assistant – 1 course (three sections)

**AWARDS**

2002  Susan Abbott Jamieson Pre-Dissertation Award, Dept of Anthropology, UK  
2002  Del Jones Memorial Travel Award, Society for Applied Anthropology  
2002  Elsie Bourke Ewing Award, University of Kentucky  

2003  Kentucky Foundation for Women Artist Enrichment Award  

1999-03  Lyman T. Johnson Fellowship/Anthropology Dept. Teaching Assistantship, UK

**PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS**

2007  Hebi Sani:  Mental Well Being Among the Working Class Afro-Surinamese in Paramaribo, Suriname  
Southern Interdisciplinary Roundtable on African Studies – Kentucky State University  Frankfort, Kentucky

2007  Krioro Dansi:  Spirituality and Activism through Traditional Afro-Surinamese Dance  
Graduate Student Interdisciplinary Conference – University of Kentucky  
Lexington, Kentucky

2005  Krioro Dansi:  Traditional Afro-Surinamese Dance as an Art Form of the African Diaspora  
Berea College – Berea, Kentucky

2005  Krioro Dansi:  3rd World Feminist Activism in Traditional Afro-Surinamese Dance  
Women in the Arts Conference – University of Missouri, St. Louis  
St. Louis, Missouri

2005  Krioro Dansi:  Culture, Identity and Well-being in Traditional Afro-Surinamese Dance  
Cultural Center Podium Kwakoe – Amsterdam, Netherlands
Afro-American Dance lecture series – Paramaribo, Suriname

2004  Traditional Afro-Surinamese Dance: Colored by a Legacy of Slavery
International conference: Globalization, Diaspora and Identity Formation:
The Legacy of Slavery and Indentured Labour in the Caribbean – Paramaribo, Suriname

2004  Music of the African Diaspora as a Source of Well-Being
National Slave Route Commission UNESCO lecture series – Paramaribo, Suriname

2004  Afro-American Dance: Sex, Dance, and the Body of the Black Woman
Afro-American Dance lecture series – Paramaribo, Suriname

2004  Afro-Surinamese Dance: An Undiscovered Afro-American Dance Form
Afro-American Dance lecture series – Paramaribo, Suriname

2003  Afro-American Dance: Culture, Identity, and Well-Being
Afro-American Dance lecture series – Paramaribo, Suriname

2003  Key note speech: Redefining Womanhood
Woman’s Day Conference – Berea College, Berea, KY

2003  Creating Spaces Without Apologies: An Amalgamation of Anthropology,
Arts, Activism and Spirituality
Women’s Studies Department – University of Kentucky

2003  Creating Spaces Without Apologies: A Dance Journey from Lexington to Suriname
Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning – Lexington, KY

2002  There are black people in the Netherlands? Using anthropology to redefine
and reclaim identity space. - Invited session
American Anthropological Association – National Annual Conference
Washington, D.C.

2002  Venturing in Sacred Space: African American Mental Health in a Small
Southeastern City in the US
International Conference of Social Anthropology: London, England – Annual
Conference

2002  Artistic presentation (dance): Balancing Act (based on Sept. 11 events), Biopsy
Women’s Writer’s Conference – Annual Conference
2002  Artistic presentation (dance): Blessing, Balancing Act (based on Sept. 11 events), Biopsy
Women’s Studies Graduate Student Conference: UK – Annual Conference

2002  Venturing in Sacred Space: Using Culturally Sanctioned Space for Engagement Between the University of Kentucky and the African American Community
Society for Applied Anthropology – Annual Conference

2001  Academy Church: Creating Sacred Space for Engagement Between the University and the African American Community (Presenter and Organizer/Chair)
American Anthropological Association – National Annual Conference

2001  Voices of Protest, Voices for Change: Transforming the Discourse on African-American Youth Violence
Panel member – UK Women Studies 3rd Annual Graduate Student Conference

2001  Academy Church: Creating Sacred Space for Engagement Between the University and the African American Community
Medical Anthropology Research Group – U.K.

2001  Rediscovering the 7 Directions: Native American and African American Identity in the era of Post-Modernism
Southern Anthropological Society – Regional Conference

2001-02  African Dance in the New Curriculum
American Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance – National Conference

2001  Native American and African American Identity in the era of Post-Modernism
Central States Anthropological Society – Regional Conference

2001  The Art of Self-Discovery: Using the Cultural Arts as Paths to Transformation
Governor’s Conference on Juvenile Justice - KY

2000  African American Mental Health in a Small South Eastern City
American Anthropological Association National Conference

2000  African American Mental Health in Lexington, KY
Y.W.C.A. Community Meeting

2000  African American Mental Health in a Small South Eastern City
Medical Anthropology Research Group – University of Kentucky

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2000    Redefining Personal Identity as a World Citizen
         Idea Festival – Lexington, KY

2000    African Dance in the New Curriculum
         American Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance –
         Regional Conference

2000    Dance as a Healing Art
         Medical Center Minority Affairs Speaker Series – University of KY.

1997    Healing Dance: An African American Treasure
         African American Studies and Research Lecture Series – University of KY.

PUBLICATIONS
2001    Venturing in Sacred Space: African American Mental Health in Lexington,
         Kentucky
         Master’s Thesis – University of Kentucky

1999    African Performing Arts Through the Lens of the Body Politic
         Black Arts Quarterly

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS
2005-06 Member Society for Applied Anthropology

2000-02 Co-coordinator Medical Anthropology Research Group, U.K.

2000-03 Chair Person Association of Black Anthropologists Student Interest Group

2000-03 Member American Anthropological Association
2000-03 Member Association of Black Anthropologists
2000-03 Member Association of Feminist Anthropology
2001-03 Member Society for Applied Anthropology
2001-03 Member National Association of Student Anthropologists
2001-02 Member Southern Anthropological Society