



Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) KONINKLIJKE NEDERLANDSE AKADEMIE VAN WETENSCHAPPEN

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published in

Against better judgement: Rethinking multicultural society
2022

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

Hoefte, R. M. A. L. (2022). Modernity and the middle class in late colonial Paramaribo. In J. Elahi, & E. al (Eds.), *Against better judgement: Rethinking multicultural society* (pp. 143-152)

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Modernity and the Middle Class in Late Colonial Paramaribo

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New! More! Faster! Better! Around the turn of the twentieth century several developments were shaping a new, modern world. Improved or newly invented transportation and communication technologies accelerated the movement of people, products, and ideas across the globe – for better or worse. Expanding cities were the home of the rising middle classes, including professionals earning their money in offices or traders in ever more complex commercial enterprises. Their increasing wealth as well as confidence and freedom enabled them to buy or rent modern products of mass manufacturing techniques, such as motor cycles and cars, spend their leisure time in theatres and the newly established cinemas, or buy household and luxury goods in giant malls. In other words, a new, ever more international consumption culture was part of this early twentieth-century modernity. However, from a reading of historical documents and publications, it almost seems that this modernity had bypassed Suriname.

Surinamese historiography has until recently focused on first, plantation slavery, and second, Maroons and marronage. The dominant colonial categories, including ‘slaves’, ‘indentured labourers’, or ‘Creoles’, ‘British-Indians’, ‘Javanese’, ‘Chinese’, whites (*Blanken*), focused on legal status or ethnicity.¹ As a result, the middle class, mainly of Afro-Surinamese descent, was excluded from the historical record. Scholars have long ignored the crucial role of this middle class, which formed a constituent element of the (late) colonial system and later in the autonomy movement.²

The growth of the middle class can be partially explained by the gradual ‘Surinamization’ of the civil service in Surinam – there was room for

1 A number of recent publications, including Neslo (2016) and Fatah-Black (2018), on Surinamese social history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries focus on the role and significance of urban free ‘blacks and coloreds’ in Paramaribo. The social mobility of these groups was crucial to the formation of the Surinamese middle class.

2 See Hoogervorst and Schulte Nordholt (2017) for similar observations regarding the Dutch East Indies.

light-coloured, Christian, Dutch-speaking, urbanized Afro-Surinamese, who almost strived to out-Dutch the Dutch in certain aspects. This urban middle class was not very much interested in or even rejected African-derived cultural and religious expressions.³ It is important to note that not all of this middle class was light coloured and male: Some were female professionals, black head teachers, British Indians, or Hindustani traders, migrants from urban centres in India, who also aspired to modernity and social mobility.

In this chapter I zoom in on the importance of early twentieth-century advertisements stimulating and shaping new, modern lifestyles. These images presented new perspectives on both physical and social mobility, time, gender, and behaviour. I argue that this focus on modernity also presents a new frame of reference for the middle class in Paramaribo. In the Netherlands, Suriname was often viewed as a backward colony, and as a consequence modernity and middle class were not visible to the (wilfully) blind. Connected to the topic of modernity and new lifestyles, I question whether it is true that Holland, as it was called, was the sole lode star for Suriname, as has been maintained in almost all publications on the colony.⁴ Language may reveal part of the answer: As we will see in Suriname, the languages of “modern” advertising were both Dutch and English. Local languages, such as Sranan, were widely considered as lower class, non-urban, or ‘market languages’, in other words, ‘uncivilized’.⁵

1 The Middle Class Post-Emancipation Suriname

The abolition of slavery in 1863 in Surinam was a legal milestone, but the socioeconomic, cultural, and political emancipation of the former enslaved and their descendants would take a century or even more to materialize. In the colonial economy the changes during the abolition period were far more visible: Many plantations were discontinued and the remaining companies, especially in the sugar industry, became increasingly larger industrial complexes. Of the 108 sugar plantations in 1830, only 14 remained by 1890. In 1930 there were only four sugar plantations in operation; however, the total area of cultivation had grown during those forty years. Through an increase in

3 Fog Olwig (1993) provides a vivid description of this process on the small island of Nevis. She describes how the adoption of norms of respectability was associated with upward mobility and the exclusion of groups who did not (want to) adhere to this culture of respectability.

4 See, for example, the quotations in Van Kempen (2003, p. 401).

5 See, for example, Hugo Pos (1995, pp. 17–18), who describes this linguistic and cultural divide in far more flowery language.

scale, modernization and concentration, production could be maintained at the pre-abolition levels. These changes were visible demographically as well: Workers on these plantations were mainly migrants from India and Java, who were put to work on temporary contracts. It soon became apparent that the majority of the more than 60,000 immigrants would not return to their homeland. The consequences of this inflow were inescapable, as seen from the census of 1921: Almost half the population was of Afro-Surinamese origin, 27 per cent Hindustani, and 17 per cent Javanese.

Early twentieth-century Suriname was a status-conscious society, in which skin colour, ethnic origin, descent and legitimacy, occupation, financial assets, gender, educational and cultural background, and individual comportment ordained one's place in society.⁶ Class then was regarded as more than the involvement in the production process and included individual attributes. A respectable job, requiring appropriate attire and the use of Dutch, was often considered more important than high earnings. Suriname was no exception in the Caribbean, where European notions of respectability were deeply entrenched in the social-cultural system. This sentiment shines through in the following remark by the Dutch social-democratic politician H. van Kol, who in one of his frequent interventions about the colonies observed that existing voting rights disenfranchised "teachers and civilized individuals ... but that pub owners, opium sellers, Chinese and such do have the right to vote."⁷

Ethnicity and class overlapped to a great extent. The exception was in the Afro-Surinamese population in which 'colour' in a physiognomic and cultural sense decided one's place in the class hierarchy. Just as in other Caribbean societies, class was and is an intricate socio-economic and cultural complex, but the system was neither completely closed nor static. However, the importance of maintaining one's position in the class and colour hierarchy is illustrated by this Trinidadian example. "There are the nearly white, hanging on tooth and nail to the fringes of white society, and these, as is easy to understand, hate contact with the darker skin far more than some of the broader-minded whites. Then there are the browns, intermediates, who cannot by any strength

6 Van Lier (1971: 263) has a different view, as "people belonging to totally different classes mixed with each other on a completely equal footing." In his view, there was no development of "class determined behavior and class pride." For a more extensive discussion of class relations, social mobility, and gender in twentieth-century Suriname, see Hoeft (2014, pp. 12–21).

7 This discrepancy was caused by the fact that the franchise was based on taxation. *Suriname, Koloniaal Nieuws-en Advertentieblad* (hereafter *Suriname*), 5 May 1911. *Handelingen der Staten-Generaal* (SG), Eerste Kamer, 20 March 1914, p. 489; also beraadslagingen in de Tweede Kamer, 15 November 1900, p. 315. Zie also *De Surinamer*, 4 May 1913.

of imagination pass as white but who will not go one inch towards mixing with people darker than themselves.”⁸

In pre-war Paramaribo, this process of closure in the upward and downward directions could be seen among the upper and the upper middle classes. Jews expressed frustration at not being able to gain access to the upper classes, largely for ethnic reasons, but tried to prevent the upward mobility of the ‘common’ middle class. The same phenomenon may be discerned among the lower classes, in which education was a vehicle for upward mobility, yet downward closure also occurred in the case of recent immigrants.

In colonial times, the white male population occupied the highest public functions or managed large economic enterprises such as plantations or mines. Thus, their position at the top of the social pyramid was based on the combination of whiteness and maleness. That is not to say, however, that all whites belonged to the upper class; lower-ranked military personnel or *Buru* (farmers of Dutch descent) were examples of white groups not belonging to the upper echelon of society. The Dutch elite tried to keep as much distance as possible from the rest of the population, including the ‘native’ upper classes. In 1905, Cato Idenburg, the 20-old daughter of Governor A. W. F. Idenburg, wrote in a letter to her grandmother how important it was not to create envy between (coloured) ‘Surinamese’, blacks, and colonial Dutchmen. Even the latter group felt slighted at “things that only exist in their imagination.”⁹ However, Van Lier (1971, p. 267) notes that in contrast to their counterparts in the British colonies, the Dutch and Surinamese elites frequented the same social club: *Sociëteit Het Park*.

The lower middle class was initially largely Afro-Surinamese and included skilled labourers, teachers, and lower-ranked civil servants. Education was the main vehicle for upward mobility. Data from the 1930s show that all professionals and almost all civil servants were Afro-Surinamese or Dutch. Among the (lower) middle classes, teachers were 84 per cent Afro-Surinamese and the police 85 per cent Afro-Surinamese. For this group, education opened up the road to social mobility. As a matter of fact, education itself became an important venue to make a career.

Chinese and Lebanese merchants and shopkeepers as well as Jewish artisans belonged to the middle classes. Until World War II only a few, mostly urban, Hindustani men – and no Javanese – could be counted among the

8 James (2014, p. 55). In his ethnography on Trinidad, Yelvington (1995, pp. 29–30) notes the importance of exclusion and usurpation to maintain or improve class positions.

9 Dutch National Archives 2.21.232, inv. nr 222, Collectie 295 Familiearchief Middelberg (1820–1960), Cato Idenburg to grandmother [late 1905].

middle classes. The Hindustanis in Paramaribo, most often from towns and cities in India, were used to living in a city. Some of these urban Hindustanis preferred to label themselves as Surinamer, Christian, or Sahariya (urbanite) to distinguish themselves from people in the districts (Choenni and Choenni 2012, pp. 95–96). However, compared to Trinidad or British Guiana, Suriname's emerging Hindustani middle class was still fairly small in the 1920s or 1930s.¹⁰ Given that migration from British India to Suriname took place thirty years later than from the other British colonies, the move from the plantations to the city and into non-agricultural occupations also took place later.

Gender relations were informed by class and ethnicity as they determined the varying degrees of socioeconomic independence allowed to women. Metropolitan notions of family, marriage, male responsibility, and feminine behaviour were very much class specific in Suriname. The decision whether women were to remain at home to run the household and take care of the children was often made by their husbands. Middle-class women who 'did not work' often had their hands full with child rearing, household tasks, and so forth. Missionaries tried to instil Western norms and ideals regarding respectability and proper behaviour, marriage, and family, including the notion that confinement to domesticity and economic dependence on a husband were necessary to female respectability. In the words of anthropologist Karen Fog Olwig (1993, p. 134), "women's success at maintaining an appearance of respectability became an important measure of the social status of the home."

2 Promoting Modernity

Paramaribo was the one and only cultural, commercial, political, and educational centre.¹¹ In the late nineteenth century, when modernity in the form of electric lighting and telegraph connections was introduced.

10 Choenni and Choenni (2012, p. 96) state that around 1920, 11 per cent of the urban Hindustanis were Christians; in size they were the second largest group. A number of entrepreneurs, the largest professional group, came from British Guiana (Choenni and Choenni 2012, p. 238). There was a lively back and forth of people and goods between the two colonies, as is also clear from an advertisement for 'Palm House' in Georgetown, located conveniently near the wharfs for Suriname, which ran multiple times in various newspapers in Suriname (*De West*, 1 March 1912). Unfortunately, in Seecharan's study (1997) of the rise of the middle class in British Guiana in the period 1919–1929 no mention is made of connections to Suriname.

11 For cultural developments in the early twentieth century, see Van Kempen (2003), p. 397 ff.

Advertisements were important for both consumers and producers to introduce new lifestyles, not only for consumers but also for businesses. As one newspaper advertisement put it, "In our modern times, one cannot be a good business man if one doesn't how to advertise."¹² A search on Google for *modern(ity) in Surinamese newspaper advertisements in the 1910s and 1920s* resulted in more than 3,000 hits, so it may be safely assumed it was popular at that time. I guess that in some advertisements the word *modernity* may have been over-used: "He who doesn't keep up with the times is limping. Therefore be *modern* in your thinking, *modern* in your choice and choose *modern* manufactured furniture from our *modern* steam furniture factory."¹³

In order to be physically and socially mobile one had to be healthy and clean. A few examples of recommended remedies to keep up with the changing times were a modern anti-septic, Scott's modern direction with a strengthening emulsion, oral hygiene products, and Ferroll, the modern remedy for weakened and dejected people.¹⁴ There were American remedies for women with ill health at all stages of their lives. Lydia E. Pinkham stated, "A healthy wife is an inspiration to her husband. A sickly half dead-and-alive woman, especially [if] she is also a mother of a family, is a damper to all happiness in the home." She also targeted working girls, a new category of potential customers with the expansion of service positions in stores and offices.¹⁵ And many of the married women were supposedly modern mothers who preferred to use Vicks as the remedy for their children with colds, which was much appreciated in America, according to the advertisement.¹⁶

An important aspect in the quest for modernity is saving time. Two examples picture the outdated past and the modern present. In a series of advertisements Sunlight soap promotes new ways to do laundry: "Let go of the old-fashioned drudgery, do it this way."¹⁷ The second advertisement goes even further back in time: "Poor Moses, He didn't have a type writer! A few thousand years ago, when Moses was to announce the 10 commandments to the world, he chiselled them on a stone plate. The modern Moses dictates some points to his (female) secretary, and while the modern Moses is playing tennis."¹⁸

12 *De Surinamer*, 27 May 1926.

13 *Suriname*, 1 March 1912; emphasis mine.

14 See *De Surinamer*, 25 December 1927, for Scott's emulsion; for Ferroll, see *Suriname*, 5 August 1913, and a jazzed-up version in *Suriname*, 29 September 1916.

15 *De Surinamer*, 29 October 1916. Lydia Estes Pinkham (1819–1883) was the inventor of a herbal-alcoholic concoction for menstrual and menopausal problems.

16 *De Surinamer*, 2 June 1929.

17 *De Surinamer*, 25 September 1910.

18 *De West*, 14 July 1922.

Of course, these modern times needed to be captured and saved for posterity. Modern consumers could avail themselves of Gevaert or Kodak roll films and cameras or could hire a “revolutionary” photographer who used the “most modern equipment and techniques [to make] the most beautiful and nice photographs, by daylight or artificial light, inside and outside of the home.”¹⁹

These products were sold in stores, often with “modern” names such as Nov-ely Store (Domineestraat) or Up to Date Store (Maagdenstraat). But judging from the newspaper advertisements, the most modern was good old Kersten department store (owned by the Moravian Brethren, *EBG*), promoting modern glass ware, modern table ware, modern prams, modern children books, modern holders for business cards, modern suitcases and bags, modern dresses and fabrics, modern suits, modern umbrellas, modern furniture, modern tools, modern musical instruments, modern presents, and much more. The secret was the store’s own agent in the United States.

3 Americanization

Americanization in the Caribbean is often linked to World War II, but I would like to posit that this development had much earlier roots.²⁰ In 1906, Maria Elisabeth Idenburg, wife to the Suriname governor, took English lessons, taught by the wife of the British consul, as so many Anglophone guests attended dinners and receptions in the colony.²¹ And an advertisement from a certain Bosch Reitz, a milk producer, also specifically addressed his “English and American friends.”²²

In the Netherlands, Suriname was framed as an agricultural colony and the authorities were blind to the emergence of, for example, the bauxite industry. Because of this lack of interest, bauxite mining concessions were easily obtained by American companies. Planters and Dutch officials smugly contended that labourers and supervisors would not be interested in working for Americans. Probably the first report on the newly established company town of Moengo, by Fred Oudschans Dentz, a prolific writer on history and contemporary Suriname, belies these views. He praises Moengo as “a monument

19 *Suriname*, 12 June 1910.

20 For example, Fatah-Black (2013, chapter 7) details the rise of North American shipping up until eighteenth-century Suriname, while merchants from Suriname traveled to North America to do business.

21 Dutch National Archives 2.21.232, inv. nr 222, Cato Idenburg to grandmother, 22 July 1906.

22 *De West*, 15 September 1916.

to the willpower and perseverance of the Americans" (Oudschans Dentz 1921, p. 485). This visitor lyrically describes the organization of the production process, modern health care facilities, the sewage system, the electric street lamps, and the calculators and typewriters. As to be expected, such a modern town and industry were very attractive to plantation labourers and their supervisors who flocked en masse to the bauxite mines.²³

In Paramaribo, cruises, targeting teachers and students, were organized so they may admire this modern paradise. "A Great Interesting *Moonlight Excursion* [to see up close] Picturesque Moengo with the Grand Bauxite Factory and the Modern Settlement."²⁴

Many advertisements for American products appeared in Surinamese newspapers, often using the same texts and illustrations as in American publications and sometimes poorly translated. Yet there are more examples to show the depth of American influences: In the 1910s year after year announcements appeared of American opticians visiting Suriname, promising the newest "professional," "modern," "scientific," "superior" American methods and insights,²⁵ but there were also advertisements for American Lady Shoe and Gentleman Shoe²⁶ or the opening of an American style butchery.²⁷ Finally, in 1912 there was the introduction of the American white sale, in tropical Suriname relabelled as *sneeuwweek* ('snow week').²⁸

4 Conclusion

In Paramaribo there was a middle class that aspired for modernity as in Europe and very much as seen in the United States as well, that paradise of modernity and modern advertising. However, the colonial framework was still firmly in place. It was World War II, including the arrival of U.S. troops combined with the authoritarianism of Dutch governor J. C. Kielstra, which provoked resistance and changed the existing colonial structure. Autonomy and expansion of the still limited franchise was demanded and granted immediately after the

23 To be sure, Moengo and other company towns were embedded in the colonial system, where the hierarchical characteristics of the plantation system were still noticeable; see Hoefte (2014, pp. 113–132) for more on Moengo in the shadow of the plantation system.

24 *De West*, 12 September 1924.

25 See, for example, *Suriname*, 18 April 1916, for Dr. W. R. Lamb and *De West*, 19 January 1917 for Doctor C. H. L. Schuler.

26 *De Surinamer*, 20 January 1910.

27 *De Surinamer*, 16 October 1913.

28 *De West*, 23 April 1912.

war. The advertisement for Amstel beer from almost one hundred years ago in a Surinamese newspaper shows the entanglement of modernity and colonialism in the Dutch Empire: It shows a prototypical white colonial wearing a topi, with a “native” woman toiling in the background and a “native” servant with a bottle on a tray. The text reads “coffee, tea and a thousand other products are Java’s exports, where the hard workers cannot live without Amstel beer.” Needless to say, the hard worker was the white colonial who took pride of place in this illustration.²⁹

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