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Title: Memorial space at a Jesuit cemetery in French Guiana : social repercussions of the

archaeology of plantations

**A**bstract: Our paper reflects on the development of a commemoration concept which takes into account the sensibilities of descendants from the slave trade period in French Guiana. Memory of slavery is indeed a very sensitive issue among residents of most Caribbean Islands and we use 20 years of research at the Loyola plantation to present the various questions with which we are confronted in order for the local population to appropriate the spirit of place. The plantation is located at 10 km from Cayenne, and under Jesuit rule it comprised an area making slightly over 1000 hectares; at one point, there were nearly 500 slaves whom toiled at the production of a number of cash crops such as sugar, coffee, indigo, rum, etc. under the supervision of a handful of missionaries. From the remains of the cemetery where approximately 1000 people (Slaves, Amerindian and White land owners) have been interred, our aim to commemorate memory while avoiding glorification of history. As a tool to launch meaningful exchanges with the descendants of the African population regarding the practice of slavery and the condition of the enslaved during the colonial period we have erected a cross in the centre of the cemetery as it was depicted in an illustration dated to the 1730’s. Our action had an immediate response from the local population and the cemetery became a focal point for them to open discussions. Curiously, our intention provoked a visceral reaction from the French governmental agents.

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**Introduction**

After nearly 20 years of research at the Loyola plantation site in French Guiana, we are at the point of communicating the results to a wider audience, namely, the local population. We present a commemoration concept which takes into account the sensibilities of descendants from the slave trade period in French Guiana. From the remains of the cemetery where approximately 1000 people (Slaves, Amerindian and White land owners) have been interred, our challenge and motivation is to determine the fine line that separates commemoration of memory and glorification of history. Memory of the trade period is indeed a very sensitive issue among residents of most Caribbean Islands and we use our research to present the various questions with which we are confronted in order for the local population to appropriate the spirit of place.

**Historical context**

French Guiana, formerly a French colony, is now an overseas department neighboring Brazil to the South and Surinam to the West; it covers an area of ​​83,846 km2 on the Guiana Shield. It is the largest [overseas region of France](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overseas_departments_and_territories_of_France) and economically Guiana is inside the European Union with the euro as its currency, it is literally Europe in South America. Covered by forest and submitted to an equatorial climate, French Guiana differs markedly from the Caribbean Islands, with its high humidity climate caused by a seven month rainy season. That humid equatorial climate is punctuated by the Guyanese intertropical convergence zone and its annual rainfall which reaches up to 3000 mm on the coast. The equatorial forest soil is very acidic, which makes agricultural production difficult; though agriculture in the lowlands was made possible through the creation of polders such as what the Dutch have brought to Suriname and, adopted in French Guiana by the second half of the 18th Century (Le Roux et al. 2012).

Settlers in French Guiana during the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries were regularly subjected to shortage of goods due to navigational difficulties, such as trade winds which tended to bring ships off course to the North and Cayenne, with its shallow harbor was difficult to access. As a result, traders neglected French Guiana in favor of the wealthier colonies to the North. Despite harsh navigational conditions, that South American territory was explored and colonized during the XVIIth century simultaneously by the Dutch, Portuguese, English and the French who took turns at controlling the region.

Possession of French Guiana had its advantage indeed; its strategic position en route to Central and South America contributed to hinder the Portuguese and Spaniards access to those parts of the New World. Thus, between 1604 and 1674, we see several attempts to settle French Guiana. It resulted in the creation of a farming plantation system which rested on the expertise and support of Jewish and Dutch settlers familiar with the technology needed for the development of sugar production (Le Roux 1994; Polderman 2004; Le Roux et al. 2009).

**The Jesuits in French Guiana**

The first missionary expeditions to the region were carried out by the Capuchin monks in 1635. The Jesuits landed in Cayenne in 1664 and, five years after, their sugar plantation was established. They swiftly imposed their monopoly over the spiritual life of the colony and soon owned several plantations. Through agriculture, their intention was to support their missions and schools; they also maintained small plantations where Native people lived under their protection and spiritual guidance (Le Roux 1994). The influence of the Jesuit congregation was felt over a large area of the Amazon Basin and South America, with an impact as far as Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Bolivia.

The main role of the Jesuits was the conversion of Native people to Christianity. They abide by the Valladolid controversy and argued that Native people were entitled to freedom. As a result, they worked at their instruction and conversion (Le Roux et al., 2009: 43). Furthermore, they tried to maintain peaceful relations with the First Nations and ensured that France would never submit them to slavery. Notwithstanding their position, we have several mentions from the archives to the effect that planters, attempted to enslave the indigenous population at least until 1723 (CAOM, C14 R. 16 F. 435, 1723).

In addition, due to the Jesuit actions, settlers were denied access to large tracts of land set aside for both the protection and assimilation of local populations. " *The desire to isolate Native people from what the Governor and the Jesuit themselves called, the rabble, led them to ask the Minister in 1729 for the concession of all properties of a vast area stretching from the Kourou to the Sinnamary Rivers [... ] in order to prevent any inhabitants to settle near Native settlements* " (Hurault 1972: 125-126). They obviously saw in them a potential for their evangelization project. It is paradoxical that the Jesuit plantations in French Guiana employed enslaved Africans to enrich the Society of Jesus which supported missions among First Nations so that they, by their conversion, would be free from slavery.

**Habitation Loyola**

The Loyola plantation, known at one time to be the largest producer of sugar in French Guiana, was founded in 1668 by Grillet, a Jesuit missionary on a parcel of land the Jesuits had bought from the Vicomte de Quincy to which they added another small property acquired from a Jewish landowner named Isaac Drague. In a short time period, Loyola became a profitable plantation, based on the work of hundreds of enslaved Africans. Its profits were a vital source of income to ensure the development of Jesuit missions in South America. The 1734 census, for the Loyola plantation, reveals that through enslaved labor, Loyola produced sugar, cocoa and coffee, however, production of indigo had already ceased. Another document dated to 1764 and transcribed by Le Roux et al. (2009: 117-126) refers to the number of enslaved at Loyola, the plantation was staffed with 305 people led by two commanders.

In comparison with other inhabitants, the Jesuits were wealthy and influential land owners maintaining a measured contempt for the law. For example, contrary to what had been agreed, they owned more land than 100 slaves could cultivate and their plantation had several times the prescribed number of enslaved Africans, numbering close to 500 at the height of the plantation (Le Roux et al., 2009: 43). All in all, Loyola was the largest and most important plantation in French Guiana.

**Slavery and memory in French Guiana**

Memory of slavery in France and the Caribbean is an emotive topic and, the sensitivity of the issue has been exposed for all to see when France adopted in 2001, the Taubira law which states that: The French Republic recognizes that transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Indian Ocean, the Americas and the Caribbean constitute a crime against humanity. The second Article of that law implies that the school curriculum with regard to the teaching of national history must be restructured to reflect that reality and, research projects in various fields of the humanities must be developed in order to explore that painful aspect of French heritage. Each year, since 2006, France and its overseas departments commemorate the victims of the slave trade, slavery and its aftermath on May 10th.

However, the adoption of the Taubira law and the day commemorating the abolition of slavery did not go as smoothly as one would have wished. Indeed, after the summons served to the historian, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau (2004a, 2004b), who had criticized openly the text of the Taubira law, a group of historians under the banner "Freedom for history "demanded the repeal of the Act and, of so-called, memorial laws. Other organizations have called for the repeal of the section of the Act concerning the teaching of the history of slavery. Meanwhile, a few highly controversial events surrounding the adoption of the Taubira law demonstrates all the emotion surrounding the issues concerning the memory of slavery.

Despite controversies surrounding the adoption of that law, it was maintained, as well as, the day dedicated to the memory of the effects of slavery. In addition, tools to develop the awareness of national memory such as museums, tourism visits to places of memory, commemoration days, renewed school curricula, etc. were introduced. Nonetheless, fifteen years after the adoption of the Taubira law, the memory of slavery is still a sensitive issue and concrete actions remain to be seen in many places. In that context, while hoping to let our work known to the public, I ask myself the difficult question: How should we go about remembering, celebrating or commemorating the past when you work in a country where racial tensions have many facets, one of them being the sorrowful episode of enslavement? While the local descendants of the enslaved are fully aware of France’s colonial hold on their ancestors, they seem reluctant to the idea of studying their own past through archaeology. I ask myself why?

In French Guiana, in addition to the monument erected in 1897 and dedicated to the memory of Victor Schoelcher, whom signed the decree for the abolition of slavery in 1848, no other places dedicated to Guiana’s memory of slavery were to be seen in Cayenne until 2008. In the wake of the movement for national awareness, the monument "The Maroons of Freedom" was inaugurated in Rémire in 2008 by French Guiana local authorities. The work by artist Lobie Cognac represents a couple resisting oppression. The artist said about his bronze that: "*the attainment of this work is a symbol of the essential historical perspective and for the construction of a regional identity capable of uniting all components of the French Guiana community*".[[1]](#footnote-1)

For his part, Antoine Karam, President of the Region, wrote: "*The duty of memory that I claim from tangible physical signs for all Guyanese is designed to assemble all; be they progressive, humanist or democrats committed to the empowerment of man and the universal values ​​of dignity, respect and justice for all. [...] French Guiana authority had the duty to erect a memorial in the name of all".* By this action, French Guiana's population has granted a memorial place which corresponds to its present and future.

In my opinion, I consider it unfortunate that the above dedication avoids stating unequivocally that the French Guiana collective memory is directly rooted in its colonial history. Enslavement had a heavy toll on the population’s collective memory and, at times, it is a past which is difficult to bear.

**Context of our efforts on the commemoration of memory at the Loyola**

We have been working in that socio-political framework for nearly 20 years where we try to articulate the research we do on a sugar plantation making the historical tread and shedding light on the sobering side of the colonial period. Whose agenda is this you may legitimately ask me? One thing is sure, research at the Loyola plantation does not emerge from a common concern of descendants from the enslaved? Why? This is the question which disturbs me! As in many known cases, officially, the memory of the site we work on has been supposedly lost, or was it deliberately ignored, by the descendant community. We work on a case where the local population has not claimed its past, much like the situation that American archaeologists Singleton and Orser (2003) experienced in their attempt to link people with their past. What has created such alienation in French Guiana? We question ourselves on the reason why the local population shows so little interest about their past.

Slavery is the genesis of the today’s population of French Guiana and it is our argument that the Loyola plantation, built by the slaves themselves, could become a tangible memorial to Guyanese citizenry in order to link the history of slavery and the egalitarian values ​​they struggle for today.

**Discussion**

One hypothesis:

I posit that the persistent discomfort about the slavery’s ravages could explain the relative lack of interest for history among the local community. As a result of a not so glorious past, unresponsiveness of the local population is a way to protect itself. That hypothesis originates from a situation I lived through my teaching at Haiti’s State University where people insist that we work on their sugar plantations. Thus, we question ourselves if descendants of the enslaved in French Guiana have really thrown off the yoke of colonialism?

**THE USE OF ARCHAEOLOGY**

**Means taken to develop a sense of belonging**

On-site actions

* Site restorations to mark the location of various buildings, terraces and the garden.
* Involvement of city council with up-keeping of the site trails.
* 2015 Erection of the calvary in the centre of the cemetery to create a *lieu de mémoire*.
* Opening of a nature trail where education will be provided to the public as a geo-rally to teach about forest environments, plants used in agriculture and history.
* Creation of a WEB site which will be online this year.

Ongoing and future research

* Three years ago started on the cemetery where 1000 people buried (enslaved, white land owner, missionaries and Native people). Objective: Creation of a *lieu de mémoire* with the cemetery.
* 2015 One of our graduate students from the U. of Pennsylvania will started to work on the enslaved quarter through a community project.

It is our belief that, our planned research on ​​the cemetery and commemoration of its location through the erection of a cross to make it into a memorial place of the interaction between religion and agricultural production could help restore an aspect of colonial history which has been voluntarily ignored by the French Guiana population and the political authorities. Despite the apparent indifference of the descendant population vis-à-vis its history, the development of a place for remembrance as the burial ground of the plantation, where slaves, Indians and white settlers are buried, could provide a sense of belonging, an opportunity to restore a the memory of its history and allow the development of self-identity to its past.

Results of our investigations on the cemetery have all the characteristics and potential to be used as a memorial place to be reckoned with slavery and its long term effects on national identity. As a memorial, the cemetery of the plantation has the potential to restore local history which has been skimmed from history books in favor of national history. Restoring memory and give it back would bring awareness of the effects of the colonial period if need is expressed. We believe that by rooting our action directly into memorial history would be to recognize the Loyola plantation as a place to celebrate the abolition of slavery and to encourage people of French Guiana to take ownership of their past and use it as a tool to understand their present. However, such action must be done in relationship/collaboration with the people; not imposed onto them. The teaching from archaeology could act as the foundation for the construction of a symbol of a regional cultural identity capable of uniting all components of the French Guiana society. Using Loyola and its cemetery would be a first since, to our knowledge; no colonial plantations on which extensive excavations took place were used to document the lives and deaths of its residents with specific reference to slavery. Such action would also allow the French Guiana population to capture the essence of a colonial entreprise and the role it played.

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