

ARTIGO

THE MEMORY OF BRAZILIANS AND GUYANESES ABOUT
THE RUPUNUNI UPRISING IN THE FRONTIER BRAZIL –
GUYANA

Abstract

In this text, I re-elaborate the narratives and oral speech of some of the social subjects (Guyanese Negroes, Macushi Indigenous and Wapishana, regional Brazilians) about the Rupununi Uprising. The narratives and oral speech of the interviewees on the subject are partially constituted by the fieldwork that originated the Ethnography built as a doctorate thesis in the frontier Brazil-Guyana. The intention is to contextualize, by means of these narratives, the realms of memory that make up the political landscape of the 60s in these two countries, since the political event called Rupununi Uprising, characterized as one of the most polemic period in Guyana's history. In Brazil, milestones of this decade were the military dictatorship and the leftist movements. In Guyana it is a moment of the process of independence and of secession fights.

Keywords: History; Ethnicity; Nationality.

Resumo

Neste texto faço uma reelaboração das narrativas e oralidades de alguns dos sujeitos sociais (Negros guianenses, Indígenas Macuxi e Wapixana, Brasileiros regionais) sobre a Revolta do Rupununi. As narrativas e oralidades dos entrevistados nesse assunto se constituem em parte do trabalho de campo que deu origem a etnografia construída como tese de doutorado sobre etnicidade e nacionalidade na fronteira BrasilGuiana. A intenção é contextualizar, por meio dessas narrativas, os lugares de memória que compõem o cenário político da década de 60 nesses dois países, a partir do evento político denominado Revolta do Rupununi, caracterizado como um dos períodos mais polêmicos da história da Guiana. No Brasil, o que marcou essa década foi a ditadura militar e os movimentos de esquerda. Na Guiana é o momento do processo de independência e de lutas de secessão.

Palavras-Chave: História; Etnicidade; Nacionalidade.

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In this text, I re-elaborate the narratives and oral speech of some of the social subjects (Guyanese Negroes, Macushi Indigenous and Wapishana, regional Brazilians) interviewed, in the occasion of the fieldwork that originated my doctorate's thesis about ethnicity and nationality in the frontier Brasil-Guyana.

The intention here is to contextualize, by means of oral history and the memory of the frontier's inhabitants, the realms of memory that make up the political landscape in which the Rupununi Uprising happened, in the 60s, one of the most polemic periods in the history of Brazil and Guyana.

In Brazil, a milestone of this decade was the military dictatorship and the leftist movements. In Guyana it is a moment of the process of independence and of secession fights.

These events, in each nation-state, started to have a significant contribution to historiography and to the identity processes of the Americas. I make use of the theoretical and methodological support of memory and oral history, in order to build a narrative that comes from the speech of the social subjects. However, since I write accordingly to my educational background in the area of Anthropology, I cannot fail to register that the social subjects used to make up their narratives by building the identity of those whom they talk about. They sketch, thus, the composition of the ethnic groups inserted into this political event, a fact that allows us to acknowledge the niche of cultural diversity in the registry of memory.

The intention here is to weave the history of the social relations among the inhabitants of a frontier between two nation-states, having as excuse a political period of armed conflict.

Contextualizing the realm of memory

Guyana has ten geographic regions; the one that is bordered by Brazil is region Nine, also called Rupununi region. It is located in the Southern lands of Guyana, which are surrounded, in an extension of 6000 km, by a river with the same name. Along this extension are the frontiers between Guyana and Brazil and between Guyana and Venezuela.

Nowadays, the indigenous people that inhabit this region alongside the Rupununi and Tacutu rivers and in the Rupununi savannah get in touch often with their parents in Brazil, Venezuela and Guyana. Among the area that constitutes the Rupununi region, I have selected, for the sake of the field research, only the frontier between Brazil and Guyana. Indigenous from the ethnicities Macushi and Wapisha-

na, the Guyanese Negroes, the Indian descendants (there around called coolies) and regional Brazilians often live together there.

Since the Rupununi region is the scenario of one of the most significant political facts in that country, the history of this country is, consequently, the niche that helps in the interpretation of its multicultural composition and the social relations created towards Brazil.

It is hard to think of Guyana's history without referring to the centuries in which this land, yet in condition of non-unified colony, was colonized by different European countries. According to Colina (1997), in 1499, the Spanish walked the ground of what is called Guyana nowadays. During the XV and XVI centuries, Guyana Essequibo was under Spanish control, and was seen as part of the Venezuelan territory. Afterwards, the three colonies – Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice – have gone under Dutch domination, from 1648 to 1814 (XVII and XIX centuries), thereafter, yet in the XIX century, they have been English domain.

There are two readings concerning the indigenous participation during the Dutch colonization. Colina (1997) points out that the indigenous did not adapt themselves to this slave work agricultural system and, because of that, they penetrate towards south of the country, which explains their great population presence in that region. Farage (1991) presents the viewpoint in which there was a barter relation between Dutchmen and the indigenous, which was more rewarding for the Dutch commercial interests than to the purpose of using them as slave labor. Even though they were amidst the commercial network that was being developed in the colony lands, the indigenous slaves traffic was also a Dutch interest.

In spite of that, it was by the slave labor of Negroes who came from Africa that the Dutch colonization in those colonies have prospered, through indigenous agricultural slave labor in the cultivation of coffee, cotton, cocoa, tobacco and sugar cane.

The English colonies Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice were unified in 1831 with the name of English Guyana. However, England's rhythm of development, along with the interests of the settlers – English growers – installed into those colonies, and the first steps of the Industrial Revolution led England to decide for wage labor. There is another significant element to the end of Negro slavery in Guyana: the missions that got place in the British colonies. The missionaries' work contributed for the slaves to take a stand regarding their slave condition. Two great slave uprisings marked the history of the slave-based economy of Guyana: the Berbice Slave Uprising, in 1728, and the Demerara Rebellion, in 1823. Eventually, slavery in

Guyana was ended in 1837, thirty years after the end of the slave traffic (Cf. Vioti, 1998).

The substitution of slave labor brought to that country a mass of employed workers who came mainly from the West India¹. That spurred the relations between the ethnical groups there were. The internal and external scenarios collaborated to the relative autonomy (1928) of that colony, and that ended up, in 1961, with the promulgation of the Constitution and its Independence in 1966 (Cf. Serbin, 1981).

Since the colonial period in the public spheres of Guyana, a nationalist and anticolonial movement had been outlined. It was intensified with the arrival of Guyanese people that had gone to Great-Britain and the United States to study in a higher education course. Thus, in 1950, deriving from the movements led by these Guyanese intellectuals, it springs up the People's Progressive Party (PPP), which turns to be the main voice against the British crown. Although it had been categorized as a Party that was close to pro-soviet thoughts, it had a classist composition that contradicted this train of thought. The political landscape of the 50s and 60s in Guyana could be described as a consolidation of a party-rivalry culture that has risen within a colony situation and that, therefore, contributed to the process of independence. That was a period of representative ideological stands of what occurred in the post-war world; thence comes Great Britain and the United States' worries towards the Marxist-Leninist tendency of the PPP².

¹ A comparative study realized by Richard Bonham (1975) in 1967/71 between Guyana and Trinidad concerning the kind of work-related migration and the establishing of movement throughout patterns of plantation in the South Caribbean explains that, after the liberation of the slaves in these two countries, Negro free men established settlements for plantation in the suburbs and kick-started the part-time jobs. The author, by doing his analysis about the 70s, explain that the way these free men from Guyana and Trinidad and (later) the migrant workers brought in the Indentured Period organized themselves in plantation villages along the countryside lands. It is possible to understand, then, how they have gone through the XIX century to get themselves organized socioeconomically. He explains also that in so few countries there were peripheral plantations in which the farmers were auto-sufficient and had ecological problems so similar as had these two places (Guyana and Trinidad), what made their inhabitants look for sources of income outside the village. The formation of the modern Guyanese society does not result in very different aspects than those of Brazil in respect to the work-related migration. The studies of Richardson clear up, also, the fact that these employed workers, in Guyana's case, got to the astounding number of 250.000. They worked in the plantations and sugar production and were hired to live in a very precarious situation. They used to sign an indenture to five years of work, which, if renewed for five years more, would give them their travel back to India.

² In 1961, when there happened the first internal division between the main members of PPP - Chedi Jagan and Fores Burnham - the People's National Congress (PCN) led by Burnham showed up, which was quickly supported by Great-Britain and the United States. However, due to Burnham's passing through the Soviet Union and his Negro identity, according to Serbin (1981), the PCN would assume a socialist identification and go through an internal process of modification in its framework of co-optation of syndicates around the most classist and anti-colonialist banners. Moreover, they start to be part of the intellectual framework and to integrate the Black Power, Jamaican and Guevarist tendency that defend the Negroes' rights and are associated to the international fight against capitalism. After the independence, in 1966, the PCN stays in charge from 1964 to 1980, period in which the ethnic separation in the power relations of the politicians has intensified as a result

It is, though, within this political landscape, which unfolds itself in four decades (1960-1992) of worsening in Guyana's internal political relations, that the Rupununi Uprising happened, this armed conflict whose scenario was the Brasil-Guyana frontier in 1969. As a focus for this research, the Rupununi region brings with it the sociopolitical aspects that are interests to the study of the interethnic relations that are created in that area. There, more precisely in Lethem, border city with Brazil, the movement of secession of Guyana's history happened and had a significant repercussion in the Brazilian border city Bonfim, in the state of Roraima.

Oral speech and memory of this event

Oral speech about this political event is, also, the testimony of the history of the ethnic and racial fights that define the boundaries of the political history of Guyana. Let us see what says Mrs. Elizia:

Eu me lembro, na época da revolução eu tinha dez anos de idade. Mas, aí eu demorei na Guiana, antes de vir para o Brasil. Na época da revolução eu me lembro de alguns detalhes assim: quem começou essa revolução foi uma família que tinha aí na Guiana que ainda tem alguns deles chamada família Melvilles eles se revoltaram porque aquele presidente [Burnham] ele já faleceu. Essa família não queria que ele ganhasse as eleições. Ele e os negros. Aquele presidente era negro. Eles foram contra porque ele se elegeu. Então, essa família se revoltou. Era uma família bem grande, uma família tradicional aí da Guiana e rica, dona de terras e gado. Eles tinham aviões, fazendas (fazendas não era ranchinhos, não). Naquela época eles tinham fazendas. Minha mãe naquela época trabalhava com eles. Então eles se revoltaram aí começaram, eles conseguiram armas com ajuda de pessoas da Venezuela. Não sei como foi que eles conseguiram. E eles conseguiram as armas com essas pessoas da Venezuela e começaram a atirar. Quando a gente viu era tiroteio pra todo lado. (Guianense branca)^{3,4}

of the domination of the State apparatus. The PNC, ethnically composed by Negroes, loses the elections, after twenty-eight years in charge (1964-1992), in 1992, to a coalition between PPP, the party that had a multiethnic composition at first, though with Burnham's fall, got closer to the Indo-Guyanese and the Civic Party (considered multiracial). This composition elects Cheddi Jagan as president, who creates a multiracial ministry, fearing the worsening of the conflicts in the relation between Negroes and Asians as in 1964, for example.

³ "I remember, at the time of the Uprising I was ten years old. But, then, I lived in Guyana before coming to Brazil. From the time of the Uprising I remember some details like who started the revolution was a family that there was in Guyana, and there still are some of them out there, called the Melville family. They rebelled because that present had already passed out. This family did not want him to win the elections. He and the Negroes. That president was a Negro. They were against his election. Then, this family rebelled. It was a very big family, a traditional family from Guyana and rich, owner of lands and cattle. They had planes, farms (and not those little ones). By that time they had farms. My mother worked for them. Then they rebelled and started... they gathered the arms with help from Venezuelan people. I don't know how they gathered them. They gathered the arms from these people from Venezuela and started to shoot. When we figured it out, there were bullets all over." (White Guyanese).

⁴ As I explained in the introduction, the fragments of interviews here utilized compose the field material of the

To organize the metanarrative about this conflict I looked up into the memory of three generations taking as reference the period of independence of Guyana, which means the decade of the 60s. The first generation: the eldest people, those who lived the conflict as adults; the second generation: those who were children or teenagers by that time and also lived the revolutionary process (without understanding the dimensions of this political fact); and the third generation: people who were born from interethnic marriages from the second generation and today are in teenage, since by all means they lived and heard the stories about the Rupununi Uprising and the fights for independence.

According to the interviewees, the Uprising was constituted into an initiative from ranchers/farmers from the Rupununi savannahs, unsatisfied with Guyana's government, they tried to create an independent State, with the help of Venezuela. In this regard, they formed the Provisional Committee of the Rupununi Government (Comité Provisional Del Gobierno de Rupununi), coordinated by Valeria Hart. The uprising was suffocated and the unsatisfied were sheltered in Venezuela and Brazil. According to Colina (1997), through small particular planes from Venezuela the rebels were taken to the Brazilian and Venezuelan territories with an action that took three days. This conflict caused, until 1990, a difficult relation between Guyana and Venezuela⁵.

In this year, 1969, Guyana was under the power of Sr. Forbes Burnham, (Prime Minister), from PNC, the party that was closest to the Negroes, maybe because he was one of the Negroes in the Guyanese diaspora and brought this banner with him.⁶ Burnham was accused of being proximate to the Soviet Bloc and administe-

research I made, which was realized for the doctorate's thesis about Ethnicities and Nationalities in the border Brasil-Guyana, cited on the References section."

⁵ As stated by Fenty (2000), during the XVI and XVI centuries, European countries disputed among themselves over the colonies of North, Central and South Americas. Several of these feuds became border conflicts that did not have an end, (as in this case) although they had to undergo the justice's decision as a result of Guyana's independence. Venezuela claimed from England what had been almost all the Essequibo colony's territory. On the other hand, England claimed about the northern and western regions of Venezuela. The arbitral award of 1899 of the International Arbitration Court benefitted Venezuela into five thousand miles of territory. Venezuela was satisfied, however, when Guyana stood up to fight in its fight for independence, Venezuela thought it wise to query the award of 1899 and to start a conflict with Guyana for more territory. A Joint Committee was set up (Guyanese and Venezuelans altogether) to study the border limits. This query, which was made in the period of the declaration of Guyana's independence, evoked an uncomfortable environment between these two countries, especially when Venezuela harbors the insurgent from the Rupununi Uprising.

⁶ Let us understand Diaspora as Stuart Hall (2003) discusses it: those that were realized willingly, beyond the forced shifts situation, characterizing the subjects of the diaspora in an ambiguity of having a social and political commitment with their place and identity of origin without giving up on a new cultural construction of their identity. "Na, situação da diáspora, as identidades se tornam múltiplas, junto com os elos que as ligam a uma ilha de origem específica, há outras forças centrípetas:"(p.27).

ring from a perspective of a “Negro Republic”. These facts must have contributed to the dissatisfaction of the ranchers in the Rupununi Savannahs, whose best vocation was in the commerce of beef, which was concentrated in the hands of three English families identified as white and mestizos (miscegenation indigenous-white) that inhabited that region. In consonance to testimonies, they were the families “[...] Melvilles, Hart, e Bourik, que contavam com apoio dos grupos Ameríndios”⁷.

The economical factor and the sociopolitical factor of ethnic-racial separation complemented one another. As stated by Colina (1997), it was very common; moreover, it was inside Burnham’s political program of election that Guyana would have its lands confiscated by the State when it changed from a colony to a Socialist Republic. Thus, those who were settled in those lands could use them with a license of one year, but would not, in fact, have them. The State could request them anytime it found it convenient. As reported by Mora (apud Colina, 1997, p.7), “...los dueños de las haciendas existentes em la región sabían que Burnham tenía entre sus planos el de eliminar dichas licencias pues lo había expuesto en su programa político de las últimas elecciones.” Thus, moved by the idea that Burnham intended to confiscate their licenses and by making use of a discourse of exclusion towards the Amerindian, the Rupununi ranchers who did not support the socialist (and Negro) government of Guyana promoted that uprising.

The bibliography about Guyana points out one more cause to the Rupununi Uprising, and this seems to be reassured in the testimonies of the first generation inhabitants of Guyana. It is said that a mass of ex-slaves (now free men) was encouraged to occupy lands and to populate the rural area of this country because of a preference for employed workers who came from West India. That would have led to a policy of encouragement to inhabitation and to the exploitation of bauxite, gold mines and plantation of rice. The ranchers of the Rupununi did not easily accept this idea, for the illegal beef exportation to Brazil, inasmuch as it was the legal commerce with Canada, has made them rich and made them strong as a social group, with economic and political power in this border area. Testimonies like Mr. Joaquim’s, a Venezuelan who lives in Bonfim, seems to corroborate to this thesis: “Quando aconteceu aquela briga aí em 68/69, os Melvilles e os Hart não queriam os pretos entrar dentro do Rupununi [...] mas o governo (foi) que abriu a pista ali no Manari, por isso que eles pousaram. Aí entrou preto de bolo”.

The local memory of the inhabitants of the border about the conflict period that enhances visibility on the Guyanese national scene to region Nine and to the

⁷ ...Melville, Hart, and Bourik, which counted on the Amerindian group.”

city of Lethem is very confusing. There is confusion in the testimonies of the youngest people (second and third generations that came after Guyana's independence revolution) and in the memory of the oldest between the years of 1966 (its independence), 1969 (the Rupununi Uprising) and even the border disputes with Venezuela⁸, which, as consonant to Colina (1997), "ocorreu oportunamente"⁹ in favor of the independence period.

In the year of 1969, the border dispute started to spring up at a good moment, and then the Venezuelan governors seized the opportunity and restarted the discussion by means of supporting the revolutionaries. It could be seen by the testimonies that this fact provokes a clutter of interpretations from the most humble people.

They mistake in their testimonies the border dispute that has again been discussed in 1962 with the revolutionary process of the Rupununi region that happened in 1969.

The youth (third generation) usually say:

Ah é? Eu não me lembro direito. Mas eu me lembro que papai falava que na guerra ninguém podia sair para lugar nenhum. Sabe ali onde eles matam gado? Pois, é ali estava cheio de negros mortos, ali dentro. Eles arrastavam os negros pra dentro depois matavam. pra Georgetown para os soldados descere pra cá, mas ninguém, nem os aviões, não podiam descer aqui porque estava cheio de camburão ali dentro. Mas, eu não me lembro muita coisa. Sei que cortaram o contato de telefone. (vendedora, Coolie, de uma loja em Lethem).¹⁰

The second-generation inhabitants report that:

Olha eu me lembro uma vez teve essa revolução, a Venezuela com a Guiana. Agora eu não sei o ano. Nesse tempo eu tinha oito anos e o meu irmão era polícia. Aí nesse dia minha mãe ela disse: minha filha vamos pescar na beira do Tacutu. E aí quando começou essa guerra, a revolução na Guiana. Aí minha mãe dizia assim pra nós: Olha tá tendo guerra, tá matando as pessoas. Naquele tempo eu não sabia muito bem, mas eu me lembro da re-

⁸ Durante gran parte del Siglo 19, Venezuela y Gran Bretaña se reclamaban territorio mutuamente. Finalmente, Inglaterra ganó las tres colonias de Esequibo, Demerara y Berbice a los holandeses en 1814. Más tarde, estas tres colonias se unificaron como la Colonia de Guayana Británica. Venezuela reclamaba casi todo lo que había sido la colonia original de Esequibo. Por su parte, Inglaterra reclamaba gran parte de lo que ahora son las regiones orientales y norteñas de Venezuela (Fenty, 2000)

⁹ "happened on time".

¹⁰ "Oh, is it? I don't quite remember. But I remember that dad said that from the war no one was allowed to go out. Do you know that place where they slaughter cattle? That's it, it was full of dead Negroes, inside it. They dragged them inside to kill them. They called from here to Georgetown for the soldiers to come down here, but no one, not even the planes could come here because there were a lot of paddy wagons there. But I don't remember much. I know they broke the telephone contract (Coolie, a salesperson in a store in Lethem)."

volução. Eu me lembro também que a polícia começou a bater no meu irmão. Sabe nesse tempo eu via meu irmão sofrendo apanhando da polícia. Ele era da polícia, mas mesmo assim ele apanhava (Guianense negra atual moradora de Boa Vista)¹¹.

According to Colina (1997), Venezuela's interest in questioning the "Guyana Essequibo" lands and the right to nine thousand miles from the territorial sea, were reasons that encouraged insurgents to carry forward the idea of creating an independent State. Thenceforth, instead of thinking that the Rupununi Uprising has taken place only in the dates there was its the peak, from January 02 to 05, one can affirm that, since the events related to the independence, the ranchers' willfulness had already been stimulated by the Venezuelan's queries over the rights to the territories and maritime boundaries.

Up to those two moments (Independence and the Rupununi Uprising), this region had never tried military presence. There was no policy of security of the borders by military presence in Guyana. Only when the Rupununi Uprising took place the Military Detachments, whose only means of transportation was the aerial kind, going first from Georgetown to Lethem, then to Brazil, through the airport of Boa Vista, in Roraima. It is a case of an armed militia that probably kick-started the formation of an army. In a testimony about the period of the independence and of the Rupununi Uprising, Mrs. Lindalva explains how the army showed up and how that uprising happened, somewhat based on her identification with Guyana:

Mas o que me motivou para a Guiana é que houve uma revolução na Guiana e eu tava em Boa Vista. Então, desceu para cá um monte de aviãozinho bimotor, eu trabalhava no aeroporto e já sabia falar alguma coisa de inglês, ai..., aí deparei com outras pessoas indígenas me falaram que aqui [Bonfim] tava recrutando pessoas para ir para o exército da Guyana, ai eu com aquele pensamento na cabeça, aqueles avião, aquelas fardas, tudo achava bonito, embarquei para Georgetown sem o consentimento dos meus pais e fui embora (aos 16 anos). Passei cinco anos no exército da Guiana, daí tive uma larga experiência até pra deixar aqui pro pessoal... (Brasileira regional)¹².

¹¹ "Look, I remember once there was this uprising, Venezuela against Guyana. But I don't remember the year. At that time I was 8 and my brother was a policeman. That day my mother said: my daughter, let's go fishing at the Tacutu's margins. And when this war started, this revolution in Guyana. Then my mother said to us: There is a war, they're killing people. At that time I did not understand things, but I remember the revolution. I remember the policemen started to beat my brother. You know, at that time I used to see my bother being beaten by the police. He was from the police, but he was beaten anyway. (Guyanese negro woman who lives in Boa Vista)."

¹² But what motivated me more to go to Guyana is that there was a revolution in Guyana and I was in Boa Vista. Then many a small plane came down here. I worked at the airport and already knew how to say some things in English, then... then I met some indigenous people that said Bonfim was recruiting some people to go to Guyana's army, and I, having that thought in mind, those planes, those uniforms, I found it all beautiful. I departed to Georgetown without my parents' allowance when I was 16. I spent five years in Guyana's army, then I got a large experience to leave here to my pals... (Regional Brazilian).

As Caires (1988) states, it was only after 1973 that the Guyanese society starts to be militarized. Before that, there was an armed militia located in the coast area of the capital, Georgetown, and in the cities of Linden and New Amsterdam. This author asserts that it took place after the elections of 1973, when Burnham was victorious. “After 1973, Guyanese society was militarised [sic]. There was an expanding army, a national service and a people’s militia. The civil service was corroded by the cult of the party card, the police were politicised [sic] and the media were government owned and controlled” (1988, p. 191/2).

In the memory of the indigenous, the Rupununi Uprising was a political question between white Negro people, as reports the Tuxaua of the indigenous people Macushi de Saint Ignatius:

Não eu não me lembro muito coisa sobre isso. A única coisa que eu me lembro, que eles estavam falando na época é que quem dominava aqui era os Melvilles e os Hort. Eram eles que dominava essa região aqui. Então quando o governo estava botando outras coisas pra cá, já tinha policiais e tudo eles não aceitavam [que o governo estava querendo trazer mais gente pra cá [os pretos]]. Eles é que ensinavam, eles que falavam que o preto é assim. Eles eram brancos. Eu acho que queriam dominar tudo, queria tudo pra eles. Eles tratavam como se fosse deles porque eles comandavam tudo aqui..mas, depois mudou tudo. (Homem Indígena).¹³

As reported but the interviewee, the Amerindians did not participate in this conflict because the quarrel was almost all restricted to the urban area and directly bound to the powerful people in that region, which were historically composed by white men (colonizers) and Negroes (ex-slaves, descendants who were born in Guyana, and the sons of interethnic marriages between white and black people). Furthermore, the Amerindians lived in their villages depending on hunting and fishing, until that period, establishing timid interactions with the other ethnic groups.

The international conjuncture in which people lived the Cold War and the expansion of socialism and communism in the world, makes us understand it to be acceptable that a revolt in Guyana’s countryside, on the border with Brazil, would compromise the relations with the Brazilian government. This is so because in the dictatorial political regime under which people lived in Brazil, any contact through

¹³ “I don’t remember much about this. The only thing I know is that they spoke, at that time, that the Melvilles and the Hort dominated this place. They ruled this very region. So when the government was setting everything here, there already were policemen and they didn’t accepted nothing else[...] from what the government wanted to bring to us [Negroes]. At first they taught us, they said that black people are like this. They were black. I think they wanted to dominate everything; they wanted it all for themselves. They treated us as if we were theirs because they ruled everything around here, but then everything changed. (Indigenous man)”.

frontiers was extremely alarmed by the military as taking a stand against national security, a discourse that was used very often. Moreover, Guyana had conquered recently its independence and was governed by a president who claimed himself to be a Marxist-Leninist.

In Brazil, we lived, in 1968, the peak of repression and torture to those who dared to upset the military government. In the State of Roraima, city of Bonfim, where the border with the Guyanese city of Lethem is drawn by the Tacutu River, there is a stretched social relation in respect to economic and cultural aspects since the colonial period. Hence, right after what happened, Bonfim was taken by military forces, as testimonies from its oldest inhabitants confirm: “apareceu policia de tudo que é jeito por aqui”¹⁴, explained the oldest teacher in the city.

It is important to register that several reports from the interviewees’ memory in Brazil and/or in Guyana the recollections and/or explanations about other subjects bring with them the historical elements that show the consequences or the way the Rupununi Uprising was spread in Brazil. The testimony of the director of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in Roraima, in 2004, about traits of the socio-economical development of Roraima, also confirms that when he says:

A partir da independência da Guiana a coisa mudou bastante, inclusive a própria movimentação revolucionária na Guiana que abriu de uma certa forma, as perspectivas do governo militar da época em povoar esta região. Em por exemplo, a abertura da estrada 401 [que sai de Boa Vista a Bonfim], a construção da ponte do Makuxi [porque nós estamos numa distância de cento e poucos quilômetros, é bastante perto de fronteira]. E a movimentação toda que estava ocorrendo lá, de certa forma preocupava, a questão de segurança na nossa fronteira. E uma das medidas, entre várias outras, nesta mesma época houve a intensificação de recuperação de estradas, de abertura da estrada pra Manaus. Então, esse período foi um período que intensificou um pouco mais as atividades de investimentos federais em Roraima, em função disso. (Brasileiro regional).¹⁵

This shows that the Brazilian government immediately took actions to politically surround the area from which there was a chance for a revolutionary political movement.

¹⁴ “All kinds of police popped up around here”.

¹⁵ “Since Guyana’s Independence things changed a lot, including the very revolutionary movement in Guyana, which broadened, in a certain way, the perspectives of the current military government to populate this region. For example, the opening of Route 401 [through which one goes from Boa Vista to Bonfim], and the construction of the Mucuxi bridge [because we are very close to the border, within a distance of one hundred kilometers]. All the movement that was happening, somehow worried us, a question of our borders’ security. And one of these actions, among many others, at this same time there was an intensification on the rehabilitation of roads, especially that one to Manaus. Therefore, this period was a period of expansion in the activities of Federal investments in Roraima.”

Consequently, it intensified the border policy by means of an opening of an infrastructure that would allow the military to develop their surveillance work about the so called “frontiers at risk”.

The Rupununi Uprising, whose causes were, above all, about economy and ethnic-racial separation, started to be internationally seen only because of its political and ideological characteristics. In Brazil, the repercussion took place right after the protection to the northern frontier. People lived the peak of the armed repression to the insurgent movements in the country. According to testimonies from the oldest inhabitants, Bonfim was alert, tense, and completely militarized. The oldest teacher says that: “mais do que hoje, a cadeia daqui (Bonfim) e de lá (Boa Vista) vivia cheia de preto”¹⁶.

This historical fact is then attested as a milestone of the construction of these two nation-states, of the inter-relation that involves them and of the consequences to the ethnic groups, inhabitants of the frontier, and of the way of perceiving and narrating the conjuncture conflicts of each reality.

We situate, among other consequences to the Brazilian internal border policy, that this was a reason for the Brazilian government to decide setting the Border Platoon in that municipality.

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¹⁶ “Even more than today, the jails here [Bonfim] and there [Boa Vista] were all full of Negroes.”

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