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Riding the Spirit Log in Suriname

January 19, 2016 4:38 PM MST



In Suriname's densely forested interior, boulders and rock formations clog the rivers and make them unnavigable except by native canoes.

Photo by Edward I. Placidi

Suddenly, they lunged at the Ba-kra, ramming the Spirit Log into his left shoulder. The startled Ba-kra darted to his right, avoiding another charge. But they had surrounded him now and, wild-eyed, began running around him in frenzied circles. “Ba-kra! Ba-kra! they shrieked, closing in tighter on the demon with each circle. The arrival of an outsider had unleashed a collective, soul-deep emotion, turning the score of lithe young Saramakan men into a hungry pack.

One leaped from the circle, shaking a bean-filled gourd and smashing it in the Ba-kra's face. Hands reached out to jostle and punch the unsuspecting visitor to the village. The three carriers of the Spirit Log pursued him relentlessly, pounding the hardwood cylinder on his chest and back. “Ba-kra! Ba-kra!”

It had begun innocently, unsuspectingly, but what a set up it turned out to be.

Via motorized canoe, with a guide and boatman, I was gliding down rivers and staying at villages and camps deep in the sea of tropical forest that makes up most of the country of [Suriname](#) in South America. Little known and visited, the country has its own Amazon-like basin but, unlike neighbor Brazil, has not been in the throes of a mad, Wild West race to development and riches. When the dirt road ends, some three or four hours drive from the Caribbean coast, essentially so too does the mining, logging and other commercial activity. There's virtually nothing out there, except for scattered Maroon (descendants of slaves) and indigenous Amerindian villages along with a handful of research and tourist camps reached mainly by small plane. The reason is largely topographical: transportation in Surinam's densely forested interior (much of it tropical rain forest) is precluded by the brown-hued boulders and rock formations that clog the rivers and make them unnavigable, except by native canoes.

That morning we had powered through the most treacherous rapids (sulas, as they are called here) as well as the most spectacular scenery so far. Amid a stunning confusion of swirling white water and smooth-skinned boulders, we traversed — surprisingly easily — the most infamous sula: “The Rapid of the Lost Iron Machine.” Some years back, the first canoe with an outboard engine on it attempted to negotiate the waters, hit the rocks, split up and went down, hence the moniker.

We stopped first at the “Christian” village of New Aurora and would next go to the traditional “animist” village of Tjaikonde. Residents of clean, active and prosperous New Aurora warned me that the contrast would shock me. It would be an understatement.

We dipped under a row of palm fronds strung across the path and entered into Tjaikonde. We all have good and evil spirits following us, believe the villagers, but bad spirits can be stopped because they have bad backs and cannot bend under obstacles such as a curtain of palm fronds. The dirt lanes winding between thatched huts badly in need of repair were empty, and silent. Plots cluttered with scarecrow-like totems worked hand-in-hand with the palm fronds strung across doorways to deter undesirable spirits.

Rounding a curve in the path, we heard drums and, about 50 yards ahead, saw a snaking line of dancing men hoisting a large log. As the gap between us closed, drums pounding louder, I could see their highly defined muscles rippling with each movement. And then they were in my face. At first, I thought I had inadvertently gotten in their way. But the log kept coming at me, no matter which way I turned. And the circle of Saramakan, racing around me, had hemmed me in. I was trapped. As they shoved and slammed me, screaming “Ba-kra! Ba-kra!,” a beam of survival-mode clarity penetrated my confusion: If I went down I would be in much, much bigger trouble, helpless on the ground. I had to stay on my feet.

This story actually has its origins in the 1700s. Holland, Suriname's former colonial power, established sugar plantations and imported slaves from Africa to work them. The Dutch struggles with the French and British for control in the region, however, left them vulnerable and mass escapes ensued. Attempts to bring back the slaves — using Dutch troops as well as different hired mercenaries — failed. The result was a re-creation of Africa deep in the Surinam bush; banding together by tribe, they founded villages in the safety of the distant interior that resembled those back home.

For more than 200 years, animist African cultures remained isolated here. In recent years, inevitably, contact with the outside expanded, and men set off to work in the timber and mining operations, bringing more of the accouterments and ways of the modern world back to the

villages. Some have converted to Christianity, yet others, like the warriors of Tjaikonde, cling to their animist beliefs.

All of a sudden, my guide, Lionel Ovarman, jumped in front of the group's leader, a pillar of a man at the front of the Spirit Log, and threw his arms around him, holding tight. They exploded in angry argument, a high-decibel shouting match in the Saramakan language (Lionel is originally from the capital, Paramaribo, but was "adopted" as an adult by a local family in a nearby village and had spent five years out among the forest denizens, learning their ways). All eyes were now on the standoff between the two, Lionel continuing to keep the man in his strong grip.

Our boatman, Otto Fonkel, had presence of mind. He saw the momentary window of opportunity — of distraction — and seized it. I felt a hand close on my wrist and then I was yanked hard, right out of the crowd. Otto yelled "Run!...and keep running...they will not follow beyond the sound of the drums."

It was a vacation time in Suriname for the timber, mine and other workers. And the young males of Tjaikonde were back home for a few weeks. Their absence, however, had left the village vulnerable to an invasion of bad spirits, and they had to be purged. They had gathered around a hut, dancing to the pounding drum inside, and then set off behind the Spirit Log which they would use to ride evil spirits out of the village. Not only did we stumble upon a cleansing ritual in progress, but the ultimate symbol of a bad spirit, a white man, had walked right into their ceremony. Ba means bad, and kra spirit, but Ba-kra also has a double meaning: it is the term generally used to refer to the white man. My arrival made their day.

Otto did not let go of my wrist until we stumbled and collided into each other, almost going head first into the ground. We were running at full speed now, down the dirt paths between the huts in the direction of the river bank where our boat was tied up. The Saramakan had hesitated a moment, taking in our escape, but now they were after us. Yet, for all the outpouring of emotion when they had me surrounded, they now seemed to have little enthusiasm for the chase. We outdistanced them easily, leaving the drums behind. They were apparently just happy to see the Ba-kra flee the village.

Though only an occasional tourist comes in, the villagers of the region want their culture and privacy assiduously guarded. Foreigners are required to sleep and eat in a separate compound of several huts walled off from YoYo, the village used as a base camp for exploration of the area. Visitors are not allowed to walk through the villages without being accompanied by a guide, and even then you encounter an uneasiness that hangs in the air. Photographing villagers – and thus stealing their spirits – is taboo.

Reaching the river bank, hearts pounding, we leaped into the boat. Otto ripped the cord and, with Lionel arriving and jumping in, we were off. It was over; we had escaped. I looked at Lionel and Otto, they looked at me and at each other, and then we all began laughing hysterically. The anxiety of a bizarre five minutes that had seemed to last forever melted away. Suddenly, we felt exhilarated, beaming from ear to ear.

Lionel explained that they were probably going to take me to the hut where the drums were beating, keep me there possibly all night as part of the ritual, and then ride me out of the village on the Spirit Log.

There were a few harrowing moments, but in the end it was the most exciting five minutes of my life. And I'll never forget the brief interlude when I was a Ba-kra in the jungle of southern Suriname.

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