

Anthropology Book Forum

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Cayenne and the transatlantic world-economy. From interdependence to commercial self-organization?

Review by Sarai Barreiro Argüelles

Approvisionnement Cayenne sous L'Ancien Régime. Archéologie et histoire des réseaux commerciaux.

By Catherine Losier

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Guyana's colonial history was shaped by 17th century European trade interests. Slavery decimated almost all native groups, so workforce issues were solved through a coercive trade whose exclusive goal consisted in providing profits for the French metropole. To understand the origins of the particular social groups that emerged from the systematic exploitation of forced labour, it is imperative to assess the European economic system.

In *Approvisionnement Cayenne sous L'Ancien Régime. Archéologie et histoire des réseaux commerciaux*, Catherine Losier leads us towards this goal by highlighting the relationship between the colony of Guyana and its French metropolis thereby revealing links established with the colonial sub-systems of North America. The author's primary purpose is to elucidate the place and continuity occupied by Guyana in the socio-economic system of the modern world. Through an analysis of archaeological material culture, this research can be placed at the core of postcolonial studies and Atlantic maritime history.

The book's first chapter provides a corpus of spatio-temporal landmarks of Cayenne port as well as a chronological approach to the economic and political history of the site, from the early European-Native interactions, followed by colonization attempts, and ending with its establishment by the earliest French settlers. In this same chapter, Losier provides an overview of the agricultural projects of the French metropolis. The initial products of interest were cotton and tobacco, and later, coffee, indigo dyes, and cocoa. In particular, sugarcane plantations and their derivative products became the main economic capital of the colony. Further to this overview of the historical context, Losier emphasizes the inadequate and underserved condition of the colony, expressed in most of the official documents between Cayenne and the French metropolis. Losier argues that the inadequate supply of provisions at colonial Cayenne should be reflected in the archaeological record. By comparing and analyzing the ceramic collection with archival reports, Losier reveals a large concentration and diversity of ceramic products exogenous to France. The core of her study consists in demonstrating that the commercial networks associated with Guyana were not deficient, but instead, implying a more complex commercial situation than the one portrayed in historical archives.

The second chapter develops the historical context and provides a hearty but necessary corpus of data. It details Guyana's association with the Circum-Caribbean area since the end of the 17th century. Special attention is given to Europe's economic conjuncture and the conflicts which arose among France, Spain, Holland and England; which regularly affected the overseas colonies. One of the most relevant aspects of this chapter is Losier's efforts in placing Guyana in the Atlantic commercial sphere. To achieve this, her research is based on data provided by official correspondence documenting the arrivals of ships, their home port and their cargo; unveiling a significant part of Guyana's commercial organization and external links between 1688 and 1794.

The third chapter is dedicated entirely to the analysis of the archaeological collection of at least 17,480 pieces of ceramic and glass. This study highlights the dynamic regions of the European trade with Guyana. The material culture examined in this chapter dates from 1664 to 1794, and provides an arduous analysis of the ceramic production of six workshops and their historical context. This chapter illustrates, in a very visual way through the inclusion of images of the artefacts, the crucial periods of each occupation. The study not only displays the techno-morpho-stylistic characteristics of these artefacts, but also reveals the geographical zones of European production and their places in specific supply networks.

The fourth chapter summarizes three crucial moments in Guyana's colonial history. It begins with the founding period of the colony (1664 to 1725) and shows the isolation of Guyana, which was limited to a single trading partner, France. In a second phase (late 17th to the early 18th century), Cayenne is referred to as a territory without economic growth at a time when the other French West Indies colonies were in full expansion. Finally, the third period (second half of the 18th century until the first abolition of slavery in 1794), testifies to the failed attempts of the crown to populate Cayenne and a conspicuous mitigation of the mercantile economic policy. As a result, self-organization emerges as more concrete interactions increase trade with the other French colonies of the American east-coast in an attempt to respond to the poor conditions of their dense population.

In the last chapter, Losier takes a critical point of view with regard to Guyana as a marginal colony in the Atlantic commercial world of the Circum-Caribbean, but no less complex in its symbiosis with a parasitic metropolis. This argument convincingly demonstrates that unilateral discourses of the center/periphery dichotomy can easily fade away when means for interdependence are out of order. In the specific case of Guyana, its peripheral status did not involve a complete exclusion from the French system. However, even though the analysis provided new insights into some episodes of autonomy in supply networks with the Caribbean islands and North-American colonies, food shortages seem to be the Achilles heel that oppressed the colony.

Embedded in postcolonial studies, this analysis accomplishes its goal by highlighting the many facets of the Guyanese colonial economy, starting from the material remains left by the colonizing system. *Aprovisionner Cayenne* is a solid contribution to Circum-Caribbean archaeology. As was shown in the case of the colonial Guyana, the survival of the servile society of the Old Regime was intrinsically linked to the colonial supply networks. Therefore, the economic analysis of the colonial project as a means to understand the origin of a society overshadowed by power relations and interdependence is crucial.

The referred analysis is the result of a work which attempts to recover historical memory, and which contributes to an attempt to seize the roots of the current Guyanese society. This society remains as

alive and self-maintained as it is dynamic in its endeavor at constructing its identity and at reaffirming its legitimacy to the territory. The volume will appeal to a public that is interested in the economic history of the modern world, but it is also accessible to those interested in the colonial history of Guyana.

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