

French Guyana has emerged, like in the rest of France, from the long period of confinement. The situation remains difficult, particularly because of its proximity to Brazil, which has been hit hard by the epidemic. Many Amerindian populations live along the Oyapock, the border river. Are they resistant to the epidemic and in what ways? By questioning our societies and our relationship with nature, the health crisis may reveal the specificities of these communities and above all what they can teach us...

*This is what **Damien Davy**, anthropologist, Director of the "Oyapock" Observatory at the CNRS, who has been working for more than 20 years in French Guyana in close contact with Amerindian populations, and **Mirdad Kazanji**, Director of the Institut Pasteur of French Guyana, in the front line of the health battle with other health professionals and State services, explain to us.*

Mirdad, at the time of deconfinement, what is the health situation in French Guyana?

Since 4 March, 164 cases and 1 death have been confirmed in French Guyana, and as of 14 May, there are no more patients hospitalized in intensive care units. The first outbreaks have been brought under control and the virus is circulating at a low level for the moment. Nevertheless, there is a strong territorial heterogeneity and the outbreak of new clusters, the first, familial, in Matoury near Cayenne and the second, community-based, in Saint-Georges, a town on the Oyapock, a border river with Brazil. This is why the ARS (*the regional health agency*) maintains surveillance and screening in order to control the risk of imported cases and any development of local chain of transmission.

The Institut Pasteur remains mobilized, with the performance of around one hundred biological analyses every day, the imminent



Mirdad Kazanji and Damien Davy
Photo credit: IFGR / CNRS

implementation of a screening drive at the institute and the presence of an employee in Saint-Georges to investigate the intra-family transmission of the virus and take samples, as part of the Epi-Covid study that we have been conducting since the beginning of the epidemic in French Guyana.

We have real concerns for the city of St. George with 37 confirmed cases for 4,220 inhabitants, including 17 new cases since last Thursday. It remains confined and important measures have just been taken by the Prefecture to deal with the epidemic: testing of the entire population, distribution of masks, hotel solution to isolate those who test positive, deployment of medical equipment in the health centre but also reinforcement of police surveillance on the river. The Amerindian village of Camopi was also placed in preventive confinement at the request of the mayor.

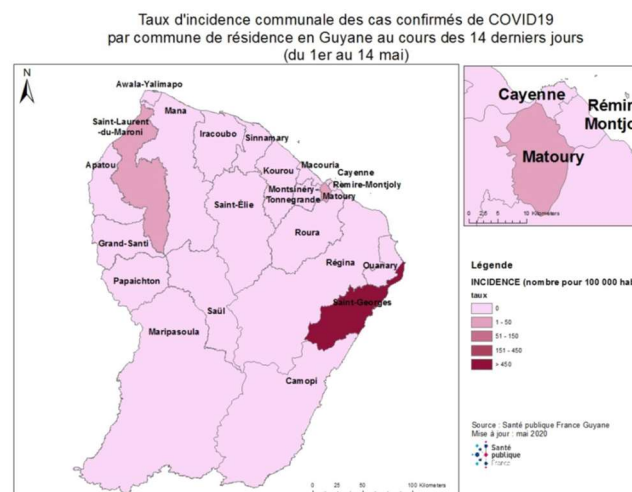
So your fear of the virus spreading from Brazil is confirmed?

It is certain that several cases have been imported from Brazil because of the proximity of Saint-Georges to the town of Iapoque just on the other side of the river, which has been hard hit by the virus (nearly 60 confirmed cases, including one death, and 151 suspected cases). It is a city of transit and recruitment of gold seekers who then come to illegal gold sites in Guyana forests. They often live in underprivileged neighbourhoods, where the virus spreads more easily, and can transmit it to the local population, especially the Amerindians who are very present along the river. Moreover, the fact that families are often settled on both banks of the river does not make things any easier either. Two-thirds of the inhabitants of Saint-Georges are of Brazilian origin. **The notion of a border does not exist here.**

Iapoque is located in the Amapa, the most affected state of Brazil. Deaths are recorded every day; 3,000 cases have been confirmed, that is to say a rate of 4 positive cases per 1,000 inhabitants. And it's not over yet: the peak of the epidemic is expected at the end of May at the earliest in Brazil, which officially already has 14,000 deaths.

"Let us avoid together that East Guyana becomes the new metropolitan Great East"
Mirdad Kazanji

That is why I fear that French Guyana will not reach the epidemiological peak until June, especially because coronavirus, like seasonal influenza, seems to be more easily transmitted during the rainy season and the onset of winter in the southern hemisphere. What happens next will largely depend on the behaviour of the populations and their adherence to the strong but necessary measures taken by the political authorities. Let us avoid together that East Guyana becomes the new metropolitan Great East...



Confirmed Covid-19 positive cases by areas in the last 14 days (from 1st to 14th of May)
Source : ARS of French Guyana

What about the Amerindian populations of French Guyana? In a recent article¹, you present them, Damien, as "confined to the confines of the Republic".

An overseas territory, French Guyana has realities and standards that are far removed from those of the metropole. And within French Guyana itself, the areas in the south are even more remote due to their geographic isolation, their strong cultural specificities and their limited access to healthcare, drinking water and public facilities. Approximately 3,500 Amerindians live in the communes of Camopi, along the Oyapock River, and Maripasoula, in the west, along the Maroni River bordering Suriname. Three peoples, the

¹ Available in French on the [blog Covidam of LEEISA](https://www.leeisa.cnrs.fr/) :
<https://www.leeisa.cnrs.fr/>

Teko, the Wayana and the Wayãpi live in 80 villages scattered along the banks of these two rivers and their tributaries.

They did not necessarily have the same containment conditions, whether for distance learning for children or for health protection. Hygiene products were delivered to them with food by helicopter. Moreover, they are populations living outdoors and in groups, making social distancing measures impossible. In Camopi, the reflex at the beginning of the confinement was to go to the 'abattis'² from a few dozen minutes to an hour by pirogue. The communities were thus broken up into small family units, which is a way of protecting themselves, as they had already been able to do during past periods of outside intrusion, notably to flee from colonial pressure.



*Abattis – photo
credit: CNRS*

This Covid-19 crisis is therefore indicative of the specificities of these populations, perhaps of their difficulties, but also of their strong capacity for resistance because they have so far been preserved from the virus. One of the keys to their resilience is their great food autonomy. They still

rely heavily today on hunting, fishing and slash and burn agriculture. I estimate that in Trois-Sauts (which has about 800 people), there is more than 80% self-consumption, even if they have to travel to buy equipment or fuel for their boats. In Camopi bourg, on the Moyen-Oyapock, it is more heterogeneous among the 1,000 people, but the families still open a slaughterhouse every year to produce manioc, yams, bananas...

Finally, this crisis shows that policies cannot be applied identically in our Republic depending on the territories. Even if the Amerindians are French citizens, protected like the others, the reality is quite different in these isolated territories.

You explain that these populations have already suffered numerous epidemics in the past, which must surely have strengthened their resilience as well.

Yes, it is a reality in all the Americas. In some places, 80 to 90% of communities have been decimated in a few decades by imported viruses. There was certainly colonial violence, slavery of the Amerindian populations - but which remained quite marginal in Guyana - and therefore also diseases brought by the colonizers (cholera, measles, flu...). First on the coast, from the 17th and 18th centuries. Southern Amerindians had more sporadic and later contacts in the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, the population fell to less than 2,000 people throughout the territory, whereas it is estimated that there were at least 50,000 Amerindians in French Guyana before the arrival of the Europeans. The Jesuit missions accentuated the microbial shock by regrouping certain

² Cultivated plot of land on which traditional shifting cultivation is practised, known as slash-and-burn agriculture.

communities. In 1949 there were only 50 Teko, today there are about 600. The six contemporary Amerindian peoples are thus the fruit of the recomposition of peoples partly implanted in Guyana and partly in Brazil. Colonization was a strong accelerator of this mixing.

The Amerindians were therefore vulnerable to imported diseases, but they are no longer vulnerable today, especially since they are vaccinated and are more in contact with other coastal populations. This is unfortunately not the case in Brazil, where the Amerindians of Amazonia are affected like the rest of the population by the virus and are also victims of an upsurge in violence by landowners who want to take over their territory, with almost total impunity.

Are the threats to these communities increasing?

In French Guyana, deforestation of their habitat areas is low compared to Brazil. The real problem is illegal gold mining. The Teko and Wayana territories are rich in gold resources and the populations fear the presence of illegal gold miners, who are becoming more and more numerous despite the military operations carried out by the French State. The myth of the Eldorado and the gold rush is still very much alive, with the price of gold per kilo ranging from 40,000 to 50,000 euros, while the standard of living in Brazil continues to decline.

"The real problem is illegal gold mining, not deforestation, in French Guiana."

Damien Davy

This is an economic and social reality of which gold miners are often the first victims because they put their lives at risk. And they threaten the lives of the Amerindians. Firstly, as Mirdad said, because they can be vectors for viruses such as coronavirus. Second, because their actions contaminate rivers with mercury and increase the turbidity of the water, which endangers the health of the indigenous people. In my opinion, there is an urgent need to put an end to illegal gold mining, which cannot be accepted anywhere in France.



Illegal gold mining camp – Credit : CNRS

Close to the natural elements that are the forest and the river, are the Amerindians still the guardians of these common goods?

Indeed, they remain the custodians of this common property and have in any case a great knowledge of it. They continue to live there and have developed an original, close and respectful relationship with nature. For example, they still live from their crops on tropical Amazonian soils, without the use of inputs. They use the forest in a sustainable way and have contributed to developing the biodiversity of the Amazonian forest.

We must recognize their way of being in the world which does not distinguish between humans and non-humans and deals with balances. There is a Wayampi expression that says: "*we must not overdo it*". This means that certain natural areas must be preserved, that the hunter who hunts more than he needs must be disapproved of, as must the hunter who does not share. Even if their way of life has been and still is influenced of course (introduction of money yesterday, breakthrough of evangelist churches and new technologies today), they continue to live in small villages organized on their own family and social rules and in a strong link with nature.

We must let them show us this ancestral knowledge and the youth of these communities must also understand the importance of keeping this knowledge. It is our collective responsibility. Each piece of knowledge is interesting and gives a point of view on the world to better understand the reality of ecosystems. This sharing between us, humans, and the others existing -plants, animals, forests...- must be that of balance. This is what the current crisis also reveals to us. The Amerindian populations can help us to avoid a predatory vision of nature.



Village along the river – Credit : R.Lietar/Imazone

“The Amerindian populations can help us to avoid a predatory vision of nature.”

Can a body such as Grand Customary Council of the Amerindian and Bushinenge populations play this role of recognition and defence of their interests?

The Amerindians of Guyana, like the Bushinengé³, are in a legalist posture. They want to remain French even if their social mode of functioning is different but insist that their specificities be respected. The Grand Council, which is a consultative body for the political authorities on any land, environmental or cultural issue, participates in the recognition of these peoples and gives them a right of expression. It had yet to gain legitimacy, but it had already made it possible to recognize the rights of those communities.

The strength of French Guyana, in my view, lies in its plural and dynamic population. The crossbreeding is ancient and living together is solid. The territory welcomes people from all over the world and the health crisis has proved that there are no strong community tensions. The Amerindian populations are an important part of it but still have to fight to be listened to more.

And you, as an anthropologist, how do you see your role?

In my opinion, the Amerindian populations have a lot to teach us about our relationship with nature. I think I am a bearer of stories, of knowledge, by restoring and sharing. As a scientist, I must avoid a monolithic vision of the world. I have the chance to learn a lot in Guyana through the contact with the Amerindian populations.

Interview by Marie-Cécile Grisard

³ The Bushinengé or black-brown are the descendants of slaves who fled slavery by isolating themselves in the forest.