

Paramakatoi: Through the eyes of a Coastlander

By Samantha Balkaran Bipat

I AM a trained Agricultural science teacher originally from the Region Three (West Demerara/Essequibo Islands) district. Presently, I am attached to the Paramakatoi Secondary School, and am proud to have the privilege of sharing my experiences of this unique village.

I am aware that it is not uncommon for teachers from coastal Guyana who are assigned to interior locations to feel misplaced. That has not been my experience.

I arrived at Paramakatoi with a sense of apprehension about the challenges of adjusting to a new environment; a different culture. My assignment to the interior had not been supported by my friends and relatives. They were concerned chiefly about the remoteness of the community. Paramakatoi lies atop of one of the Pakaraima Mountains, and is not easily accessible, except by aircraft.

My decision to accept this challenge was both personal and professional. I am a teacher, and my duty is to share my knowledge. At a personal level, I saw this as an opportunity to work with a community where there was a particular need for my skills.

I sensed, somehow, from the moment I arrived here that I would benefit immensely from this experience. The sense of security that I felt upon reaching Paramakatoi was immediate. What touched me most was the openness with which I was accepted in what is a closely-knit community.

There was a time when I subscribed to the axiom that luxury makes life. I understand now that there is a great deal to be derived from a simple life. When you are able to commune with nature, and to learn the ways of a tribal people -- the Patamunas -- your life is enhanced in ways that cannot be realised through luxury.

Most of my afternoons are spent admiring the varying green carpets of trees that unfold for miles on far off mountains. The sunsets at Paramakatoi are the best I've seen, as the sun faints away slowly behind huge mountains, producing some of the most magnificent rays one can imagine. As night falls, the temperature drops sharply, which causes me to sleep in two pairs of socks and jerseys of the thickest

fabric I can find. The beauty of the night sky keeps sleep until late into the night; the well-defined constellations, the far-stretching Milky Way and the rising of a full moon are indescribably beautiful sights. The moon creeps up from behind one of the great Pakaraimas, and, for a moment, sits majestically on its peak. On dark nights, candle-flies can be seen in their thousands, creating magical twinkles.

Each morning, I am awakened by the howling of monkeys from far-off mountains, or by a particularly noisy rooster who makes it his duty to ensure that I sleep no later than 5:30am. It took me three months to overcome this cock's alarm on weekends.

It is surprising how one can consume time, simply by enjoying the entertainment that nature brings in Paramakatoi. Just to look at the puffs of white clouds being tossed by the busy wind across the friendly sky makes every day one to wake up to. Rainy days are no less lovely, creating moments not to be missed with the camera as the thick white mist is strewn artistically through the mountains and trees like balls of cotton.

I enjoy my work. My students are easygoing and eager to learn. Language is sometimes a barrier. Patamuna is their first language, and communication can sometimes be difficult. This situation has motivated me to take Patamuna classes. My teachers have been some children from the Primary School, and some older folks who willingly educate me about the Patamuna culture, after offering me bowls of cassiree drinks. The Patamunas are popular for making "strong drinks," which they prepare from almost any fruit or root.

Teaching, I have found to be more rewarding than challenging, since the students look forward to every teaching period, and would put lots of effort into self-discipline. Apart from that, they are a humorous bunch. It is sometimes really hard to keep a straight face while presenting lessons, especially when a student tells me "you're invited," instead of "you're welcome." My students never fail to present me with gifts. I have had some of the strangest nature gifts, for instance a banana with my name engraved on it; live butterflies; and parched acoushi ants, which is a delicacy here in the North Pakaraimas.

Despite the fact that I happen to be a 'no-nonsense' teacher, I still practise some leniency with my students. This helps me to understand them better. Some students from the dormitory will often pay me visits, on the pretext of doing

assignments or checking on my general wellbeing, although they can guess that I am fully aware that they want to relax and listen to my music, as a change from the dormitory. I always set aside time to share with these students, because they depend solely upon teachers for attention, guidance and encouragement. It amazes me when I consider the very long journeys that these students make to attend school. For the first time, I have used days instead of mileage to calculate distance. The distances vary, from approximately one to four days by foot (the popular mode of transport in Region Eight, Sub-region One)

I have acquired knowledge and skills by socialising with students, and they have been my tour guides in finding creeks, rapids, falls and caves. My students have equipped me with the essential jungle survival tricks and tips, and have contributed significantly towards making my stay at Paramakatoi interesting. As a result, we have grown to establish an exceptional symbiotic relationship that is mutually beneficial.

Most of my spare time is spent with students, carrying out projects with respect to Agricultural Science. However, as the students place much interest and effort in their work, I am boosted to add extra effort in improvising teaching and learning materials. Much improvisation is needed because of a lack of teaching and learning resources in this region. Nevertheless, the CSEC examination results are always rewarding.

The school has benefited immensely from a gift of five computers by the President, Mr Bharrat Jagdeo. I have seized the opportunity to enhance my computer skills. Mr E Banks (former Region Eight IT Officer) did a commendable job in equipping residents of Paramakatoi with the knowledge and skills to become computer literate individuals; medical workers, students, teachers, and COM employees have benefited in some way or the other.

There is never a dull moment in this community, as I have two wonderful neighbours from the UK (Project Trust volunteer teachers) who are always ready to go for picnics down the mountain. I have benefited from their influence, and can probably execute the Scottish Ceilidh dance as well as many people in Scotland.

The influence of the Brazilian culture is quite evident here. Community entertainment is frequently dominated by the Brazilian 'forró' music.

There is much that coastal people can learn from the Patamunas.

There is their sense of discipline, their unique approach to problem-solving, and their sense of community, to name a few qualities. There is no police station in this community. That notwithstanding, the crime rate is close to zero

When it comes to the ways of the Patamunas, it is surprising how these people can solve problems by formal writing. I have witnessed various conflicts being solved by letter writing. It's quite interesting to know that a place which most 'Coastlanders' would label as the 'bush' can portray such civilised behaviours.

The Touchau (captain) is an open, engaging leader who never ceases to welcome visitors -- particularly those whose visits are intended to benefit the community.

Medical emergencies can be worrying. There are a few nurses and a 'Medex'. They all are dedicated and work hard. Still, the medical services here are limited.

I have had some unusual and untimely, enlightening experiences here. One morning I was awakened, not by my favourite fowl, but by the loud blowing of a horn. It sounded like a warning; a distress signal; a call for help. I knew that the days of Carib invasions were long gone; still, I was apprehensive. It turned out that someone was signaling to the rest of the community, that voluntary help was needed in some task, which required more manpower than the blower of the horn had at his immediate disposal. I find the spirit of community here amazing. Villagers would readily set aside their own tasks to respond to such calls.

The soil here is very fertile, and farming is a way of life. Some of the largest fruits and vegetables I have ever seen can be found in Paramakatoi. Another thing -- while organic cultivation now appears to be a fad in coastal Guyana, it is a common practice here. Apart from the land being good for agriculture, it is rich in mineral resources.

The physical environment is very friendly; residents use the water from nearby creeks and springs without having to fear pollution. There is no need for signs such as 'Do not litter'.

Living at Paramakatoi has enabled me to distinguish the most important things in life from the least. It has taught me to exercise more positive attitudes.

I know that there is still much more to be discovered here. This experience has caused me to change my perspective on life. Now I understand what it means to say that some of the best things in life come in the simplest form, and because of that, I place more value on what I have.

Hopefully, if this article has inspired any 'Coastlander' to take their first tentative steps into the interior to render any service, I trust that they would not allow anyone's preconceptions to prevent them from making this life-changing journey.

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