Dutch Guiana

Demographics and Living Conditions and the Emergence of Dutch Creoles during the First One Hundred Years, 1580–1675

Silvia Kouwenberg

University of the West Indies, Mona
silvia.kouwenberg@gmail.com

Abstract

The first one hundred years of the Dutch presence on the “Wild Coast” of Guiana, beginning with exploratory voyages and establishment of trading networks, and culminating in the establishment of plantation societies in Berbice and Essequibo, forms the historical context for the emergence of the Dutch creole languages of Berbice and Essequibo. This article explores that historical backdrop, focusing on the early plantation colonies, their management, and the presence and roles of different linguistic groups: Amerindian, Dutch, African. Amerindians—both free and enslaved—formed a numerically dominant presence in the initial plantation phase; although they were soon to be outnumbered by enslaved Africans, they were present on and around the plantations throughout the history of these Dutch colonies. It is surprising, then, to note that Arawak-origin material in rather peripheral domains of the Berbice Dutch lexicon forms the sole evidence of an Amerindian presence during its formation. This contrasts sharply with the very central Eastern-Ijo derived contribution to basic lexicon and bound morphology. On the Dutch side, given the dominance of the southwestern provinces in the colonization of both Berbice and Essequibo, it is not surprising that Zeelandic Dutch characteristics can be recognized in many of the Dutch-derived forms. The marginal linguistic role played by Amerindians suggests that the dynamics of slavery determined the linguistic influence of the different groups historically present in the plantation society.

Keywords

Dutch Guiana – Berbice Dutch Creole – Essequibo Dutch Creole – Arawak – plantation society – slave labour – conditions for creolization – Eastern Ijo
1 Introduction

Despite exploratory voyages and the establishment of small trading posts in the 1580s, Dutch attempts at settlement and colonisation in the Caribbean did not begin in earnest until early in the seventeenth century, more than a hundred years after the arrival of the Spaniards, at a time when the English and French were also competing to establish trade privileges and territorial claims in the region. Despite initial successes, according to Emmer (1989: 2), the Dutch lost their momentum “[within] 50 years after their exploits in this region”. Ultimately, the role the Dutch played in the Atlantic remained modest. This, combined with the fact that the Berbice and Essequibo were ceded to the English early in the nineteenth century, explains why there has been little interest in the historiography of these Dutch colonies.

In this article, I will attempt to set out what little is reliably known of the Essequibo and Berbice colonies during their early years. The period 1621–1675, which is the life-time of the first Dutch West India Company,¹ is of most interest for the purpose of establishing the sociohistorical context of the formation of Skepi Dutch and Berbice Dutch, the Dutch-lexifier creoles of Essequibo and Berbice, respectively. In many instances, inferences have to be drawn from later sources, as the early years of colonisation are not well documented. Nevertheless, some insight can be gained into the structure of the colonies, their populations, the nature of interactions, and the languages present during the early years.

In the following, I will first set out the historical context in which Dutch Creoles were formed by considering the colonisation of Essequibo and Berbice, their management and (slow) growth. We will see that Dutch exploration of the Wild Coast in the 1580s led to the establishment of contacts with Amerindians and of trading posts before the founding of colonies several decades later; these colonies remained small throughout the period under consideration. This is followed by discussions of the presence and role of Amerindians in the colonies, the growth of the African population, and a general assessment of demographic developments which takes into account the proportions of whites, blacks and Amerindians and the nature of their

¹ The first Dutch West India Company was established in 1621 with a monopoly on Dutch trade, shipping, and colonisation in the Atlantic, but was bankrupt within decades of its establishment, as will be explained below. The establishment of the second Dutch West India Company in 1674 heralds a period of more serious interest in and attempts to grow the plantation colonies. As a result, the supply of slaves increases greatly, and the Berbice, Essequibo, along with the Demerara are set on a firmer footing.
relationships. It is clear that Dutch colonisers were outnumbered first by Amerindians, then by enslaved Africans, and were heavily dependent on Amerindian support. The final section considers the emergence of Dutch Creoles in the historical contact situation, and attempts to establish the influence exerted by different groups of speakers. Despite the constant and numerically significant presence of Amerindians, especially of Arawak speakers, their linguistic influence remained peripheral, showing that the dynamics of interaction in the plantation context restricted the role which different groups played in creolisation.

2 The Colonisation of Essequibo and Berbice and the Management of the Colonies

Emmer and Klooster (1999: 48) characterise the period between 1580 and 1675 as a “dynamic period of Dutch expansion in the Atlantic”, in contrast with “the subsequent period of stagnation and decline”. Where the Guianas are concerned, the first three decades of that period and possibly some time beyond constitute a pre-plantation period during which the Dutch established trade with the Amerindians all along the so-called “Wild Coast” (Goslinga, 1971: 58)—a trade which was never abandoned, as agents continued to operate trading stations in the interior through which a steady supply of dyes, woods, oil and balsam were secured while the colonies were developed as plantation societies (p. 428).

The reports from these early trading explorations triggered a strong and enduring interest among merchants in the south-western province of Zeeland in the colonisation of the Guianas, contrasting with a notable lack of interest on the part of the Dutch West India Company (WIC). The Company had been established in 1621 with a monopoly on Dutch trade, shipping and colonisation in the Atlantic, but concentrated on challenging Iberian control of the Atlantic, attempting to do so both through aggressive commercial expansion and military challenges (e.g. Boxer, 1965; Den Heijer, 1994; Meuwese, 2012). While the Dutch state and some of the Company’s private funders preferred to underwrite what turned out to be the WIC’s financially disastrous attempts to take control of Brazil and the port of Luanda, the Company was unable to fund colonisation expeditions. Influential Dutch merchants stepped into this void and persuaded the Company to issue concessions to private individuals. It is in this manner that privately owned and managed colonies were established in Berbice and Essequibo, although the WIC kept some control through the imposition of conditions under which these colonies were allowed to
operate—including stringent conditions on trade—and in the case of Essequibo, through the appointment of its governors. By 1632, after the WIC took a formal decision to abandon the Guianas in favour of concentrating its efforts on Dutch Pernambuco in Brazil, only the Zeeland Chamber of the WIC continued its support for the colonies established on the Wild Coast. In 1657, management of the Guiana colonies fell to the Zeeland trading towns of Middelburg, Vlissingen (Flushing) and Vere (Goslinga, 1971: 423), to be returned to the WIC’s Zeeland Chamber in 1670. As will become evident below, the instability in the management situation had a direct impact on the provision of slaves to the colonies.

At this point, it is useful to consider briefly the somewhat different histories of Essequibo and Berbice. The chronology in appendix I is intended to allow for these histories to be placed in the larger historical context.

Essequibo predates Berbice by nearly three decades, but barely outgrew its tentative beginnings as a trading post during that period. By 1616, the Essequibo settlement was protected by a fort, built on an earlier Portuguese fortification on an island in the Essequibo river, at its confluence with the Cuyuni and the Mazaruni Rivers; some small tobacco plantations were also established on said island. Initially, Dutch activity in Essequibo involved trade in cotton, dyes and wood rather than planting (Postma, 1990: 188; Smith, 1962, Chapter 2), the cultivation of commercial crops only gradually becoming of greater importance. A 1634 proposal by the then-commandor of Essequibo to explore silver mining in the Oronoque, which resulted in an unsuccessful venture financed by the Zeeland Chamber of the WIC (Goslinga, 1971: 418), also shows that the Dutch were never solely occupied as planters in Essequibo.

A spurt of activity in the 1650s surrounding the introduction of sugar planting and expansion into the Pomeroon was followed by the capture and destruction of the colony by the English in 1666, its recapture by the Dutch, and a slow process of rebuilding in the 1670s (Postma, 1990: 188). In his account of his visits to Essequibo in the early 1670s, Van Berkel, (1948[1695]: 45) mentions three estates, “that of Master de Graaf being the largest and of 28 to 30 slaves. The other two could not each support more than 12 to 14”. According to Postma (1990: 187ff), by 1679, the colony had one WIC plantation, while a dozen or so private plantations were established in the decade to follow; by 1700, there were still only 14 private plantations.

The 1627 colonising expedition to Berbice, funded by Abraham Van Pere, a prominent member of the Zeeland Chamber of the WIC, established it as a private colony, under Van Pere’s “patronship”, “a device intended to enlist private capital in the settlement and administration of the WIC’s territories” (De Vries, 2005: 15). As in Essequibo, the Dutch in Berbice engaged in trade with the
Indians. For instance, Van Berkel, a senior clerk in the service of the Van Pere patroonship, writes of Indians coming to the Fort in Berbice with wares, of which he specifically mentions *oriane* (annatto, a natural dye) (1948[1695]: 19); he also mentions that “we had three men posted to trade with the Indians” in the Amerindian village of *Woeroenje* (Wuruni, located on a tributary of the Berbice River) (p. 50).

But apart from trade, Berbice appears to have been established early on as a plantation colony, and was certainly a larger and stronger settlement than Essequibo. Not only was it able to withstand the English in 1666, it also reconquered the Dutch settlements at Essequibo and in the Pomeroon (Goslinga, 1971: 430). Van Berkel, whose time in Berbice spans the period 1670–1674, speaks of five plantations in the Van Pere patroonship in the 1670s:

In my day, there were 5 estates comprised under the Head-plantation of the Fort which yearly supplied a fine quantity of sugar, the most important article of trade that is carried on here, besides the *Oriane* [annatto] of which about a hundred barrels were exported.

*VAN BERKEL 1948[1695]: 95*

In addition, there is reason to believe that there were a small number of privately owned plantations—a matter to which we will return below.

In sum, during the period under consideration, the dominant concern in Essequibo was trade. It is not until the end of this period that we see consistent attempts to grow the settlement and establish more plantation activity. Berbice appears to have been the more successful colonial venture, with plantations established there early, and a more sizeable settlement around the Fort.

3 The Native Populations of Berbice and Essequibo

Carlin and Boven (2002: 11) remind us that the Guianas, before the arrival of the Spanish, were a well-populated “animated arena of minipowers”, with villages populated by different groups interspersed all along the rivers. By the time the Dutch arrived, the Amerindians were no longer naïve to the European presence, and were not always welcoming. Thus, Hartsinck (1770: 292f) recounts that Dutch occupation of Berbice in 1627 met with fierce opposition from (some among) the native population—he specifically refers to the Caribs—who, however, proved no match for Dutch fire-power and withdrew, leaving the area for the Dutch to live “in peace” with all other Amerindians.
Amerindian communities existed in the plantation areas throughout the period of Dutch colonisation, and rendered important services to the Dutch. Little has been written about the early period of contact between them, but it is reasonable to think that the Dutch must have worked closely with the Amerindians to establish themselves, relying on their expertise and willingness to collaborate in the construction of shelters, provision of hammocks, exploration of foot trails, construction of canoes, supply of fish, meat and staples, etc. As Smith (1962 Chapter 2) points out in his discussion of the first settlements established by the Dutch, English and French, “[a]ll settlers depended a great deal on the goodwill of the Amerindian population—not only for trade, but also for their very survival”.

That the Dutch were successful in persuading the Amerindians to ally with them is confirmed by reports from their European competitors. A 1637 Spanish dispatch claims that the Dutch “are in league with the numerous Indian tribes ... the Dutch being so mixed with the Indians that they marry with the Carib women, as well as with those of other tribes” and another Spanish source wrote “In those three settlements of Amacuro, Essequibo and Berbis the enemy have many people ... all the Aruacs and Caribs are allied with him” (cited in Goslinga, 1971: 413, 414).

Nevertheless, Dutch interactions with the native populations were not always benign: the Dutch also subjected Amerindians to forms of enslavement. Dalton (1855: 75) points out that “[i]n the first ages of discovery, they [=Amerindians] were treated as slaves by the Europeans who emigrated to their soil”, but that this system “recoiled upon its authors”, who eventually forbade the practice. However, Kramer (1991) cites tax records which show that the practice of Amerindian enslavement persisted in Berbice up to the mid-eighteenth century, when Amerindians still comprised around 10% of the slave force. Postma’s 1691 figures for the three WIC plantations in Essequibo include 165 black slaves and 54 Amerindian slaves (1990: 190)—the latter then

---

2 Swaving (1827: 186–189) describes a sumptuous meal which, apart from saltfish and pickled meat, consists entirely of locally obtained meats, ground provisions and vegetables, and which includes several dishes which are Amerindian in origin. It appears from his description that Berbice and Essequibo, different from other Caribbean economies, were less reliant on imports for food, benefiting in this regard from a collaborative indigenous population. On the other hand, Van Berkel (1948:1695) describes a 1673 mutiny of soldiers at the Fort in Berbice, driven by a lack of victuals and other supplies, in particular of bacon and (pickled) meat. One wonders if soldiers, being in the employ of the WIC, the company having responsibility for the security of the colony, were less able to make use of the services of the indigenous population.
It appears that the Dutch obtained Amerindian slaves by buying captives from friendly Amerindians. According to a Stabroek News editorial of 2 September 2001, “[t]he colony of Essequibo was the centre of an Amerindian slave trade prosecuted by the Carib nation”. (Article entitled “Amerindians in Colonial History”, accessed through guyanaundersiege.com.) Goslinga (1971: 428) cites a description of this trade by a Spanish Jesuit who lived in the Guianas—probably also the source of the Stabroek News article. It should be noted, though, that the idea that the Caribs were responsible for Amerindian enslavement fits the mythologisation of Caribs as the “bad Indians”, and should perhaps be taken in that light. Thus, Van Berkel (1948[1695]: 51ff) describes a war party of Arawak Indians from the Berbice which set out to wage battle against their enemies in the Corentine; his description of the war effort includes mention of the taking of slaves, especially of children.

It is safe to assume that Amerindian enslavement at that time represents the continuation of an older practice, and that Amerindian slaves may have constituted a majority of the enslaved population initially.

The period following the abolition of Amerindian enslavement is truer to Smith’s claim that “the tendency was to regard Amerindians as allies and trading partners and to import African slaves for manual labour in the settlements and plantations” (1962, Chapter 2). Thus, Hartsinck (1770: 290) says that “[w]e have made friendship pacts with all these peoples, forbidding their sale as slaves”. These pacts appear to have been motivated by the planters’ need for Amerindian allies in tracking run-away slaves and preventing slave uprisings at a time that plantations had become completely dependent on African slave labour. According to Swaving (1827), who lived in Berbice from 1807–1812, Amerindians and whites lived “on good terms” (p. 199). From his description, the services rendered by Amerindians included sexual favours (p. 251), guide services (p. 296), the provision of meat and fish (p. 228), as well as the capture and murder of run-away slaves, for a head-fee (p. 199).

4 Slave Imports to Essequibo and Berbice

The very small size of the European population in the Dutch colonies (see discussion below) meant that there was an immediate need for slave labour. It is generally agreed that Amerindian enslavement was not able to meet this need. In fact, Emmer and Klooster (1995: 55) claim that Amerindian slaves “were not usually employed in the field but as hunters and fishermen”. They argue that the inability of the Dutch to recruit European migrants—a matter to which I return below—is the reason that the Dutch trans-Atlantic slave trade developed quickly during the first half of the seventeenth century (p. 55). Be that as it appears that the Dutch obtained Amerindian slaves by buying captives from friendly Amerindians. According to a Stabroek News editorial of 2 September 2001, “[t]he colony of Essequibo was the centre of an Amerindian slave trade prosecuted by the Carib nation”. (Article entitled “Amerindians in Colonial History”, accessed through guyanaundersiege.com.) Goslinga (1971: 428) cites a description of this trade by a Spanish Jesuit who lived in the Guianas—probably also the source of the Stabroek News article. It should be noted, though, that the idea that the Caribs were responsible for Amerindian enslavement fits the mythologisation of Caribs as the “bad Indians”, and should perhaps be taken in that light. Thus, Van Berkel (1948[1695]: 51ff) describes a war party of Arawak Indians from the Berbice which set out to wage battle against their enemies in the Corentine; his description of the war effort includes mention of the taking of slaves, especially of children.
The WIC's monopoly on the slave trade was abandoned in the 1730s in favour of a system which taxed private slave traders on the basis of tonnage and length of voyage. According to Emmer (2003), this benefitted especially the Dutch Guiana colonies of Suriname, Essequibo, Berbice, and Demerara.

Without documentation of the trans-Atlantic shipment of slaves to either Essequibo or Berbice at this time. It is clear though that the provision of slaves to Berbice and Essequibo was erratic, to say the least.

Goslinga (1971: 342) mentions a decision, in 1626, of the Zeeland Chamber of the WIC to “provide a ship for the express purpose of transporting slaves from Angola to its colonies on the Amazon and the Wild Coast”, followed by further such undertakings by the WIC. However, absent documentation of the actual shipments, we cannot say for sure that the undertakings had the desired results. What we are sure of is that, despite its promises, the WIC was unable to meet the demand of the colonists in these territories. Its response was to issue licenses for private slave shipments, one of the beneficiaries being Abraham Van Pere, the patroon of Berbice and a powerful member of the Zeeland Chamber of the WIC. In 1634, Van Pere financed an expedition which captured the island of Arguin in Senegal, intended to facilitate the provision of slaves to his colonists. Unfortunately, there is no information regarding the actual number of slaves that Van Pere was able to acquire there, much less the number brought to Berbice (Goslinga, 1971: 343).

Postma (1990) cites a single documented slave landing at Essequibo for the period 1618–1669, but assumes that there may have been a few more, estimating the total number of slaves landed at Essequibo for that period at a maximum 500, or an average of 10 per year. The decade that follows, when a concerted effort was made to establish sugar planting in Essequibo, saw an unprecedented influx of slaves, of between 225–250 (p. 191). Together, he estimates that no more than 750 slaves were disembarked at Essequibo for the period 1618–1679, of whom around a third in the final decade of the period. He goes on to say that slave imports “accelerate significantly thereafter, averaging 90 slaves per year up to 1738” (p. 191).

Postma characterises Berbice as “the smallest of the Dutch slave markets during the period of the WIC monopoly” (1990: 195). Like Essequibo, annual slave arrivals are low for the period under consideration. Postma suggests that the documented number of 417 slaves disembarked at Berbice for the period 1627–1699 should be adjusted to a maximum of 1,017, or 14 annually for that period. Slave arrivals do not really pick up until the last decades of the Dutch slave trade in the nineteenth century. In light of the fact that Berbice was

---

4 The WIC’s monopoly on the slave trade was abandoned in the 1730s in favour of a system which taxed private slave traders on the basis of tonnage and length of voyage. According to Emmer (2003), this benefitted especially the Dutch Guiana colonies of Suriname, Essequibo, Berbice, and Demerara.
clearly a larger plantation colony than was Essequibo, I suggest that Berbice may have been more successful in raising creole slaves.\footnote{Indeed, Robertson (1993: 299) argues that Berbice relied heavily on creole slaves, citing the fact that the single largest group of slaves tried in the aftermath of the Berbice slave rebellion of 1763–64 were creole slaves.}

In order to account for the place of African languages in the linguistic contact situation in early Essequibo and Berbice, we need to reasonably establish the languages of the enslaved African population—a task made very difficult indeed by the complete lack of documentation of the ports of origin of enslaved Africans in the colonies. Fortunately, for Berbice, the task is made lighter by the linguistic evidence itself, which incontrovertibly points to the dominant presence of speakers of the Eastern Ijo varieties spoken in coastal Nigeria, a point to which we shall return below. This in turn means that Berbice drew its slave population from the Bight of Biafra during its early phase. Postma (1990) points out that slaves from the Bight of Biafra, generally referred to as “Calabaries” were considered undesirable in the colonies, and that the WIC had much difficulty selling them, but that “[d]uring the early stages of their development, small settlements like Berbice, Essequibo, St. Eustatius, and Saba were forced to accept shipments of Calabary slaves, because the settlers there had no choice but to accept what they could get” (p. 107). Indeed, the first slave voyage in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Voyages Database which specifies Essequibo as the place of disembarkation, in 1658, purchased slaves in New Calabar; 82 of the 117 slaves reached their destination.

Essequibo and Berbice did not necessarily receive similar slave shipments: the two colonies were administratively separate and made their own arrangements with the WIC or private carriers. It is useful, therefore, to consider the division of WIC’s consignments. Emmer’s (1989: 40) figures suggest that of approximately 10,000 slaves bought by the Dutch in West and West-Central Africa between 1637–1645, around half originate in the Slave Coast (Bight of Benin), 25% in “Calabari”, while the remainder originate in the Gold Coast and in West-Central Africa. Furthermore, the Calabary designation should not be taken to refer to a specific ethnic group: the inland Igbo, not the coastal populations of the towns of Calabar and Elem Calabar (Old Calabar), constitute the single largest group of enslaved from the Bight.

After management of the colonies fell to the Middelburg-Vlissingen-Vere alliance in 1657, the cities dispatched a ship to Africa to get slaves (Goslinga, 1971: 423). Again, no further documentation is available, and in any case, the cities, “apparently, were also negligent about procuring slaves for the colonists” (p. 143). Considering the overall Dutch trade during 1658–1674, Postma shows...
that the Slave Coast continues to be the single largest source of slaves for the Dutch slave trade, at around 40% of slaves for the period. The Bight of Biafra is supplanted by West-Central Africa during this period, the latter responsible for a quarter of slaves, followed by 18% of slaves in the Dutch trade originating in the Gold Coast, and smaller percentages in the Bight of Biafra, the Senegambia, and Ivory Coast (1990: 112).

Absnet evidence to the contrary, I assume that slave deliveries to Essequibo largely reflected the overall patterns of the Dutch trans-Atlantic slave trade, although Bight of Biafra slaves may have been better represented, based on Postma’s assertion that small colonies were not able to act on preferences for slaves of particular origins. For Berbice, while the linguistic evidence points to an early dominant presence of Eastern Ijo slaves from the Bight of Biafra, as will be discussed below, there is no reason to believe that later arrivals differed in any way from that of the overall patterns of the Dutch trade.

5 Overview of Demographic Developments

The most striking fact about the demography of the Berbice and Essequibo colonies is their diminutive size. In part, this betrays the fact that some of the financiers of the colonies were more interested in trade than in settlement and cultivation. But it also betrays the general lack of success in recruiting migrants. Emmer and Klooster (1999: 50) point out that “Dutch attempts to build colonies in the Atlantic world were beset by the lack of migrants”. At a time of unprecedented economic growth at home, few were interested in an uncertain future in the New World. This meant that successful settlement was dependent on New World population growth—something which the unhealthy lifestyles of the settlers and the hostile disease environments of the Caribbean prevented, so that none of the Dutch Caribbean colonies developed into settler colonies.

Recruiting families for the Dutch colonial expansion was particularly difficult. Thus, for Van Pere’s 1627 colonising expedition to Berbice, he received permission to transport thence 40 men and 20 boys, after attempts to send families “had apparently been relinquished because of the difficulty in recruiting them” (Goslinga, 1971: 413). Van Berkel, who extols the luxuries and comforts of

6 Robertson (1993) attempts to trace the growth of the white and black populations of Berbice. His figures for the early period are not reliable, however, and will not be used here (see Kouwenberg 2009 for discussion).

7 Van Pere received subsequent permission to have 6 blacks join the colonising expedition. It appears that a small black population existed in Zeeland, if nothing else as a result of the
plantation life, nevertheless laments “[i]f there was only companionship, an inseparable attribute of human nature, one would need seek no other existence to spend his remaining days in rest and freedom, with few cares, and no troubles to worry over” (1948[1695]: 95).

Different from the early colonies established by the English, Dutch colonies could not rely on indentured servants. The upshot is that in both Berbice and Essequibo, the small white populations consisted almost entirely of men, and suffered from high mortality and very low birth rates. As Emmer and Klooster point out, all this meant that in the Dutch Atlantic, “the Africans were even more important than elsewhere” (1999: 55).

Reliable estimates of the white populations of Essequibo and Berbice do not exist, but the nature and size of the Dutch holdings provide an indication. Recall that Van Berkel (1948[1695]) listed only three estates in Essequibo in the 1670s; twenty years later, the WIC operated three functioning plantations there, while a dozen or so privately owned plantations had been established. For the period under consideration, the white population of Essequibo remained exceedingly small, was predominantly male, and engaged in trade rather than planting. Van Berkel, reflecting on his visit to Essequibo, remarks that “it behoves him who is of a sociable disposition and would rather have people to converse with, not to betake himself there” (1948[1695]: 45).

Despite the similarities, it appears that the white population of Berbice exceeded that of Essequibo. Although Berbice is poorly documented for this period, there is enough evidence to suggest that it was more seriously established as a planters’ colony. Van Berkel, writing of his time in Berbice during 1670–1674, speaks of five plantations in the Van Pere patroonship. He also mentions the presence of around 80 soldiers at the fort. In addition, there is reason to believe that there were a small number of privately owned plantations. It is useful to consider the later figures for comparison. The 1720 inventory of the

disembarkation at Middelburg, in 1596, of 130 enslaved Africans off a Portuguese prize; the slaves were supposedly given their freedom—although Emmer (2003: 34) speculates that a good number of them may well have been taken directly to the Antwerp market, where slaves were traded on a regular basis.

8 A 1637 source, which provides an account of the taking of the island of Tobago from the Dutch, notes the displacement of 150 Dutch from that island, of whom “120 Dutch and many negroes” to the River Essequibo, and “forty Dutch and twenty-five negroes” to the Berbice (Don Juan Desologuren “As to the powers of the Dutch in the West Indies”, cited in English translation by Ishmael 2001). In light of the small size of the colonies at the time, the arrival of colonists and slaves in these numbers must have had a very significant impact. On the other hand, the author may have provided an inflated number, so as to emphasise the heroic feat accomplished. It is striking that no mention of the arrival of the Tobagonians appears in the Dutch sources.
Van Pere holdings, drawn up as part of the contract for the transfer of ownership of the Berbice colony to a new joint stock company, the Sociëteit van Berbice (‘the Berbice Society’), lists a total of eight plantations (six sugar plantations and two cacao plantations), the fort, outposts, smithy and church, and 895 slaves—a figure to which we shall return below. The number of privately owned plantations is not documented for this early period, but 12 years later, in 1732, there were ninety-three private plantations in the Berbice River and twenty in the Canje Creek (Smith, 1962); assuming that these were not all established over that short period of time, there must have been a fair number of private plantations even in the seventeenth century.

In short, of the eight plantations in the 1720 inventory, five were already in existence in the 1670s; indeed, since these represent the assets of the financier of the Berbice venture, it is natural that they were among the first to be established. This would not have been true of the 113 privately owned plantations listed in 1732. Nevertheless, I suggest that it is reasonable to think that at least a dozen or so must also have been in existence around Van Berkel’s time. In all, I suggest that Berbice must have had a more significant plantation structure than Essequibo in the mid-seventeenth century.

Postma (1990: 190) cites a 1691 inventory which shows that the three WIC plantations in Essequibo were operated by 43 Europeans, 165 black slaves and 54 Amerindian slaves, or an average of 73 slaves per plantation. Private plantations, of which by 1700 there were 14, averaged only 11 slaves (p. 190), reflecting a difference in plantation crops and investment capital: the WIC operated sugar plantations, whereas private plantations traded in other crops; sugar plantations are typically the largest and most labour- and capital-intensive. In all though, we see a significant improvement over Van Berkel’s figures for the 1670s, when he claims that the largest estate in Essequibo had 28 to 30 slaves, the other two each not more than 12 to 14 (1948[1695]: 45).

Turning to Berbice, the 1720 inventory drawn up for the founding of the Berbice Society lists 895 slaves (adults and children) among the colony’s assets (Hartsinck 1770: 327). For the most part, these slaves must have belonged to the six sugar plantations. Private plantations mostly cultivated tree crops (cacao, coffee, annatto) and tobacco—and continued to do so throughout the history of Berbice as a Dutch colony. In short, the six sugar plantations listed in the 1720 inventory are more than likely responsible for a very large proportion

---

9 The Association’s main shareholders were Amsterdam merchants. In 1732 it was granted a charter by the West India Company.

10 According to Hartsinck’s description of the colony in the 1760s, only five of more than 100 plantations along the Berbice River were sugar plantations; of this number, four then belonged to the Association, while one was privately owned (1770: 288).
of the 895 slaves, with much smaller numbers belonging to the two cacao plantations, alongside the fort, outposts, smithy and church. Privately held plantations, being nonsugar for the most part, would have augmented this number with dozens rather than hundreds of slaves. This is further supported when we consider that in 1749, when the colony consists of 111 plantations, the black slave population has not quite reached 1,500 (Kramer, 1991: 60, based on tax counts).

Working our way back to the 1670s, Robertson’s (1993: 299) estimate of a slave population of between 400 and 500 for the five plantations mentioned by Van Berkel strikes me as somewhat high, but possibly accurate when applied to the entire slave population of the Berbice colony, including that of the small number of private plantations. This number included Amerindian slaves, who may have constituted as much as 25% of the slave population.

With a slave population at least double that of Essequibo, the white population of Berbice also appears to have been significantly larger than that of Essequibo. Van Berkel makes mention of “80 mouths to fill at the Fort” (1948[1695]: 100)—a white population which has to be added to the white plantation populations of planters, overseers and plantation clerks. Moreover, there was a sizeable enough population of planters to constitute a Council.

Summing up, the Dutch constituted a minority of the Essequibo and Berbice populations right from the start. For the early decades of the seventeenth century, the largest group present in and around the colonies were Amerindians. As the Dutch in Essequibo pursued trading activities and the cultivation of tree crops, plantations did not exceed an average of a dozen slaves, of whom a significant but declining number were Amerindian. However, with the establishment of sugar plantations in the course of the seventeenth century, the demand for imported slaves grew and we see the emergence of a population dominated by enslaved Africans on the few Company-owned sugar plantations, while numbers on the privately owned estates remain low. In Berbice, the white population was rather more substantial. Moreover, the Van Pere patroonship established several sugar plantations early; hence, the population of enslaved Africans is likely to have become an important presence in Berbice before it did in Essequibo.

Thus, despite their slow development, the early years of these colonies do not fit the image of the *société d’habitation*, where Europeans and Africans worked small fields side by side. Instead, Europeans constituted a minority presence from the outset, among a dominant population first of Amerindians, then of enslaved Africans. Although the practice of Amerindian enslavement ceased as the African slave population increased, Amerindians remained an important presence in the plantation environment.
Creolists recognise numerical disproportion of the black and white populations as possibly the single most important demographic condition for creolisation—based on “the assumption that the degree of linguistic restructuring in a language contact situation is related to the degree of access second-language learners have to first-language speakers” (Arends, 2008: 316). In Berbice and Essequibo, where the Dutch constituted a minority presence from the outset, that condition was met early on. But the Dutch minority presence initially was in relation to an Amerindian majority. Despite the generally close relations between the Dutch and Amerindians, there is little to suggest that either group learned the other’s language to any great extent. Amerindians continued to speak their native languages in their communities well into the twentieth century, and their needs for communication with the Dutch would have been met through a few interpreters. If any kind of pidgin was in use between the Dutch and the enslaved Amerindians on the plantations, or between the Dutch and their Amerindian trading partners, no trace remains of it, and it must have given way to the Dutch Creoles that emerged in Berbice and Essequibo when enslaved Africans came to predominate on the plantations. This is supported by Robertson (1983), who cites several nineteenth-century sources which refer to the fact that Dutch Creole was the language used by Amerindians as *lingua franca* in their interactions with other Amerindians as well as Europeans—although there too it appears that knowledge of Dutch Creole was usually restricted to certain individuals in the community. A. F. Baird, Superintendent of Rivers and Creeks in Essequibo, wrote, in 1844:

> These are chiefly of the Arawak nation, with a few Caribbeese in the Masserooney and Cuyuni. The Creole Dutch is the language next to their own best understood by the Indians in their intercourse with the settlers.  
> **Robertson, 1983: 87**

Although Amerindian languages were a constant part of the linguistic landscape, and may initially have been the majority languages of the plantation populations, lexical items constitute the sole evidence of sustained contact between Dutch and Amerindian speakers. Here, we find a curious bias: despite references in the historical sources to contact between the Dutch and both Arawaks and Caribs, it is only the language of the former that has contributed to the lexicon of the Dutch Creoles. This cannot simply be explained by referring to hostile Dutch-Carib relations, as the Dutch appear to have conducted a lively barter trade with the Caribs. It does suggest that there is some truth in
the view that Arawak Indians were the main if not sole victims of the trade which supplied Amerindian slaves to Dutch plantations.

Although it is probable that enslaved Africans became a dominant presence soon after the first slave arrivals, Amerindian enslavement persisted well into the eighteenth century. This means that both Amerindian and African slaves were present in the emergent plantation colonies. Is it possible that the linguistic practices developed in Dutch-Amerindian contact constituted a basis for the development of Dutch creole? It appears not. Emmer and Klooster (1999: 55) claim that Amerindian slaves "were not usually employed in the field but as hunters and fishermen". This suggests that Amerindian slaves held privileged positions vis-à-vis African slaves. Surrounding Amerindian communities supported the continued use of the heritage languages of Amerindians on the plantations, and reduced the need for a stable contact variety. Thus, during the transition from an Amerindian-dominated to an African-dominated plantation population in Berbice and Essequibo, enslaved Africans entered a language contact situation in which Amerindians did not provide linguistic role models. Hence, the Dutch creoles of the two plantation areas were largely formed in the contact between enslaved Africans and Dutchmen. In this context, it is hardly surprising that Arawak remains a somewhat peripheral contributor to the lexicon of the Dutch creoles. Thus, Arawak-derived forms in Berbice Dutch (bd) are predominantly found in terms denoting indigenous flora and fauna, other elements of the natural environment, and Amerindian food items—although a few forms form part of other cultural domains: body parts, kinship terms, verbs relating to hunting and food processing, spiritual elements, etc.

A far more significant contribution to the Berbice Dutch lexicon is that which can be traced back to a West African source. As first documented in Smith, Robertson and Williamson (1987), that source is Eastern Ijo, a small cluster within the Ijo family. In Kouwenberg (2012), I discuss the unusual characteristics of this African element in the bd lexicon: different from other Caribbean creoles, it has a single source, comprises more verbs than nouns, is found in basic vocabulary rather than culturally specific vocabulary, and includes words of specific importance to plantation life. Perhaps most surprisingly, the Eastern Ijo-derived forms in bd also include such functional forms as pronouns; markers of aspect, location, negation, focus, comparative, and plural number; and copular forms and auxiliaries. And while more function words in bd can be ascribed to Dutch, all bound morphemes in bd are traceable to Eastern Ijo. In addition to the seminal Eastern Ijo contribution to the bd lexicon, previous authors, beginning with Smith, Robertson and Williamson (1987), have pointed to the existence in bd of grammatical
patterns which resemble those of Eastern Ijo. However, despite superficial resemblances, BD and Eastern Ijo belong to different linguistic types. In Kouwenberg (2009), I consider a possible account of the emergence of BD, and I argue that locally born children constitute the population which was responsible for its creation.

Of Skepi Dutch (SD), so little is known that it is not possible to say whether Amerindian and West-African elements can be identified in this language. Robertson’s (1989) comparative listing shows that BD forms of Eastern Ijo source correspond to SD forms of Dutch origin. There are, moreover, mismatches between BD and SD Dutch-derived forms (Kouwenberg, 2009: 153ff), supporting the view that the two languages developed separately. However, a recently discovered SD fragment in a 1780 letter includes the word Bikkelante—clearly corresponding to BD beke ‘white man’ (Eastern Ijo-derived) and landi ‘country’ (Dutch-derived), to designate ‘Holland’. This shared form points to sufficient contact that borrowing between the two Dutch-lexifier creoles was possible (Kouwenberg 2013).

Unsurprisingly, given the dominance of Zeeland in the colonisation of both Berbice and Essequibo, there are clear indications that Southern, Zeelandic Dutch is the dominant lexifier variety for the two creoles, at least in their early period of emergence. Thus, Robertson (1989) includes forms such as BD/SD bili/bila ‘axe’, kiki/kika ‘to see’, rifi/ris ‘rice’, which contain the Zeelandic /i/, rather than the Hollandic diphthong /ɛi/ (standard) or /ai/ (nonstandard); BD/SD bedi/bɛdɛ ‘bed’, krabu ‘crab’, which contain a voiced obstruent which may indicate their derivation from a Zeelandic form ending in -ə (its presence allowing for the preservation of the voicing of the obstruent); BD slotro, which reflects the Zeelandic ‘r’ of sleuter (compare standard Dutch sleutel) ‘key’; and BD jende and SD ende [3PL], which are reflexes of the typical Southern 3PL pronoun (Kouwenberg 2013). Other forms point to the later influence of North-Western Hollandic varieties. Thus, BD rei ‘ride (horse)’ and feli ‘file’ do not contain the Zeelandic /i/. Gaps in the documentation of SD make it impossible to consider whether a similar development took place there.

In conclusion, (Zeelandic) Dutch is the dominant lexifier of Skepi Dutch, but shares that position with Eastern Ijo in the case of Berbice Dutch. Unusually, in the latter case, the West African substrate’s most significant contributions are in basic lexicon and function morphemes. Sustained contact with Arawak has resulted in many Arawak-derived words in Berbice Dutch, especially in semantic domains of the lexicon where Arawak Indians can be expected to have contributed indigenous knowledge. Despite the evidence that the two creoles developed independently, the presence of a shared form of Eastern Ijo origin suggests contact and (mutual?) influence between the varieties.
Summary and Conclusion

Ambitious Zeelandic merchants financed the establishment of Dutch colonies in Berbice and Essequibo. But a range of factors conspired to keep these colonies small: recruitment for the colonies was difficult, especially of Dutch families; short-term gain from trade was given priority over the development of a plantation economy; raids and attacks from competing European powers resulted in the destruction of property; neither the WIC nor private ventures succeeded in meeting the demand for slaves.

In light of the small number of Europeans, African slaves outnumbered whites from the inception of the slave trade to Berbice and Essequibo, despite the low average numbers of slaves supplied to the colonies over the period under consideration. This means that conditions were favourable for rapid creolisation. In the case of Berbice Dutch, this resulted in a very large proportion of both content and function morphemes derived from Eastern Ijo—thus supporting Postma’s (1990) claim that small colonies like those of the Guianas had to accept shipments from the Bight of Biafra.

Their small size is not the only factor distinguishing the two colonies from other plantation societies in which creole languages arose. The initial use of Amerindian slave labour, the presence of Amerindian communities in the vicinity of the Dutch settlements, whether it be trading posts or plantations, and the permanent presence of Amerindians rendering services to the planters, all point towards the significance of the Amerindian presence throughout the contact period in which Dutch creoles were formed. Taken in this light, it is surprising that Amerindians did not play an important role in the emergence of either BD or SD: their linguistic influence remained peripheral. In other words, neither early presence, nor numerical dominance, nor constant presence need be determining factors in the nature and direction of interactions in the plantation context. Instead, it appears that the dynamics of slavery determined the roles played by different groups in the hierarchies of the plantations and restricted their roles in linguistic creolisation.
Appendix I  

Chronology, largely based on Hartsinck (1770), Den Heijer (1994), Boxer (1965)

| years | events |
|-------|--------|
| 1580s, 1590s | First Dutch explorations of the Guianas and the Amazon, financed by prominent citizens of the Zeeland provinces, and establishment of trading posts; strong statements of interest in colonisation of the Guianas especially from Zeeland |
| 1596 | A Dutch settlement in the Essequibo is destroyed by the Spaniards, but subsequently rebuilt |
| c.1600–1610 | Dutch trading posts in the Amazon are destroyed by the Portuguese, after which the Dutch pretty much give up on the area |
| 1621 | The Dutch West Indian Company (wic)—in the making since 1601—is at long last established, heavily dominated by its Amsterdam and Zeeland Chambers. Although its charter gives the wic sole rights on trade and shipping in the Atlantic, it was never possible to completely prevent interlopers encroaching on its monopoly and at various times in its history, attempts were made to regulate the interloper trade through a system of permit fees |
| 1627 | Abraham Van Pere, prominent member of the Zeeland chamber of the wic, establishes Berbice as a private colony, under a wic concession. According to Hartsinck (1770:292f), the native population resists fiercely, but proves no match for Dutch fire-power. Fort Nassau, a wooden fortification which in the eighteenth century was replaced by a brick structure, forms the centre of the colony, which initially produces tobacco and annatto (a natural dye) |
| 1630–1637 | Funded by the 1628 capture of the Spanish silver fleet, the Dutch conquer Pernambuco (N.E.Brazil), triggering increased interest in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The wic takes a formal decision to abandon the Guianas in favour of concentrating its efforts on Dutch Pernambuco. However, Dutch control of Pernambuco lasts only two decades |
| 1634 | The Dutch capture Curaçao, followed by Aruba and Bonaire in 1636. During the 1640s, the island comes to function as transshipment port in the supply of slaves to the Spanish and as depot for the intra-Caribbean slave trade as well as a significant trade in victuals and other goods. The cash-for-slaves trade at Curaçao is so lucrative that there is little incentive to supply slaves to cash-strapped planters in plantation colonies such as Berbice and Essequibo |
years | events
--- | ---
1634 | 30 Dutch planters establish themselves in Cayenne, but the settlement is abandoned in 1636
1651 | An English colony is established on the Suriname River
1654 | Pernambuco is definitively lost to the Portuguese
1657 | Management of the Guiana colonies falls to the Zeeland trading towns of Middelburg, Vlissingen (Flushing) and Vere.
1666–1667 | The English take Suriname and Essequibo, and carry out a failed attack on Berbice. The Dutch retake their possessions the following year. Suriname is ceded to the Dutch in exchange for New Amsterdam
1670 | Management of the Guiana companies is returned to the wic’s Zeeland Chamber
1674 | In order to facilitate refinancing of the enterprise, the Dutch West India Company is dissolved and the Second Dutch West India Company established
1720 | The Van Pere patroonship is transferred to the Berbice Society, a joint-stock company

References

Arends, Jacques. 2008. A demographic perspective on creole formation. In Silvia Kouwenberg and John V. Singler (eds.), *The Handbook of Pidgin and Creole Studies*, 309–331. Malden, MA/Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Bennett, John P. 1989. An Arawak-English dictionary, with an English word-list. *Archaeology and Anthropology* [Journal of the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology, Georgetown, Guyana] 6 (1–2).

Boxer, C. R. 1965. *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600–1800*. London: Penguin Books.

Carlin, Eithne B., and Karijn M. Boven (2002) The native population. Migrations and Identities. In Eithne B. Carlin and Jacques Arends (eds.), *Atlas of the Languages of Suriname*, 11–45. Leiden/Kingston: KITLV Press/Ian Randle.

Dalton, Henry G. 1855. *The History of British Guiana*, vol. I. London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman.

De Vries, 2005. The Dutch Atlantic economies. In Peter Coclanis (ed.), *The Atlantic Economies during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, 1–29. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

Den Heijer, Henk. 1994. *De Geschiedenis van de wic*. Zutphen: Walburg Pers.
Emmer, Pieter. 1989. *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy, 1580–1880: Trade, Slavery and Emancipation*. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum.

Emmer, Pieter. 2003 *De Nederlandse slavenhandel 1500–1850*. 2nd edn. Amsterdam/Antwerpen: De Arbeiderspers. [English translation 2006. *The Dutch Slave Trade, 1500–1850*. s.l.: Berghahn books.]

Emmer, Pieter, and Wim Klooster. 1999. The Dutch Atlantic, 1600–1800: Expansion without empire. *Itinerario. European Journal of Overseas History* 23(2): 48–69.

Goslinga, Cornelis. 1971. *The Dutch in the Caribbean and on the Wild Coast 1580–1880*. Assen: Van Gorcum.

Hartsinck, Jan J. 1770. *Beschryving van Guiana, of de Wilde Kust in Zuid-America*. Amsterdam: Gerrit Tielenburg. [available from http://www.dbnl.org/titels/titel.php?id=hart038besc01]

Ishmael, Odeen (ed.). 2001. *Guyana’s Western Border: Background Historical Documents* [downloaded July 29, 2007 from http://www.guyana.org/Western/Cover.htm]

Kouwenberg, Silvia. 1994. *A Grammar of Berbice Dutch Creole* [Mouton Grammar Library 12]. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Kouwenberg, Silvia. 2009. The invisible hand in creole genesis: Reanalysis in the formation of Berbice Dutch. In Enoch Aboh and Norval Smith (eds.), *Complex Processes in New Languages*, 115–158. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Kouwenberg, Silvia. 2012. The Ijo-derived lexicon of Berbice Dutch Creole: An a-typical case of African lexical influence. In Angela Bartens and Philip Baker (eds.), *Black through White. African words and calques which survived slavery in Creoles and transplanted European languages*, 135–153. London: Battlebridge.

Kouwenberg, Silvia. 2013. The Dutch-lexifier creoles. In Frans Hinskens and Johan Taeldeman (eds.), *Language and Space: The Dutch Language Area* [Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikations-wissenschaft 2], 879–896. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Kramer, Klaas. 1991. Plantation development in Berbice from 1753 to 1779: The shift from the interior to the coast. *New West Indian Guide* 65(1/2): 51–65.

Meuwese, Mark. 2012. *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade. Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595–1674*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Postma, Johannes. 1990. *The Dutch in the Atlantic slave trade, 1600–1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robertson, Ian E. 1983. The Dutch linguistic legacy and the Guyana/Venezuela border question. *Boletin de estudios latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 34: 75–97.

Robertson, Ian E. 1989. Berbice and Skepi Dutch. A lexical comparison. *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 105: 3–21.

Robertson, Ian E. 1993. The Ijo element in Berbice Dutch and the pidginization/creolization process. In Salikoko S. Mufwene (ed.), *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties*, 296–316. Athens/London: University of Georgia Press.
Smith, Norval, Robertson, Ian E., and Williamson, Kay. 1987. The Ijo element in Berbice Dutch. *Language in Society* 16: 49–90.

Smith, Raymond T. 1962. *British Guiana*: Issued under the Auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs. London/New York/Toronto: Oxford University Press. [downloaded October 20, 2007 from http://home.uchicago.edu/~rts1/chapter_ii.htm]

Swaving, Justus G. 1827. *Swaving’s Reizen en Lotgevallen*, vol. I. Dordrecht: Blussé en Van Braam.

Van Berkel, Adriaan (1948[1695]) *Adriaan van Berkel’s travels in South America between the Berbice and Essequibo Rivers and in Surinam 1670–1689*. Translated and edited by Walter Edmund Roth, 1925. Georgetown: Daily Chronicle.

**On-Line Resources**

Amerindians in Colonial History. *Stabroek News Editorial*, 2 September 2001 [guyanaundersiege.com]

*Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* by Emory University [http://www.slavevoyages.org]