

Evolution of traditional taboos in Suriname

Evolução dos tabus tradicionais no Suriname

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ABSTRACT

Traditional taboos have persisted in Suriname, thanks to the sustainability of African culture in Maroon communities in the interior of the country. A conceptual dichotomy emerged in the 19th and early 20th centuries coinciding with two geographical regions: in the coastal region, ‘*trefu*’, a food taboo, practised mainly by Creoles, violation of which was thought to result in contracting leprosy, and in the interior ‘*tyina*’, a ‘broader’ taboo concept (food, places, actions) practised by Maroons. Recent research indicates the dichotomy is weakening, reflected in a declining belief in the *trefu*-leprosy relation and a merging of ‘*trefu*’ and ‘*tyina*’, exchange of taboo practices between ethnic groups and declining adherence of youngsters to taboos. The migration of Maroons to the coastal region and creolisation appear to be driving forces behind these processes, whilst the decline in leprosy incidence may also have contributed. Additional research is needed to understand the evolution of traditional taboos in Suriname and the Greater Caribbean.

Keywords: Traditional taboos. *Tyina*. *Trefu*. Leprosy. Suriname. Greater Caribbean.

RESUMO

Os tabus tradicionais persistiram no Suriname graças à sustentabilidade da cultura africana nas comunidades quilombolas no interior do país. No século XIX e início do século XX, surgiu uma dicotomia conceptual que coincidiu com duas regiões geográficas: na região costeira, o “trefu”, um tabu alimentar, praticado principalmente pelos crioulos, cuja violação pode resultar em lepra; e no interior “tyina”, um conceito de tabu “mais amplo” (comida, lugares, ações) praticado pelos quilombolas. Pesquisas recentes indicam um desvanecimento da dicotomia, refletido no declínio da crença na relação trefu-lepra, além da fusão de trefu e tyina, troca de práticas tabus entre grupos étnicos e declínio da adesão dos jovens aos tabus. A migração dos quilombolas para a região costeira e a criouliização parecem ser as forças motrizes por trás desses processos. O declínio na incidência da lepra pode ter contribuído. São necessárias pesquisas adicionais para compreender a evolução dos tabus tradicionais no Suriname e no Grande Caribe.

Palavras-chave: *Tabus tradicionais. Tyina. Trefu. Lepra. Suriname. Grande Caribe.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Suriname is part of the Greater Caribbean, comprising all the islands in the Caribbean Sea whilst also including mainland nations and regions in nations in the Americas, where a plantation system based on slave labour preceded the present societal structures (Girvan, 2017, p. 3-23; Menke, 2011). The ethnically diverse population of Suriname consists of descendants of European (particularly Dutch) colonisers, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews from Brazil and Europe, enslaved people from Africa and indentured workers from Asia (East-Indians from India, Javanese from Indonesia, Chinese from China) and also indentured peoples from Madeira and the English speaking Caribbean. Furthermore, Suriname is populated by indigenous and Maroon peoples. The Maroons are descendants of enslaved Africans who fled the plantations during slavery and settled in tribal societies in the interior. They live there to this day (Figure 1), making Suriname the country with the most enduring groups of Maroons in the world (Ngwenyama, 2007, p. 55). East Indians, Maroons, Creoles, Mixed and Javanese are the most important groups numerically in Suriname at the present time, according to census data (Menke; Sno, 2016; Menke, 2011, p. 115). The different ethnic groups have conserved their own culture to a considerable degree. However, since colonial times, we have witnessed continuous cultural exchange and adaptation between these ethnic groups, a process called creolisation (Trouillot, 2006, p. 9-21). In connection with the subject of this paper (*trefu* and *tyina*), we highlight that Jewish immigrants have played an important role in the evolution of Surinamese society, including the creolisation process (Vink, 2010). They have had a significant cultural, economic and political influence on the formation of colonial and postcolonial Suriname (Menke; Menke, 2015, p. 266).

Traditional taboos (traditional bans) originating from Africa have been described in Suriname amongst enslaved people working mainly on the plantations since the second half of the 18th century (Fermin, 1770). They are important in the spiritual and daily life of Surinamese people with African roots (Herskovits; Herskovits, 1936), but the question under discussion here is how sustainable these taboos are. The traditional taboos *trefu* and *tyina* are part of the (intangible) cultural heritage of the Maroons and Creoles in Suriname. Cultural sustainability is the fourth pillar of sustainability, next to social, economic and ecological sustainability (Soini; Birkeland, 2014). Our research, addressing the evolutionary changes of the traditional taboos, can be considered an attempt to understand the sustainability of the taboos from a historical linear time perspective.

This article examines the sustainability of traditional taboos in Suriname in the context of the recent encounter of diverse groups in the capital, Paramaribo and its surroundings. After presenting a short outline of the taboos *trefu* and *tyina* in Suriname, we address their evolution in the coastal region by discussing documentary sources and the results of our research in the neighbourhood '*Sophia's Lust*' in this region. We will show that the taboos are undergoing substantive changes, especially in the coastal region, including Paramaribo. These changes, which are based on the intercultural exchange between Maroons and other ethnic groups and associated adaptation of the taboo concepts, coincide with the migration of Maroons from the tribal communities in the interior to the coastal region (see also section 4. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY). We will show that a medical-epidemiological development, namely the sharp decline in leprosy incidence, also plays a role.

In this paper, the coastal region refers to Paramaribo and its surroundings and the part of the coastal plain where plantations were located in colonial times, namely South and East of Paramaribo along the Suriname River and the Commewijne River and their branches and West of Paramaribo (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Map of Suriname showing capital Paramaribo and plantations (coastal area where *trefu* is practised) and the residential areas of the 6 Maroon groups in the interior (where *tyina* is practised).

Source: Authors work, partly based on Hendrik Rypkema, Naturalis Biodiversity Center (Van Andel et al, 2014).

2 TREFU AND TYINA, TABOOS PRACTISED IN SURINAME

Trefu and *tyina* continue to play an important role in the lives of Creoles and Maroons, and to a lesser extent, of people of other ethnic groups (Menke et al., 2020). The crucial question relates to the meaning of these two taboo concepts and their relationship over time.

Trefu is a taboo related to food and is strongly connected with leprosy or Hansen's disease. The name *trefu* is a Surinamese corruption of the Yiddish word *treife*, pointing to the food products forbidden to Jewish people according to the Mosaic laws. *Trefu* can be regarded as a remnant of totemism, much like the African mother concept *tyina*, which it probably derives from (Benjamins, 1930). *Trefu* is hereditary through the father's line (father *trefu*). However, one can also obtain it in several other ways. For example, the forbidden food can be revealed in a dream (dream *trefu*) or can be determined through personal experience (experience *trefu*). Some people rely on the authority of a local '*trefu* connoisseur', who determines their *trefu* (Lampe, 1929, p. 546-550). The idea that leprosy can be induced by eating food that is forbidden to eat in the context of a taboo is the quintessence of *trefu*. Historically, *Trefu* is practised in Paramaribo and the country's coastal region (Lampe, 1929, p. 566). Benjamins (1930) argues that the word *trefu* was originally unknown among Maroons living in the interior.

Tyina is a complex concept, encompassing a variety of taboos, which were historically mainly practised by Maroons in the interior of Suriname. According to Lampe (1929, p. 562), in the early 20th century, *tyina* was practically unknown in the capital Paramaribo. It originates from West Africa, where similar practices were reported in Loango (present Southern Gabon, Congo and Northern Angola), where it is known as *tschina* (Pechuell Loesche, 1907, p. 455-472), and also in regions North of Loango, e.g. the Coast of Guinea (Bosman, 1907). In addition to a ban on certain foods, *tyina* includes a ban on certain places and certain actions. It is basically acquired by inheritance through the paternal line. *Tyina* is closely linked with the natural environment and the *Winti* religion in Suriname. Violation of the *tyina* can end up in disease, death and/or another disaster.

Based on the above (and on information presented in the next sections) we assume that a geographical and conceptual dichotomy has developed in colonial times along two lines. On the one hand, *trefu*, a food taboo, a violation of which may result in leprosy, is practised mainly by creoles in the coastal region. On the other hand, *tyina*, a conceptually broader taboo (for food, places and actions), practised by Maroons in the interior.

It is important to note that the term *trefu* may lead to some confusion because Maroons use it in the meaning of *tyina*, the complex concept with a broad meaning (own experience of the authors during their 2018 expedition to the *Saamaka* Maroons). In this article, the word *trefu* (unless stated otherwise) exclusively refers to a food taboo linked to the disease leprosy, practised in Paramaribo and the country's coastal region.

3 HISTORICAL NOTES ON LEPROSY, TREFU AND TYINA

3.1 LEPROSY

In the 19th century, close to 1% of the population of Suriname was isolated in a leprosy colony (Snelders, 2017, p. 43-78). In the early 20th century, 2.5 -3% of the capital's population suffered from leprosy (FLU, 1928). At the same time, the people were under the spell of *trefu*. They believed that eating the forbidden food (their *trefu*) could lead to leprosy. Conversely, not eating their *trefu* was considered the appropriate remedy to prevent and even treat the disease. A leprosy patient (H.E. born in 1929) explains: "I was not allowed to eat beef, monkey, pumpkin, rice and chicken. I also knew people who only consumed bread and water for their breakfast, in order to combat their leprosy" (Reyme; Menke, 2019, p. 99-105). Because physicians and colonial rulers considered leprosy a highly contagious disease (Drogat Landré, 1869; Schilling, 1769), patients were isolated in remote leprosy colonies (Menke *et al.*, 2020; Snelders, 2013). However, the Afro-Surinamese patients believed in *trefu* rather than in the contagiousness they despised, which only led to their isolation. To avoid this, many went into hiding.

3.2 TREFU

Stedman (1796, p.264) described a practice in the 1770s: “a direct prohibition in every family, handed down from father to son, against the eating of some kind of animal food, which they call ‘treff’”. Teenstra (1835, p.199-200) explains that Africans in Suriname have some animals or plants they will not eat. In one case, it is turtle, in another, it is crab, in another, it is a certain species of fish and so on. He furthermore reports that it has been experimentally proven that Africans who were secretly fed their *trefu* developed a convulsive illness and ‘*treef vlekken*’ (*trefu* spots) on the skin. According to Herskovits and Herskovits (1936, p.37), violating one’s *trefu* could develop eczema, which could develop into leprosy by continued consumption of the forbidden food. So eating the forbidden food can lead to various diseases, but there also seems to be a gradual conceptual narrowing of the consequences of violating one’s *trefu* towards leprosy. Thus, Benjamins (1930, p.187) defines *trefu* as: “any food, the continued use of which - according to the widespread popular belief in Suriname - would give rise to the development of leprosy”. Our interviews with leprosy patients in the 20th century indicate that the alleged relationship between *trefu* (i.e. eating of the forbidden food) and the development of leprosy had the character of a collective obsession of the people in Paramaribo and the coastal region. This idea was so firmly entrenched in their minds that leprosy was named ‘*treefziekte*’ (Lampe, 1929, p. 545), meaning ‘disease caused by *trefu*’. The physicians in charge of leprosy control accused the population of hindering the fight against this disease because of their ‘ridiculous’ belief in *trefu* (Landré, 1889, p. 13). However, some doctors actually supported this belief held by their patients .

Lampe (1929, p. 566) suggests that *trefu* originated in Paramaribo in the process of cultural exchange between Jews and Africans. However, according to Trouillot (2006), plantations were an important context or a fertile breeding ground for creolisation in the Caribbean during slavery (although he explains that creolisation also occurred in other contexts). Davis (2015) endorses this view for the origins of *trefu*, explaining that on the plantations in Suriname, the cooks and housemaids learned Jewish food prohibitions and compared them to those they had brought with them from Africa. Talking of this taboo in Dju-tongo, they used the Yiddish word *treff* (*treife*), which linguistically changed to *treef* (Dutch) or *trefu* (*Sranan* language). As Lampe (1929) already noted, not only on the plantations but also in the capital Paramaribo, interactions between Jews and people of African descent were part of everyday life, resulting in the continuous exchange of cultural ideas and practices. Food was a common part of cultural interaction, which, for example, can be traced in Creole (Afro-Jewish) dishes like *pom*, a Surinamese festive dish (Vink, 2010, p. 74). There is no scope in this paper to elaborate on the precise contribution of Jewish dietary rules to *trefu* and the similarities and differences between Jewish *treife* and Surinamese *trefu*, but the influences are apparent.

Trefu is a concept of the people. However, professionals, specifically physicians like Lampe (1929), have contributed to its construction through research papers, public presentations, and newspaper reports on the relationship between *trefu* and leprosy. These professionals influenced the *trefu* practices, the majority through their objections to it, but some through their approval. Anthropologists who followed a different research route have not explicitly delved into the relationship between leprosy and *trefu*. They studied the traditional taboos mainly in the interior of the country in the context of the culture of the Maroons; they generally considered *trefu* and *tyina* as identical taboo concepts and the two words as synonymous (Herskovits; Herskovits, 1936, p.36). While this view might have been true for the interior of Suriname, in Paramaribo and the coastal region, *trefu* has developed, as already explained, more as a taboo specifically linked to leprosy.

3.3 TYINA

During colonialism, Maroons settled in six tribal groups (or tribal peoples) in the interior (Figure 1). Benjamins (1930, p. 194) points out that the ‘Saltwater negroes’, in particular those brought in from Africa, in contrast to the ‘Creole negroes’ who were born in Suriname, m.,fled from the plantations

to the interior with their traditional ideas and customs. Traditional taboos (called *tyinas* or *kinas*) are practised by all Maroon tribal peoples; they are part of their *Winti* religion, and the *Winti* gods might punish people who violate the *tyina* (De Beet en Sterman, 1981, p.239). The *tyina* taboo system in the interior includes a wide range of practices. American and Dutch anthropologists have described these in the context of their research into Maroon culture. We rehearse some examples of *tyina* to illustrate its complexity. Herskovits (1928) mentions food taboos inherited from the father's line among *Saamaka*. Eliza (2017, p. 38-39) points to taboos associated with menstruation amongst the *Matawai* and *Ndyuka*. Junker (1923) describes the water splash taboo amongst the *Ndyuka*, linked to the *Winti* river god. The violation of this *tyina* was thought to be punished with heavy rains that spoiled the field crops.

Moreover, the splashed person fell ill. Green (1974, p. 185.) describes among the *Matawai* a ban linked to animal totemism: a man lost in the jungle was guided back home by a '*pomba*' (dove) with the voice of a human; his descendants do not eat '*pomba*'. This kaleidoscopic array of practices among Maroons illustrates the diversity and broad meaning of *tyina*, indicating its relation with the surrounding nature and the *Winti* religion.

4 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The foregoing shows that *trefu* is historically practised in the urban and coastal region, whilst *tyina* is practised in the interior. Since the last quarter of the 20th century, we have witnessed large waves of Maroons into the urban context, particularly the *Saamaka* and *Ndyuka*, profoundly changing the demographic situation in the coastal region. To illustrate, the number of Maroons in the urban districts of Paramaribo and Wanica grew from 33181 to 58436 (an increase of 43%) between the census years 2004 and 2012 due to urbanisation and natural increase. In the last decades of the 20th century, we also witnessed a sharp drop in leprosy incidence and subsequently, all leprosy colonies closed their doors, all as a result of the introduction of anti-leprosy drugs (Menke *et al.*, 2011; WHO, 2022). The above developments might have influenced the traditional taboos in Paramaribo and its surroundings, so it was decided to study the ideas and practices regarding these taboos amongst the people in a coastal urban neighbourhood. This case study focuses on the occurrence, meaning and role of traditional taboos and intercultural exchange in the daily lives of people in *Sophia's Lust*, a neighbourhood in the Wanica district adjacent to urban Paramaribo that can be considered a suburb of the Capital (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Map of Paramaribo and Wanica district with the neighbourhood Sophia’s Lust (in red)

Source: Authors work.

Sophia’s Lust is mainly populated by Creoles and Maroons, groups who are historically familiar with taboos, but people from other ethnic groups also live there (table 1). A mixed method study was conducted, consisting of a survey amongst 60 residents (or respondents) of *Sophia’s Lust* and an in-depth interview with ten of them. Of the 60 residents, 28% have always lived in this neighbourhood, 40% migrated from the Wanica district, 25% from Paramaribo and other districts in the coastal region, and 7% previously lived in the interior of the country. Most of the Maroons in this study claim not to have moved directly from the interior to *Sophia’s Lust*. They first lived elsewhere in the coastal region before moving to *Sophia’s Lust*.

Regarding ethical aspects of the field research in *Sophia’s Lust*, the research design was approved by the Chair of ‘Social Sciences in a multi-ethnic society with emphasis on research methodology’ of the Anton de Kom University of Suriname. In addition, everyone who was surveyed and interviewed received, in advance, an explanation about the nature and purpose of the study and gave permission to publish the edited results.

Table 1 – Ethnicity of respondents in *Sophia’s Lust*, 2022

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent.</i>
Creole	24	40%
Mixed	9	15%
Ndyuka (Maroon)	8	13%
Saamaka (Maroon)	7	12%
Matawai (Maroon)	1	2%
Javanese	5	8%
Indigenous	4	7%
East Indian (Hindostani)	2	3%
Total	60	100%

Source: Authors’ work, based on a thesis by Robert (2022).

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results from the recent sample survey in *Sophia's Lust* point to changes in taboo practices compared to the (early) 20th century. The findings fall into four categories:

1. a declining belief in a relationship between *trefu* and leprosy,
2. a merging of *tyina* and *trefu*,
3. a cross-cultural exchange of taboos between ethnic groups
4. a decreasing interest of young people in taboos.

Do the results obtained from the *Sophia's Lust* participants also apply to Paramaribo and the Wanica district, or more generally to the coastal region? We believe that the data cannot simply be generalised because the composition of the population and the distribution of key variables, such as ethnicity, is different in other neighbourhoods and regions. On the other hand, we assume that the social processes that have brought about the observed changes in *Sophia's Lust* also operate in other areas where the Maroons have settled and encountered people of other ethnic groups, possibly resulting in acculturation. We refer to densely populated neighbourhoods, such as 'Pontbuiten' and 'Latour' in the capital city Paramaribo, and 'De Nieuwe Grond' and 'Saramacca Polder', neighbourhoods of the Wanica district (figure 2). Many Maroons, as well as people of other ethnicities, live in these neighbourhoods. This information is based on Jack Menke's personal observations and census data (Menke; Sno, 2016). Moreover, the interviews provide credible information about changes in the meaning and importance of the *tyina* and *trefu* concepts in Paramaribo and its surroundings. We assume that our findings in *Sophia's Lust* set out in four themes (in the next sections) also apply to parts of the coastal region, (including Paramaribo), with by and large the same composition of ethnic groups. But it will be clear that the validity of these findings for other regions needs to be investigated through additional research.

5.1 DECLINING BELIEF IN A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *TREFU* AND LEPROSY

Of the 60 residents of *Sophia's Lust* (none had leprosy) who have been surveyed, a third (33.3% of Maroons, 25% of Creoles and 29.4% of others) believe that a person can develop the disease leprosy by violating their *trefu* (Robert, 2022, p. 46). According to Lampe (1929, p. 551), almost a century ago, more than 90% of the pupils (healthy children) in a public school in the capital adhered to their *trefu* to prevent leprosy. Furthermore, there appears to be a decline in this belief among leprosy patients, although less pronounced than among healthy people. In the 1920s, 75 to 85% of leprosy patients were convinced that repeated violation of their *trefu* caused their disease (Lampe, 1929, p. 546). In the early 21st century, the belief in *trefu* as an alleged causal factor for leprosy still seemed to be alive among older leprosy patients (Van Haaren *et al.*, 2016). However, interviews conducted between 2013 and 2015 among 30 leprosy patients (of whom 14 had been isolated in a leprosarium between 1938 and 1972) showed that 20 of them (67%) directly or indirectly attributed their leprosy to violating their *trefu* (Ramdas *et al.*, p. 156). Moreover, one of these 20 patients used the word '*tyina*' rather than '*trefu*' to indicate the taboo she was supposed to adhere to. This was the first time we heard the word *tyina* in the coastal region instead of the familiar *trefu*. The narrative of this patient (named L.) indicates that things are changing and that the coastal taboo concept of *trefu* is in decline. L. is a *Saamaka* Maroon woman who had migrated from the interior to urban Paramaribo. In addition to the food products *podosiri* and *pokaj*, soil (sand) is her *tyina*. She explained that sand had caused the leprosy lesions on her body (Reyme; Menke, 2019, p. 123). Her story suggests a merging between the coastal *trefu* concept and the *tyina* concept of the interior (see 5.2). We conclude that both data from the *Sophia's Lust* study and the patient's narratives indicate that today, fewer healthy people, as well as fewer leprosy patients (than in the past), believe that the disease leprosy is a result of violating their *trefu*. How can we explain this

change? We observe a general decline in young people's belief and practice of the traditional bans in the coastal region (see 5.4). This general decline also includes the belief in the relationship between *trefu* and leprosy. Indeed, 25% of people under 25 surveyed in *Sophia's Lust* are unfamiliar with the term *trefu*, compared to 11% of people over 25 (Robert, 2022, p.37). The decline in leprosy incidence in Suriname might also have contributed to the reduced belief in the relationship between *trefu* and leprosy. Finally, health education might be another contributing factor.

5.2 MERGING OF *TYINA* AND *TREFU*

About a century ago, *tyina* was practically unknown in Paramaribo. However, nowadays, more than 50% of the people in *Sophia's Lust* are familiar with this taboo. This can be attributed to the Maroons who have migrated to this neighbourhood. From the second half of the 20th century onwards, Maroons or their ancestors apparently brought *tyina*, an important part of their cultural heritage, from the interior to Paramaribo and the surrounding coastal region. Table 2 shows that all Maroon people (*Saamaka* and *Ndyuka*) are familiar with the concept of *tyina*. Of the Creoles (also people with African roots), 62% are familiar with it, and of the remaining groups, the vast majority (90%) are not familiar with *tyina* (Table 2).

Table 2 – Number and percentage of people in *Sophia's Lust* familiar with *tyina* (2022)

Familiar with Tyina	Ethnicity								Total	
	Saamaka		Ndyuka		Creole		Other			
	Number	Percent.	Number	Percent.	Number	Percent.	Number	Percent.	Number	Percent.
Yes	7	100%	8	100%	15	62%	2	10%	32	53%
No	0	0%	0	0%	9	38%	19	90%	28	47%
Total	7	100%	8	100%	24	100%	21	100%	60	100%

Source: Authors' work, based on a thesis by Robert (2022).

Regarding *trefu*, most Creoles (96%) and Maroons (*Saamaka* 86% and *Ndyuka* 88%) in *Sophia's Lust* appear familiar with this taboo. Of the other ethnic groups, two-thirds are aware of *trefu* (Table 3).

Table 3 – Number and percentage of people in *Sophia's Lust* familiar with *Trefu* (2022)

Familiar with Trefu	Ethnicity								Total	
	Saamaka		Ndyuka		Creole		Other			
	Number	Percent.	Number	Percent.	Number	Percent.	Number	Percent.	Number	Percent.
Yes	6	86%	7	88%	23	96%	14	67%	50	83%
No	1	14%	1	12%	1	4%	7	33%	10	17%
Total	7	100%	8	100%	24	100	21	100%	60	100%

Source: Authors' work, based on a thesis by Robert (2022).

So *trefu* is a well-known concept in *Sophia's Lust*, but compared with a century ago (Lampe, 1929, p.551), there seems to be some decline in familiarity with this food taboo. On the other hand, the familiarity with *tyina* shows an opposite movement because about 100 years ago, this term was practically unknown in urban Paramaribo. We conclude that today, *tyina* has taken root in the urban coastal region while *trefu* is diminishing as a concept. These changes coincide with the urbanisation of Maroons to Paramaribo and its surroundings.

Interviews conducted with ten respondents provide in-depth insights into ideas and practices of taboos in daily life (Robert, 2022, p. 81-87). They also illustrate the merging of *trefu* and *tyina*. Three of the interviewees, a Creole woman, an East Indian man and a Javanese man, confirmed their familiarity with *trefu*, but they had never heard of *tyina*. Of the remaining seven (all Maroon or Creole), four believe that *tyina* and *trefu* are the same and consider the words synonyms. Only one person doubts whether

the two words are the same, and two believe they are different. What is the difference between *tyina* and *trefu* according to these last two people? One of them (S.A., a Creole male) perceives *tyina* as to be a prohibition to work on certain days, so-called *tyina dei* (or *kina dei*), while in his opinion, *trefu* is a taboo on eating certain foods, including food prepared by a menstruating woman. Surprisingly, he also believes that *trefu* is taboo when entering certain roads. The other person (X.S., a Christian woman of *Saamaka* Maroon ancestry) explains that *tyina* is a prohibition obtained at birth. Her *tyinas* are *sara-sara* (shrimp) and *barbamang* (a type of catfish). If she eats them, she gets white spots, so-called 'lota spots', and a swollen throat. *Trefu*, she says, is something you should not do. For example, you cannot cook for men if you have already received '*pangi*'.

Furthermore, she explains that her mother also has *trefus*. For example, her mother is not allowed to eat certain food or do certain things because she is possessed by a snake named '*Tenzawa*'. This came about when working on an agricultural plot where she unintentionally killed a snake while lighting a fire. A *kunu* was born. Her mother must now worship this snake and is therefore not allowed to eat '*wāná*' and '*baaka wii*'. When her mother dies, her *trefus* can pass to someone else. This case again illustrates the entanglement of the taboos with the natural surroundings and the *Winti* religion. The narratives of S.A. and X.S. show a reversal of the meaning of *tyina* and *trefu*. For example, according to S.A., entering certain roads is a *trefu*. However, as said before, traditionally, in Paramaribo and the coastal region, *trefu* is a ban on eating certain foods, while a prohibition to enter certain places is part of the *tyina* concept from the interior.

We conclude that the interviews point to a merging of *tyina* and *trefu* in a neighbourhood where both Maroons and Creoles live and have intensive social contact in daily life.

5.3 CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE BETWEEN PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT ETHNIC ORIGIN

Traditional taboos in Suriname are originally Afro-Surinamese practices. However, we are aware of cross-cultural diffusion with people of other ethnic groups. These are illustrative interviews of leprosy patients conducted between 2013-2015, indicating that various Javanese and East Indian patients ceased to eat certain foods on the advice of Creoles, hoping to turn the leprosy tide. For example, S.N., a Javanese leprosy patient, was advised by her Creole neighbours not to eat certain foods because her disease was said to be food-induced. On their advice, she stopped eating onions, garlic, scaleless fish, sardines, and red meat (Reyme; Menke, 2019, p. 130). Unsurprisingly, the recent in-depth interviews in *Sophia's Lust* indicate that the cross-cultural exchange of taboos also occurs among healthy people. A Javanese man (S.T.) explains that he knows *trefu* but himself has no *trefu*. He knows that many Creoles stick to their *trefu*, and he can imagine that some get leprosy if they do not adhere to their *trefu*. (Robert, 2022, p. 87). An East Indian man (R.B.) explains with great assurance that he certainly has *trefus* himself, quote: "*I don't like people lying to me, it's a trefu for me. That the people who I am with or whom I call friends or family look down on others, that is also my trefu. A trefu can be many things*" (Robert, 2022, p.85-86). R.B. uses the word *trefu* to express a state of mind and, in fact, to indicate something he does not like about people's attitudes or behaviour. R.B. has interpreted the *trefu* concept differently and taken on new aspects. His *trefus* does not resemble the traditional meaning assigned to the concept of *trefu* by the Afro-Surinamese community, indicating a substantive change of the coastal taboo concept (at least in the mind of R.B.) induced by acculturation.

Interestingly, the narratives of the interviewed people indicate the emergence of certain nuances and novel perspectives, by which we mean the different 'directions' the observed evolutionary changes can take. The testimony of the East Indian respondent (R.B.) is an example, representing a different nuance, indicating both a broadening and blurring of the traditional taboos. One might perhaps even speculate whether this case (R.B.) indicates that *tyina* and *trefu* in the coastal region could metamorphose into a 'container concept'. It is clear that further research is needed regarding the nuances of evolutionary developments in general.

5.4 DECREASING IMPORTANCE OF TABOOS AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

The *Sophia's Lust* survey indicates that young people attach decreasing importance to knowledge about and compliance with taboos. Transfer of knowledge about traditional taboos is considered less important by the younger generation than the older ones. Of the older Maroon generation in *Sophia's Lust*, 63% consider knowledge transfer about traditional taboos important, versus 55% of the young people. Amongst Creoles, these percentages are 54% versus 42%, respectively and among other ethnic groups 20% versus 15%, respectively. Furthermore, the results show that 55% of respondents violate their *trefu* or *tyina* (Robert, 2022, p. 83-84). As mentioned earlier, about a century ago, more than 90 % of the public school students in Paramaribo (for fear of leprosy) faithfully adhered to their *trefu*. The interviews in *Sophia's Lust* confirm the decline in knowledge regarding traditional taboos and actually complying with them, especially among the youth. The statement by M.M. (a Creole woman) at the end of her interview is significant: "Young people adhere less to *trefu* and/or *tyina* than older people and people from the interior. The young people have buried their old [previous] life." (Robert, 2022, p. 83-84)

6 CONCLUSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Traditional taboos originating from West Africa have been practised in Suriname until today. Our 2022 research shows that the geographical and conceptual dichotomy, with the dominance of the leprosy-related *trefu* food taboo in Paramaribo and the coastal region and the broad *tyina* taboo (food, places, action) in the interior, is diminishing. Taboo ideas and practices are still currently flourishing in the urban neighbourhood of *Sophia's Lust* in the coastal region. At the same time, however, our research indicates that things have changed compared to the (early) 20th century. In Paramaribo and the coastal region, we are witnessing a declining belief in the relationship between *trefu* (food taboo) and leprosy and a merging of *trefu* and *tyina* due to cross-cultural exchange and an adaptation of taboos (ideas and practices) between ethnic groups, and furthermore a decreasing belief in taboos by younger people.

While *trefu* is declining in Paramaribo and the coastal region, *tyina* is emerging in these regions. We assume that *trefu* originated from African totemism-linked taboo concepts, as Benjamins (1930) postulates. So *trefu* can be considered a concept that has separated itself from the African 'mother taboo concept', basically *tshina* from Loango, whether or not combined with taboos from other African regions. The present merging of *trefu* and *tyina* as concepts can thus be regarded as a kind of 'homecoming' of *trefu*.

The case study of traditional taboos in *Sophia's Lust* in 2022 indicates that cultural traditions in Paramaribo and the coastal region are changing. The migration of Maroons from the interior to the coastal region and the related creolisation process are the driving forces behind the observed changes concerning taboos. However, the strong decline in the prevalence of leprosy in the past decades might also have contributed, more in particular, to the declining belief that leprosy is caused by violating one's *trefu* (in fact, by eating the forbidden food). Finally, we suggest that what we are now mapping in the coastal region (the changes regarding traditional taboos) is part of a broader process of cultural changes in Suriname driven by recent internal demographic transitions.

Returning to the situation in the greater Caribbean, Lampe (1929, p. 562-563) noted that *kina* (another term for *tyina*) was found in the early 20th century in the Caribbean countries St Lucia, Martinique, Guadeloupe, British Guiana (now Guyana), French Guiana, British Honduras (now Belize), but not in Barbados, Trinidad, Antigua and Saint Kitts. Seventy-five years later, Maureen Warner-Lewis (2003, p. 104-106) reports that these taboos are found in Jamaica, Guyana, French Guiana and Suriname in the Americas. Recently received personal information indicates that traditional food bans are present today in a mitigated form in Haiti and Curacao⁵. The above indicates that traditional taboos in the past landed in the Greater Caribbean. These taboos may have disappeared in many countries or regions, but it could also be that they live on in a limited form, perhaps hidden in plain sight.

Suriname has the most enduring Maroon tribal communities in the Americas (Ngwenyama, 2007), which probably explains the persistence of *trefu* and *tyina*, the traditional taboos originating from West Africa. As explained before, these taboos are widely practised in the interior and the coastal region. Nevertheless, how sustainable are they in Suriname? Our study is too limited to draw far-reaching conclusions, but regarding sustainability, we have come across interesting evolutionary developments in the coastal region, e.g., young people practice traditional taboos less often than their parents (see section 5.4). This development is evident from the survey but is also made clear by the heartfelt cry of several interviewees who say with a mixture of pain and disappointment that the traditional taboos in the coastal region are in danger of fading away because young people do not adhere to the cultural traditions of their ancestors.

Additional research is needed in both Suriname and the Greater Caribbean to increase our knowledge about traditional taboos and their evolution.

NOTES

1 | In Suriname they are generally called Hindostani.

2 | The meaning of Creole and Mixed changed over the years in the censuses, in which ethnicity is determined by self-identification (Menke; Sno, 2016, p.105-126). In the *Sophia's Lust* study, ethnicity is also determined by self-identification. Creole refers to dark skinned people of predominantly African descent. Mixed refers to people who arise from a mixture of people of different ethnic groups.

3 | Other terms are also used to denote cultural fusion, depending on the context, like hybridization and acculturation.

4 | Various spellings and pronunciations are used, e.g.: *trefu*, *treff*, *treef*.

5 | Various spellings and pronunciations are used, e.g.: *tyina*, *tschina*, *xina*, *kina*, *kinah*.

6 | The Sephardic Jews from Pernambuco (Brazil) settled with their African slaves in the mid-17th century in Suriname and established sugar plantations in the Suriname River area. These Jews together with Northern European Ashkenazi Jews were demographically and economically a large and visible group in Suriname throughout the colonial period. Around the end of the 17th century the Jews owned 40 sugar plantations with a total of 9,000 slaves and possessed 115 of a total of 400 plantations in Suriname (Menke; Menke, 2015, p. 266).

7 | In Brazil this disease is officially called Hanseníase.

8 | Lampe (1929, p. 548) explains that '*trefu-connoisseurs*' are nothing more than charlatans who squeeze money out of people who live in great fear due to leprosy.

9 | The belief that food somehow plays a role in the development of leprosy is certainly not an idea only among 'common' people. For example, Pandya (1998, p. 375) explains that in the 19th century the opposition to the idea that leprosy is contagious came from three scientific 'schools of thought': the hereditarian, the dietary, and the sanitarian. Furthermore Hutchinson (1906), the authoritative British physician and researcher, vigorously defended the view that leprosy was caused by eating fish. *Trefu* is contrary to these scientific explanatory concepts of leprosy researchers, a spiritual Surinamese explanation model based on African totemism.

10 | *Winti* is a Surinamese (Afro-American) religion, similar to Haitian *Voodoo*, Trinidadian *Shango*, Brazilian *Candomblé* and Cuban *Santería* (Green, 1974, p.235).

11 | *Trefu* spots or *treef* spots are white spots on the skin.

12 | For example Sila, a 67 year old Hindostani (= East Indian) female leprosy patient explains that her general practitioner (a Western trained physician) advised her to continue obeying her *trefus* (so, not eating the forbidden foods), because that would promote her healing (Ramdas *et al.*, 2019, p.161).

13 | *Dju tongo* means Language of the Jews.

14 | *Sranan* language is the local creole language spoken in Suriname.

15 | In the first decades of the 20th century, an avalanche of popular articles appeared in the newspapers in Suriname about the alleged relationship between *trefu* and leprosy, in which supporters and opponents debated fiercely. These newspaper articles are available at: delpher.nl.

16 | Physicians who encouraged their patients to stick to their *trefu*.

17 | The six Maroon groups are: *Saamaka* or *Saramaccaners* on the upper Suriname River, *Matawai* on the Saramacca River, *Kwinti* on the Coppename River, *Ndyuka* on the Marowynne and Cottica rivers, *Patamaccaners* on the Marowynne River and Boni's or *Aluku's* on the Lawa river.

18 | The *Ndyuka* are also called *Okanasi* or *Aucaners* by the Dutch (Eliza, 2017, p.22.).

19 | This *tyina* is related to a forbidden place (the river) and a forbidden action (splashing).

20 | Calculation based on data from tables 9 and 10, page 121 and table 1, page 251 in: *Mozaiek van het Surinaamse Volk* (Menke; Sno, 2016).

21 | The research was carried out by Orpheo Robert at the Anton de Kom University under supervision of Jack Menke. The study is laid down in Robert's bachelor thesis (Robert, 2022).

22 | *Podosiri* (Surinamese name) = acai (Brazilian name).

23 | *Pokai* (Surinamese name) = parrot.

24 | She says that a woman she fought with, threw earth (soil) on her and where the sand touched her body, leprosy bumps appeared. She claims that earth (soil) is her *tyina*.

25 | Personal communication from Karin Sewpersad, head of the leprosy control in Suriname.

26 | *Lota* spots are white spots on the skin, caused by a yeast (fungus). The spots resemble tree spots (see note 11).

27 | 'Receiving *pangi*' is a ritual that indicates the coming of age of a girl, whether or not related to the first menstruation.

28 | A *kunu* is a curse.

29 | '*Wāná*' is a type of wild boar and '*baaka wii*' is a vegetable.

30 | Personal information received from Orpheo Robert (see note 21).

31 | People of other ethnic groups, including people of Jewish descent, might also adhere to these taboos.

32 | Lampe does not provide a source, except for British Honduras; he received information from Dr. Burton, Principal Medical Officer in British-Honduras.

33 | Information received by e-mail on 27-05-2021 from Jean Casimir, referring to Haiti and on 24-05-2021 from Richenel Ansanoo, referring to Curacao.

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