

'Only a disciplined people can build a nation': North Korean Mass Games and Third Worldism in Guyana, 1980-1992 [鍛錬された民のみぞ国づくりに役立つ] ガイアナにおける北朝鮮のマスゲームと第三世界主義 1980-1992

Moe Taylor

Abstract: As the 1970s drew to a close, Forbes Burnham (1923-85), Guyana's controversial leader of 21 years, received Pyongyang's assistance in importing the North Korean tradition of Mass Games, establishing them as a major facet of the nation's cultural and political life during the 1980-92 period. The current study documents this episode in Guyanese history and seeks to explain why the Burnham regime prioritized such an experiment in a time of austerity and crisis, its ideological foundations, and how Guyanese interpreted and responded to Mass Games.

I argue that the Burnham regime's enthusiasm for Mass Games can in large part be explained by their adherence to a particular tradition of socialist thought which holds education and culture as the foundation of development. While such a conception of socialism has roots in the early Soviet Union and, in the case of Guyana, was greatly influenced by the North Korean model, it was also shaped by local and regional contexts.

The deep aversion of parents to their children losing class time to Mass Games training, along with ethnic division and Indo-Guyanese hostility to the Afro-Guyanese dominated government in particular, proved the central obstacles to widespread public support for the project. Despite these contradictions, Mass Games, which took on a local flavour distinct from its North Korean progenitor, did in fact resonate with those who believed in Burnham's promise of a brighter, socialist future, while also

appealing to a certain widespread longing within Guyanese culture for a more "disciplined" society.

Introduction

In the final months of 1979, while the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan dominated international headlines, the approximately 750,000 citizens of the South American republic of Guyana (formerly British Guiana) were informed by state-owned media about the coming arrival of a strange and mysterious new thing called Mass Games, a spectacle event that would be, according to one editorial, "the most magnificent in the history of our country."¹ It would require the mandatory participation of their children in primary and secondary school, parents were told, and would take place at the National Park auditorium on 23 February 1980 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Co-operative Republic, as part of the broader Mashramani celebrations (Guyana's version of Carnival). It was presented to Guyanese as both a performance, a spectacle, implying entertainment; but also as fundamentally educational in nature, a project of the Ministry of Education whose primary value lay in what it stood to offer the nation's youth. It was also made clear that this event was the latest fruit of fraternal cooperation between Guyana and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which had taken on

increasing importance in the life of the country during the last six years. It was the dawning of a decade in which North Korean-style Mass Games became a major facet of the cultural and political life of Guyana, and it is this episode in Cold War international relations the present study seeks to document. More specifically this article examines the ideological, political and cultural factors which moved the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) to import and adapt North Korean Mass Games, and how Guyanese interpreted and responded to the state-driven experiment.

Guyana, North Korea and the Burnham Era

Guyana is the sole English-speaking country in South America, bordering Venezuela, Brazil and Suriname on the northern coast but culturally affiliated with the Anglophone Caribbean. First inhabited by indigenous Amerindian peoples, successive periods of colonial rule by the Netherlands (1648-1814) and Britain (1814-1966) saw the arrival of slaves from Africa and indentured labourers from India, China and Portugal (in particular the island of Madeira), forging a pluralistic society with six official ethnic groups. However modern society and politics would largely be shaped by the often troubled relations between the two largest communities: Indo-Guyanese, mostly Hindu with a sizable Muslim minority, working the sugar estates and rice farms of the rural coastland, and Afro-Guyanese, predominantly Christian, concentrated in the capital and employed primarily in the civil service, security forces, mining and urban work force. Historically Indo-Guyanese constituted the single largest group; by 1970 for example, they represented 51.4 percent of the population, with Afro-Guyanese constituting 30.6 percent.²

The arrival of North Korean Mass Games in Guyana at the dawn of the 1980s was the latest episode in the controversial 21-year reign of Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham (1923-85),

leader of the People's National Congress (PNC). A London-educated Afro-Guyanese lawyer and trade unionist, Burnham's political career began with the anti-colonial and labour struggles of the early 1950s in the then recently established People's Progressive Party (PPP), led by the Indo-Guyanese dentist and fellow trade unionist, Cheddi Jagan. As the Marxist leanings of Jagan and other PPP leaders stoked British and American fears about a communist takeover in the colony, Burnham led a breakaway faction that would become the PNC in 1957, positioning himself as a moderate socialist who would protect private property and welcome foreign investment, in contrast to the supposedly Stalinist Jagan. Guyana's electoral arena was torn along ethnic lines, with most Indo-Guyanese backing Jagan and most Afro-Guyanese following Burnham, while Washington decided the latter best served its agenda of curbing Soviet influence in the region. Covert intervention by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the 1960s was instrumental in the PNC's ascension to power, a dark period marred by ethnic violence, sabotage and labour unrest.³ Burnham was elected Premier in December 1964 in coalition with the right-wing United Force (UF), and became Prime Minister with Britain's granting of independence in May 1966. As Guyana stepped into independent statehood, Burnham inherited an underdeveloped plantation economy dominated by the production of sugar, rice and bauxite for export, and a population deeply divided by years of communal strife.

The first indication that the honeymoon between Burnham and his American patrons would be short-lived came on 23 February 1970, when, having shed his cumbersome coalition partner in a rigged 1968 election, Burnham formally declared Guyana a "Co-operative Republic," and proclaimed a new revolutionary course for the nation under an official ideology he called "co-operative socialism." He vowed to "establish firmly and irrevocably the co-operative as the means of

making *the small man a real man*⁴ and changing, in a revolutionary fashion, the social and economic relationships to which we have been heir as part of pure monarchical legacy."⁵ Like the Juche idea in North Korea, co-operative socialism would be simultaneously articulated as the brainchild of the maximum leader and as an indigenous adaptation of Marxism-Leninism, based in Guyanese history and conditions.⁶ At its core was the principle of self-reliance (primarily manifested in the nationalization of all foreign-owned enterprises and the banning of imports deemed unessential), a multitude of ambitious educational and cultural reforms designed to create a "new man" free of colonial influences, and a programme, never fully realized, to build a new economic structure based on co-operatives. In explaining this sudden shift to the Left, the Comrade Leader (the formal title Burnham adopted in the 1970s) maintained that he had always been a Marxist, but had the wisdom and tact to put ideology aside until he had secured independence for his country. While there was some blowback from Washington, the PNC regime was spared the kind of overt American hostility received by other Leftist states of the region in the same period; with the staunchly pro-Soviet PPP the only other serious contender for power, Burnham remained the lesser evil in the eyes of Washington throughout the Cold War.

Burnham's foreign policy priorities were securing aid, favorable trade agreements and outside support in Guyana's territorial disputes with neighbors Venezuela and Suriname, particularly the former, which historically claims two-thirds of Guyana's territory and was threatening military action in the period. As Burnham snubbed the Western powers which had once backed him as Guyana's best defence against communism, he hoped to find an alternate source of support in the socialist bloc and Non-Aligned Movement. The outcome of these efforts presents an interesting case study of what options existed for developing

countries located in "America's backyard" against the politics of the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet rivalry. Traditionally, the Soviet Union recognized Burnham's opposition, the PPP, as the legitimate Marxist-Leninist party in Guyana. With Burnham's rise to power having been bankrolled by the CIA, and his routine condemnation of the "Soviet threat" during his opposition years, the Brezhnev administration had plenty of reason to be sceptical. Moscow's reaction was to recognize Guyana as a "socialist-oriented" (rather than socialist) country, rejecting Burnham's bid to have the PNC admitted into the Communist International (reserving that honour for the PPP), and his request that Guyana be accepted into the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON),⁷ the economic organization of socialist states. At the same time, Moscow continued its fraternal relations with Burnham's opposition, and offered scholarships to Guyanese students - not through formal government channels, but through the PPP. By the late 1970s there was thinly-veiled animosity between the two states, with the PNC charging Moscow with "flip-flopping" on commitments of aid and of supporting a "fifth column" within Guyana.⁸

Cuba was a more constructive ally, and provided Guyana with substantial medical personnel, scholarships and military aid. However the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) had also traditionally been aligned with Burnham's opposition, and provided guerilla training to PPP militants. Burnham grew frustrated with what was perceived as Fidel Castro's unwelcome interest in influencing the course of Guyana's "revolution," and in 1978 five Cuban diplomats were expelled for allegedly offering guerrilla training to members of the Working People's Alliance (WPA), Guyana's second major Left opposition group.⁹

In June of 1972 Guyana became the first country in the Commonwealth Caribbean to recognize the People's Republic of China,

thereby accessing a vital market for Guyanese sugar and bauxite and becoming the recipient of substantial aid, most notably the construction of a textile mill and clay brick factory in the mid-1970s.¹⁰ However Beijing's policy in the region was cautious and pragmatic, unwilling to back insurgencies or shore up Leftist governments under threat, and by the late 1970s it was drastically curtailing aid to even its closest allies in the Third World.¹¹ Moreover, in the context of the Sino-Soviet rivalry, Burnham's overtures towards China only exacerbated tensions with Moscow.

Burnham was a zealous champion of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), hosting the 1972 Non-Aligned Foreign Ministers Conference, an occasion he used to unveil a monument to movement founders Nasser, Nkrumah, Nehru and Tito in the capital. But as a coalition of developing nations facing their own economic difficulties, NAM could hardly be a source of capital, nor could it be of much assistance in the event of a military conflict with Venezuela. And like other Third World leaders, Burnham discovered that strident support for the "Arab cause" in international fora - which the PNC took active part in - was not guaranteed to be repaid in Middle Eastern oil dollars.

However, the PNC's foreign policy objectives proved neatly compatible with those of another country eagerly seeking new allies on the international stage in the same period: North Korea. The two states became natural allies as their respective representatives came face to face via the Non-Alignment Movement in which both took an active role. Charles Armstrong (2013) described this phase in North Korean foreign policy thusly:

The 1970s were a decade of unprecedented outward expansion for North Korea. Admission to several UN bodies, active lobbying at the UN General Assembly, a successful diplomatic offensive in

the Third World, and new economic and political ties to advanced capitalist countries all reflected a new global presence for the DPRK. Long a partisan of the socialist side in the global Cold War, Kim Il Sung presented his country in this decade as "nonaligned," and a model for postcolonial nation-building.¹²

While Pyongyang had begun reaching out to governments in Asia, the Middle East and Africa in the 1960s, it extended this activity into Latin America and the Caribbean with renewed vigour by the following decade.¹³ Pyongyang succeeded in building a substantial base of support among the radical and non-aligned governments of Africa and the Middle East, but encountered more difficult terrain in Latin America and the Caribbean, where in the turbulent atmosphere of the Cold War potential allies were few and their time in power often short. One notable exception was Cuba, and North Korea established diplomatic relations with it in August 1960. However while friendly cooperation between the two states existed, there was a discernable distance as well, suggesting that the Cuban leadership's commitment to Moscow, and North Korea's ambiguous position in the Sino-Soviet split, placed certain limits on the potential of such a partnership.

North Korea's Third World diplomacy was in large part an attempt to build international support for its geo-political objectives in the Korean peninsula, and its strategy was not unsuccessful: votes from Third World states made possible a number of political victories at the United Nations in this period.¹⁴ Meanwhile Guyana under Burnham's leadership had gained a reputation for its outspoken support of radical causes worldwide - from the Palestinian intifada to Basque separatism - and became one of the most vocal advocates of North Korea

on the world stage. Guyana consistently defended North Korea in international fora, hosted the first "Latin American-Caribbean Conference for the Independent and Peaceful Reunification of Korea" in January 1979, and played a leading role in similar activities worldwide.

While for the Soviets and Cubans the PNC's distance from orthodox Marxism-Leninism was a flaw, diplomatic pronouncements from North Korea praised the fact that co-operative socialism, like Juche, was a "unique line" of a national character, and furthermore one which incorporated the self-reliance philosophy of Kim Il Sung.¹⁵ Relatedly, it appears that idiosyncratic regimes like the PNC, lacking a firm commitment to the Soviets or Chinese, were attractive allies to Pyongyang because it allowed them the opportunity to play the patron-mentor role so important to their desired domestic and international image. If the Soviets had Cuba and the Chinese had Albania, North Korea could boast that Guyana was "carrying out socialist construction under the banner of the Juche idea created by the great leader Comrade Kim Il-Sung."¹⁶

In addition to the pragmatic need for aid and diplomatic support, other factors drew the PNC to North Korea. In the prevailing atmosphere of Third Worldism, and the Black Power movement rocking the Caribbean of the 1970s, Soviet socialism had limited credibility; at the same time, Maoism was not useful to a thoroughly urban-based ruling party encircled by a hostile countryside. By contrast, Juche seemed to perfectly reinforce the Burnham brand, notably his obsession with self-reliance, his emotionally-tuned nationalism and his faith in the power of education and culture to transform concrete reality. North Korea's self-identification as a member of the Third World, and Kim Il Sung's emphasis on anti-imperialism and the attention he paid to issues facing post-colonial states had a special appeal to the left-wing of the PNC, as it did to other Third World radicals. By the 1970s North Korea had recovered from the devastation of the Korean War, underwent rapid industrialization and developed a seemingly robust economy; to the scores of Latin American and Caribbean activists, intellectuals and artists who made the pilgrimage, the grandeur of Pyongyang seemed to offer proof that the so-called Third World could in fact achieve rapid development through a socialist path.¹⁷



Forbes Burnham and Kim Il-Sung in Pyongyang, late 1970s



State media coverage of the first Guyanese Mass Games in 1980

The outcome of this diplomatic junction was roughly a decade of extensive political, economic, military and cultural relations between Guyana and North Korea unprecedented in the Western hemisphere. North Korea's extensive aid focused on supporting the regime's goal of self-sufficiency in food; this included material gifts (e.g. tractors, harrows, boat motors), efforts to raise the productivity of traditional food sectors such as rice and fishing, as well as agricultural projects designed to introduce new crops Guyana had to otherwise import, such as potatoes. North Korea also aided the PNC's desire to vastly expand its military capabilities - particularly in the areas of artillery and naval warfare - in preparation for a potential conflict with Venezuela. Burnham's former vice-president Hamilton Green has even alleged there were North Korean troops stationed along the Guyana-Venezuela border, prepared to impel any incursion,¹⁸ although such claims have been vigorously disputed. Nevertheless, North Korean agronomists, chemists, engineers, doctors and military officers, as well as contingents of English students, become guests in the country, as Juche study groups popped up in every major city and town, and party members and civil servants were implored to attend public rallies in solidarity with their comrades in Asia. Cultural collaboration flourished as well, as North Korean and Guyanese artists, musicians and dancers engaged in state-sponsored exchanges, collaborating and performing in both Pyongyang and Georgetown. North Korea's most substantial gifts in material terms included the construction of a glass factory at Yarrowkabra and Guyana's first acupuncture clinic, staffed by North Koreans, in the capital; however, several other projects were announced or initiated only to be abandoned following Burnham's death in 6 August 1985. Burnham's successor, Desmond Hoyte, representing the "right-wing" of the PNC, believed Guyana's long-term interests were better served repairing its relationship with

Washington and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and his ascension to power began the gradual decline of the North Korean partnership in the 1985-92 period. The aborted North Korean ventures included a small hydro-electric project in the north-west, a spare parts factory capable of producing ten to fifteen tons annually, a gold mining operation in the interior, a new national stadium in the capital capable of seating 20,000, and a North Korean-style "Students and Children's Palace."

Mass Games

While Mass Games in North Korea were first observed by PNC leaders during the latter half of the 1970s, they date back to the birth of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea following liberation from Japanese rule in August 1945. Although the historical development of Mass Games is beyond the scope of this article, they have their roots in the European group-gymnastics clubs of the nineteenth-century, whose traditions were eventually adopted by socialist parties and became part of the cultural sphere of the early Soviet Union (see Nolte 2002, Stites 2009, Burnett 2013, Frank 2013). It should be noted however that mass spectacle and mass mobilization were part of a broader zeitgeist of the interwar period, appealing to ideologues and artists of both the Left and Right, and mass gymnastics displays made their appearance in a number of European countries. Their most recent incarnation in North Korea commenced in 2002 under the formal name *The Grand Mass Gymnastics and Artistic Performance Arirang*. ("Arirang" is the title of a traditional folk song, which, through the metaphor of two separated lovers, has become a kind of anthem of Korean reunification).¹⁹ Today an Arirang performance in North Korea involves approximately 100,000 performers, the bulk of them primary and middle school students, and typically takes place annually in August through September in Pyongyang's massive [Rungnado May Day Stadium](#).²⁰ They are without comparison the

largest choreographed performance in the world.²¹

There are three central components to Mass Games: gymnastics, music, and the panoramic backdrop; however the gymnastics portion is supplemented with dance, singing, drama, and in recent years the entire performance has been enhanced with lasers and pyrotechnics. The gymnastics are mass group gymnastics, whose dazzling effect is achieved through the sheer number of bodies performing in synchronized unity. The backdrop is created through tens of thousands of children aligned in one side of the stadium seats holding books of illustrated cards positioned contiguously with each other to give the illusion of an imperforate surface; by changing the pages of the book in precisely coordinated unison following the signals of a conductor, the backdrop image is transformed throughout the performance. The entire spectacle is coordinated to thematic music, which according to Burnett (2013) can bring to mind, conversely, "a four-part Christian-style hymn, military march, operatic quasi-recitative, folk song, classical symphony or ballet, or Hollywood Golden Age film score."²²



The Guyana Committee for Solidarity and Peace hosts an event for "Month of Solidarity with the DPRK," June 1980, at the Guyana Mines Workers Union hall in Linden. Left to right: Committee

President Edwin James, Committee Secretary Jean Smith and Sim Sang Guk of the DPRK embassy.

Kim Jong-il, in his April 1987 speech "On Furthering Mass Games Gymnastics," divides the value of Mass Games into three areas: its impact on the development of the children participating as performers, its impact on the "party members and workers" who constitute the audience, and its contribution to North Korea's relations with foreign countries.²³ Firstly, Mass Games plays an important role in turning school children into "fully developed communist people."²⁴ His definition of such people merges the intellectual with the physical, and contains echoes of the same language used by nineteenth century European advocates of mass gymnastics: "one must acquire a revolutionary ideology, the knowledge of many fields, rich cultural attainments and a healthy and strong physique."²⁵ While Mass Games are an excellent way to "foster particularly healthy and strong physiques,"²⁶ they also install "a high degree of organization, discipline and collectivism,"²⁷ as the performance forces them to "make every effort to subordinate all their thoughts and actions to the collective."²⁸ While participating in Mass Games helps mold school children to become ideal citizens, they also educate the adult audience, as a form of ideology-reinforcing entertainment: "they are a major means of firmly equipping the Party members and other working people with the Juche idea and of demonstrating the validity and vitality of our Party's lines and policies."²⁹ They remind North Koreans of "the line and policy put forward by our Party on the basis of the Juche idea at each period and stage of the revolution, as well as the history and achievements of the struggle of our Party and people to carry them out."³⁰ And lastly, Kim Jong-il explains that by inviting foreigners to attend Mass Games, as well as working to assist other nations in adapting Mass Games, North Korea's

international prestige is enhanced while "trust between our country and other countries is deepened."³¹

Mass Games come to Guyana



North Korean Mass Games instructor Kim Il Nam (far left) oversees Guyanese students preparing the backdrop for the first Guyanese Mass Games in 1980.

In September 1979 a seven-member team of North Korean Mass Games instructors arrived at Guyana's Timehri International Airport. They were headed by visual artist Kim Il Nam, reported to have ten years of experience in Mass Games training and personally selected for the mission by Kim Il Sung himself.³² According to the Guyanese press, the group spent two months familiarizing themselves with Guyanese history and culture, touring schools, factories, farms, historical sites, and Guyana's famous Kaieteur Falls.³³ This was followed by three weeks of training school teachers, and two and half months of training student participants.³⁴ During this final phase, the illustration work to create the panoramic backdrop went on eleven hours a day in alternating shifts at the Sophia auditorium, while gymnasts and dancers trained five hours a day with North Korean instructors and the well-known Guyanese performer Dawn Schultz.³⁵ Burnham apparently visited often to observe these preparations firsthand.³⁶ Father

Andrew Morrison (1919-2004), a Jesuit, opposition activist and tireless critic of Mass Games, claimed that for the occasion the government imported eight tons of decorations from North Korea, 100,000 balloons from North America and distributed 200,000 lapel buttons bearing Burnham's image.³⁷

Initial efforts to recruit a prominent Guyanese artist to the position of artistic director were unsuccessful. Keith Agard, known as a devout member of the Nichiren Buddhist Soka Gakkai sect and for his Mandala-like paintings full of heady cosmic-mystical themes, politely declined the offer, as did the well-known abstract painter and draughtsman Dudley Charles; both were apprehensive over its highly structured format and political orientation. The job went to George Simon, a Lokono Arawak painter and graphic artist who had once studied fine art at the University of Portsmouth in England, at the time working as a lecturer at Guyana's E.R. Burrowes School of Art. Today a renowned painter (and archeologist) known for his acrylic paintings steeped in Amerindian folklore and spirituality, Simon may have seemed an unlikely candidate, but his background in graphic art engendered an appreciation for the new medium.³⁸ "I suppose I took to it," Simon recalls,

...because as a printmaker, one had to restrict oneself to get an image on to print. If it was a silkscreen print that one was preparing, one had to prepare the drawings in a particular way to suit that technique. If it was lithograph, then again, there is some restriction. And so it is with intaglio printmaking. So it didn't bother me. I understood that to make this work, and to make these drawings be dynamic, they had to be simple, yet it had to have the punch that would make it a

spectacle.

Following an apprenticeship period in which Simon learned the new techniques from his North Korean teachers, the 50x80 centimeter boards that together constituted the panoramic backdrop were painted by students from the E.R. Burrowes School of Art under the supervision of Simon and the North Koreans.³⁹ As artistic director, Simon also served as the conductor during the performances, who directs the succession of backdrop images with a series of coloured flags.

Appointed as musical director was Patricia Cambridge, who had graduated from America's Boston Conservatory in 1975 and had previously worked for Guyana's Ministry of Culture. Cambridge describes her compositions for Mass Games as "eclectic in style to match the choreography and the overall storyline"⁴⁰ which included "some calypso-flavored elements, folk songs, national songs, and marching music woven into the production."⁴¹ This music in turn was performed by the Guyana Police Forces Band aided by the City School's Choir.

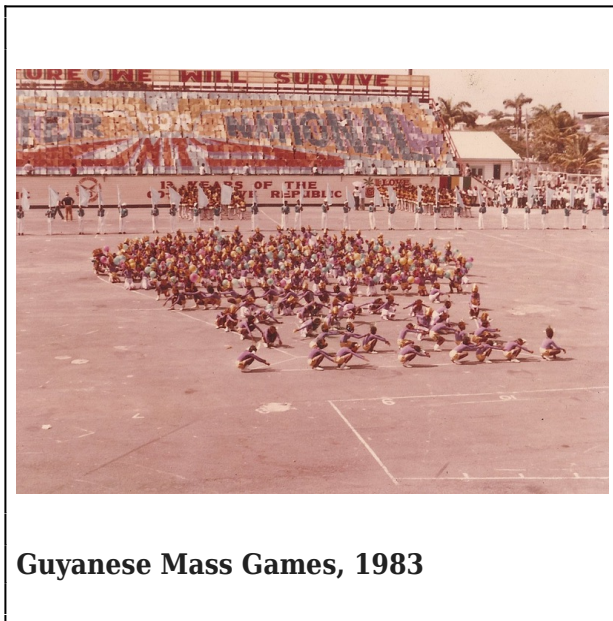
How much creative freedom did people like George Simon and Patricia Cambridge have? Both artists describe a process in which the Ministry of Education deferred to their judgement and vision in terms of design and composition; however they worked under the understanding that their output must reflect the themes and messages presented to them. Their preliminary work needed to be approved by the Minister of Education, who was tasked by the Party leadership with ensuring ideological pedigree, and "changes could be required if anything was deemed ideologically incorrect."⁴² Simon also recalls one year when a mishap in the performance made the grandiose portrait of Burnham appear to have one eye closed, sparking a call in one local newspaper that the artistic director be punished.⁴³

Although the threatening remarks were never acted upon, it gives some impression of the authoritarian atmosphere in which the artists worked.

As the state-owned media began hyping the event with much fanfare in the months leading up to Mashramani, many Guyanese were apprehensive and somewhat confused, and Burnham's opposition wasted no time in concluding that Mass Games would "serve no educational purpose but merely to divert attention from the general economic and social situation of the country."⁴⁴ The Working People's Alliance (WPA), a radical Left opposition party led by the scholar Walter Rodney, called for parents and teachers to boycott the event. Nevertheless, Guyana's first Mass Games went ahead on 23 February 1980, with Burnham, the PNC senior leadership and foreign diplomats in attendance. Students from different regions of the coastland were organized into different chapters: West Demerara students re-enacted Burnham's proclamation of the Co-operative Republic in 1970, while the five chapters handled by Georgetown students dealt with industry, agriculture, education, defense and the PNC's "Feed, Clothe and House" (FCH) campaign.⁴⁵ Students from the east coast completed the book with a final chapter on Guyana's international relations, the entire performance taking ninety minutes, as is standard in North Korea.⁴⁶

Needless to say, in a country with a population of approximately 750,000, Guyanese Mass Games did not approach the grandeur of those held in Pyongyang: at their peak they nevertheless included 3,000 student performers (780 of whom held the card-books which constituted the backdrop) drawn from twenty-six primary and secondary schools (although a total of 10,000 students were said to have been involved in an entire production) and the backdrop changed sixty times (compared with 180 in a North Korean

production). If we accept media reports that tickets for the first Mass Games, which cost three Guyana dollars, were completely sold out, we can roughly gauge the attendance, as the National Park's open-air auditorium seats upwards of 10,500. In addition to the main event open to the public, there were three, free subsequent performances for school children in the following weeks, a practise that became standard.



Guyanese Mass Games, 1983

Although the state-owned media was compelled to heap praise on the event, its coverage is useful for conveying an idea of the visual character of the performance. The journalist Raschid Osman, writing for the state-owned *Chronicle*, offered the following description:

Mass Games came alive yesterday for thousands of Mash [Mashramani] revellers, a spectacular sweep of colour and pageantry and informed by a precision that had to be seen to be believed. Viewed for the first time, Mass Games with their cinema-like tableaux and seemingly endless possibilities, prove to be just a bit awesome.

The giant pictures segmented into pages of books held aloft by hundreds of children, gymnastics by further hundreds in the foreground, the swirling rhythm of gaily-coloured costumes and the sense of pomp and circumstance which always accompanies the unfurling of flags, all merged to make the performance at the National Park a memorable one.

At a signal from a director perched in a box up in the north stand they turned the leaves and fashioned pictures relevant to honouring Prime Minister Forbes Burnham, economic independence, the development of agriculture, the welfare of the people, defending the Republic, holding high the banner of anti-imperialism and independence, and developing socialist education and culture.

There is little doubt that Mass Games has instilled the children with discipline that would be hard to beat. For the most part, the the participants moved as if they were all parts of one big machine operated by a single operator."⁴⁷

The state-controlled press made out Mass Games to be a magnificent success of tremendous historical importance, even while quietly acknowledging the "many criticisms" among the public.⁴⁸ Mass Games continued throughout the 1980s, expanding in size and sophistication under the direction of the Ministry of Education's Mass Games Secretariat. The North Korean team stayed in Guyana for nine months, training staff from the Ministry of Education as Mass Games instructors before departing with a lavish farewell ceremony hosted by the PNC top brass at the National Cultural Centre.⁴⁹ In addition to

the Republic Day performance at Georgetown's National Park, additional annual performances comparable in size were held in the predominantly Indo-Guyanese region of Berbice on the east coast, and the predominantly Afro-Guyanese mining town of Linden, Guyana's second most populous town. The PNC boasted that the former involved 2,600 student performers from thirty-six schools and was attended by 40,000 local residents.⁵⁰ By 1982 Mass Games training was incorporated into the public school system's year-round physical education curriculum.⁵¹ By the mid-1980s, the Guyanese military (Guyana Defence Force) were incorporated into the annual performance, as were members of the Guyana National Service (GNS, a compulsory paramilitary service program for youth). Local steel bands were also included in subsequent years, increasing the Caribbean flavour of the production. As for the WPA's boycott campaign, four months after the first Mass Games, party leader and respected scholar Walter Rodney was killed by a bomb detonated in his car, in what is widely accepted to have been an assassination perpetrated by Burnham's security forces. It was a massive blow from which the party never fully recovered.

Burnham played a central role in the backdrops, as did the image of Kim Il Sung in North Korea. In general the tone was highly nationalistic and echoed common PNC themes of patriotism, education, unity, self-reliance, non-alignment, and international solidarity. Inter-ethnic unity and homage to the Guyanese peoples' diverse points of ancestry was often emphasized by, for example, dancers from the respective communities appearing in traditional dress. The celebration and encouragement of youth was also a consistent theme, reflecting the fact that it was this group who the event was seen as primarily serving. The backdrops commonly depicted Guyana's natural beauty and wildlife, as well as typically socialist realist-style portrayals of "reality in its revolutionary development" populated with happy workers, students and scientists, all interwoven with standard political slogans such as "Produce or Perish," "National Unity for Prosperity" and "Practise the Virtues of Self-Reliance." Another common element was the recital and visual representation of text from renowned Guyanese poets, such as Martin Carter and A.J. Seymour (which was not without irony, as the former was an opposition supporter, beaten by PNC militants while participating in an anti-government rally in 1978). Generally speaking, Mass Games reflected a Guyanese aesthetic, more free in form and more cheerful than its North Korean progenitor. While an ideological factor was certainly paramount, and the tragic history of slavery and indentureship were sometimes invoked, these were blended with the temperament and rhythms of the Caribbean. The resulting performance was less bellicose, less militaristic, more light-hearted and internationalist; it lacked the solemnity and hard-hitting character of North Korean Mass Games, leaning more towards a jovial patriotism. I asked Yolanda Marshall, a Guyanese writer and poet who performed in the 1986 Mass Games as a dancer, to watch a video recording of a contemporary North Korean performance and share her thoughts.



Guyanese Mass Games, 1986

The content of Mass Games in Guyana reflected a distinctly Guyanese appropriation of the North Korean medium. The portrait of Forbes

She commented:

It is very similar, in terms of the display cards and gymnastics etc. Our Mass Games was like a well-organized Carnival show. Bigger, brighter costumes, Caribbean music, dances etc. Our Mass Games resembled some type of an African celebration from slavery with a mixture of militancy and blending of cultures. I personally feel my Guyanese Mass Games was more fun, after all, most Guyanese love to dance to good music.⁵²

The following brief descriptions of a few Mass Games performances offer examples of their general style and content. The 1985 Mass Games, the last one before Burnham's death in August of that year, was entitled "Youth - participation and development for peace." It was conceived as a tribute to the United Nation's International Youth Year (IYY), and in addition to this overriding theme, relayed the story of the arrival of Guyana's six ethnic groups through settlement, slavery and indenture, and congratulated Burnham on the occasion of his sixty-second birthday.⁵³ The 1986 Mass Games was entitled "Standing up for Guyana," and its chapters were "in honour of the youth of Guyana, the centenary celebration of the Guyana Teachers Association and Guyana's eighteenth independence anniversary."⁵⁴

The 1987 Mass Games "Guyana - Oh Beautiful Guyana" opened with a shower of praise for Burnham's successor, Desmond Hoyte, and a patriotic tribute to the Co-operative Republic. The subsequent seven chapters were a celebration of the nation's natural resources, devoted in turn to flora, forestry, rivers, mineral wealth, wildlife, Guyana's holiday resorts and a concluding chapter extolling "the beauty, firm spirit, determination and

resoluteness of the Guyanese people as they continue to build a united and free country."⁵⁵ Mid-way through the performance time was taken to declare Guyana's recognition of the United Nation's International Year of Shelter for the Homeless(IYSH).

The 1988 Mass Games, "Guyana - a Nation on the Move" is particularly interesting, as it was based on Burnham's theory of Guyanese history as the natural and spontaneous impulse towards co-operative living, suppressed under colonialism but emerging triumphant under the leadership of the PNC. The performance begins in the colonial past with the harsh realities of slavery and indentured labour (not, interestingly, with Guyana's indigenous people, among whom Burnham had posited Guyana's original co-operative spirit). In the second chapter, emancipation has been declared and free Africans, refusing to continue working on the plantations as wage-labourers, pool their resources and establish communal villages sustained on agriculture and fishing. Subsequent chapters portray the growth of Caribbean unity, the struggles of sugar workers and the development of the trade union movement with Burnham, Jagan⁵⁶ and Hubert Critchlow⁵⁷ as its guiding lights. This leads towards the achievement of independence, the proclamation of the Co-operative Republic in 1970, and concludes with Guyana's march into the future in a final chapter entitled "Guyana - Boldly Reaching out for Progress."⁵⁸

Why did Guyana adopt Mass Games?

The period in which the Burnham regime decided to embark on the ambitious and costly project of bringing Mass Games to Guyana was one of crisis and austerity. Despite its rhetoric of self-reliance, the PNC never succeeded in substantially diversifying the country's narrow export base or outgrowing its dependency on foreign oil and other imports. Like most developing nations Guyana was hit hard by the 1973 oil crisis, whose effects were compounded

by mismanagement and corruption in the vastly expanded state sector and the punitive measures of the United States, which cut aid and blocked loans from the Inter-American Development Bank.⁵⁹ In 1978, a desperate Burnham turned to the IMF, which in return for economic assistance demanded an end to subsidies and massive layoffs in the state sector, in effect forcing the PNC to punish its base. A serious rise in crime, goods shortages, a flourishing black market, labour unrest and mass outward migration were among the symptoms. The majority of Indo-Guyanese, the country's single largest ethnic group, remained intransigently opposed to the regime, viewing it as illegitimate and discriminatory, leading Burnham to routinely rig elections in order to remain in power.⁶⁰ Under threat, the PNC unleashed its security forces and gangs of party militants on the opposition, and there were *several murders of opposition activists linked to the government*.⁶¹ Like many radical regimes before them, the PNC leadership justified authoritarian tactics (if not always publically) on the grounds that "the revolution" required discipline and steadfastness: democracy was a luxury they could not afford.

Also like other self-appointed vanguards before them, the PNC leadership attributed Guyana's economic hardships and public discontent in large part to the low levels of "consciousness" of the Guyanese masses, something which was, in their analysis, the product of centuries of colonial rule. In the worldview presented through official organs, a citizen with "socialist consciousness" had full faith in the Party and was willing to work hard and sacrifice for the betterment of the nation, exhibiting the virtues of "self-reliance" and "self-help," while those still poisoned with "individualist consciousness" complained of daily hardships, craved foreign goods, thought only of their individual plight and expected others to solve their problems for them. And while such ideas about consciousness may have been a Leninist import unfamiliar in the discourse of ordinary people,

in PNC rhetoric they were closely related to the theme of "discipline," something, as we will see, which was much more ubiquitous in Guyanese society, forging an intellectual bridge between the two. "Discipline" became a meme that filled newspaper editorials, radio broadcasts and official speeches in the period, while the government's "Self-Denial Month" encouraged citizens to forfeit a portion of their wages to the state, and volunteer work brigades were mobilized to aid the sugar harvest. Typical were *New Nation* headlines throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, always emblazoned in capital letters: "Every Citizen A Solider" (a variation of Leon Trotsky's "every worker a soldier" slogan adopted during the Russian Civil War), "Everyone Will Have To Work Harder," "Treat Unruly Behaviour Harshly," "The Importance Of Sacrifice To The Nation," "Grow More Food Now," "Women Urged To Be Involved In Higher Productivity," "Limers Turned Into Productive Citizens,"⁶² "Let's Talk About Indiscipline: at Work, at Play, at Home, in School, in the Streets."⁶³

For Burnham, the problem of consciousness in Guyana left the PNC with the task of creating a "new man," of refashioning the minds of Guyanese with a new value system through education and cultural revolution.⁶⁴ This decision to respond to the crisis with intensified education efforts was not an innovation, but the natural extension of Burnham's long-held political thought. He had always proclaimed that education was the cornerstone of his plans to transform society, and that constructing a new national culture based on truly "Guyanese" values - which by the 1970s were defined as one and the same as socialist values - was central to this process. One PNC document of the 1970s entitled "Principles of Authority" defines the Party's role as "leading tasks of stimulating and implementing that learning and unlearning, that education and re-education without which transition [to socialism] will be impossible."⁶⁵

The idea of implementing socialism through education and cultural reinvention - and the related fixation with discipline and efficiency - has its roots in the early Soviet Union, and can be seen, in different forms and to varying extents, in many socialist experiments of the twentieth century. However this tradition reached its pinnacle in North Korea, where Stalinist ideology merged with a Korean philosophical tradition in which the perfection of society depended on the perfection of the individual. Under Kim Il Sung's leadership North Korea developed an all-pervasive system for the central control and regimented dissemination of ideas. The Great Leader called for a never ending war against unhealthy ideas and values, and placed special emphasis on the indoctrination of the young, as nursery school and kindergarten teachers were told that it was their "honorable revolutionary duty" to begin the process of "revolutionizing and working-classizing" the population.⁶⁶ In the 1970s when North Korea was presenting itself as a model for Third World development, Kim Il Sung's message for countries like Guyana was that cultural development and educational reform were of even greater importance for them, as they faced the double burden of building the objective conditions of socialism and freeing themselves from the psycho-cultural legacy of colonialism. This required that the revolutionary state not only seize and thoroughly revamp existing educational institutions, but also forge a new national culture that could install a "noble, moral and beautiful mental character" in the masses.⁶⁷ PNC leaders, as well as delegations of Juche students, artists and journalists, were frequently hosted in Pyongyang during the 1974-85 period, and the remarkable achievements they observed there - widely reported in the PNC press - vindicated the idea that the key to the socialist society they sought lay in education and culture. Time and time again, PNC officials marveled at the "discipline," "dedication" and "loyalty" of the North Korean people - both those they

observed in Pyongyang, and the scores of skilled workers, technicians, agronomists, doctors and military officers who visited Guyana in this period - and asked themselves how they could reproduce the same ethos among their own populace.

The PNC's zeal for mass education also had Caribbean and specifically Guyanese roots. Tyrone Ferguson (1999) points out that in the 1970s the centrality of education to building socialism was a position shared by Burnham's chief rivals - the pro-Soviet PPP and the radical Left WPA.⁶⁸ The idea that the people of the Caribbean, specifically the African majority, had been impacted intellectually, culturally and spiritually by slavery and colonialism, and that some process of mental emancipation was central to their struggle for a just society, was and remains a staple of Caribbean thought, and ran through the currents of Caribbean Marxism and Black Power of the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, belief in the central priority of education and discipline is something deeply rooted in Guyanese culture, and in its vision of an enlightened vanguard leading a backward populace out of darkness, the PNC leadership demonstrated certain unmistakable traits of the Guyanese middle class.⁶⁹ And while the PNC leadership did indeed draw from a mix of the lower- and upper-middle class, an examination of its Central Committee in any given year reveals that the single most common occupational background of its 31 members were teachers and headmasters trained in the tradition of the British colonial school system. Many more were the sons and daughters of teachers and headmasters, including Burnham himself. The habits, values and mentality of this occupational group - the importance of discipline, hierarchy and respect for authority, the paramount role of the educator in society - shaped their interpretation of the socialist project. It is only by understanding these local and regional contexts - in conjunction with Third Worldism, the Cold War and the historical contradictions of socialism as a

development strategy – that we can fully appreciate the appeal of the North Korean model to the PNC leadership.

With North Korea as an inspiration and a source of material support, the PNC undertook a massive overhaul and expansion of the education system, nationalizing all schools held in private hands and by religious groups and decreeing education free from nursery to university. The total number of schools in Guyana increased from 432 in 1970 to 1214 by 1979,⁷⁰ as Burnham declared his priority of "revolutionising the formal education system, a process aimed at eradicating the old colonial and capitalist values and introducing and emphasizing new and relevant ones."⁷¹ Throughout his reign ambitious educational and cultural projects, many based on institutions and practises observed in North Korea, remained Burnham's priority to the point of obsession. As Guyana entered the 1980s and its economy continued to decline in the face of global recession and a new hardline stance from Washington's Reagan administration, Burnham's zeal for mass education only intensified. In fact, an inverse relationship existed between the two, as if Burnham was in a race to achieve the "new man" before the "old man" lost patience with the hardship and deprivations of socialist construction. Although he remained the Party's unquestioned leader until his passing in August 1985, Burnham was increasingly isolated within the leadership in his fixation on costly educational projects in a time of scarcity. In 1983, defending his decision to prioritize the creation of a new elite boarding school for the nation's top seventy-two students when the country was bankrupt, Burnham stated: "The eventual cost will run into several millions of dollars. This will be found. It is a small price to pay for preparing the younger generation to carry on the revolution to its ultimate goal and success."⁷² The President's College, as it was called, said to be modeled on the Mangyongdae Revolutionary School in Pyongyang, opened its

doors a few months after Burnham's passing.

This is the context in which the PNC leadership adopted Mass Games as the 1970s drew to a close. By demanding the participation of all primary and secondary students, and its annual occurrence involving nearly three months of training, it stood to have a broader and deeper impact on the lives of Guyanese than any other of the PNC's projects of educational and cultural reform. On the eve of the first Mass Games of February 1980, an editorial in the state-owned Chronicle made its purpose clear:

We as a nation must pursue discipline or we will certainly be unable to maximize our productive efforts, and also raise the level of our productivity. We expect discipline to be an overriding consideration in all avenues of society. And we expect discipline to be inculcated in the very young who are the nucleus of our aspirations. Discipline of mind and body are the prerequisites for positive achievement and development, not only of ourselves, but the nation as a whole.⁷³

However, Mass Games was about more than discipline. It was part of Burnham's broader attempt to institutionalize a hegemonic master-narrative over Guyanese society. As mentioned, Mass Games was established as part of the broader Mashramani celebrations, which take place annually in February and function as Guyana's equivalent of the Carnival celebrated at the same time across the Caribbean. Originally hoping that it would come to eclipse Christmas in importance, Burnham established Mashramani in 1970 by elevating the annual Afro-Guyanese carnival of the town of Mackenzie into a national celebration, appropriating the title of a traditional Arawak harvest festival. This project reflected

Burnham's desire to replace the colonial legacy with a new, pan-ethnic and "co-operative" culture with himself as universal figurehead. By choosing the date of 23 February - the anniversary of Burnham's proclamation of the Co-operative Republic, three days after Burnham's birthday - it tied the national celebration to Burnham's individual persona and the broader PNC nation-building project. Even prior to Mass Games, the PNC established the People's Parade as an integral component of Mashramani, where workers representing their trades and workplaces were encouraged - some would argue coerced - to march in a show of solidarity with their government. Grand theatrical productions at the National Cultural Centre to mark the Comrade Leader's birthday also became customary during the same time each year. Mass Games then was part of a broader effort to politicize Carnival in Guyana, to place it in service of the Burnham personality cult, pulling it in the opposite direction from the "ritual of inversion" that it is commonly analyzed as constituting in the Caribbean. By attempting to fuse these concepts - the birth of Burnham, the birth of the Co-operative Republic, an idyllic pre-Columbian past, patriotism, socialism, loyalty to the State - into a premiere national celebration, the PNC were attempting to create something fitting the description Stites gave to the forms of mass spectacle which emerged in the early Soviet Union: "a kinesthetic exercise of revolution, a massive performance of revolutionary values and myths that were to infuse the new society-in-the-making."⁷⁴

How did Guyanese respond to Mass Games?

Not all Guyanese shared the PNC's enthusiasm for discipline, or accepted that the kind embodied in Mass Games stood to have any positive impact on their children's education or personal development. One letter to the editor of the *Stabroek News* described students training for the 1989 Mass Games at the

Farnum Playing Field in the Subryanville district of Georgetown thusly:

There hundreds of children, in normal school-hours, twice a week are put through their boring and repetitive paces, soaked by rain, burnt by sun, shouted at, abused, and threatened by a loud-mouthed instructress, day by day being wound up to their futile task like little, brow-beaten automatons.⁷⁵

However, the discipline aspect of Mass Games was its least controversial. While the PNC's preoccupation with it may appear a Leninist import, it also reflected a widespread sentiment within society at the time that indiscipline was a major problem of contemporary society. Lamentations on lack of discipline - routinely expressed in letter columns and editorial sections of newspapers across the partisan divide - could refer to lazy and indifferent public servants, or absenteeism, corruption and theft in the workplace - things the PNC could attribute to a lack of socialist consciousness, and which critics of the regime could blame on an allegedly bloated and dysfunctional state sector created through socialism. Absent fathers, children born out of wedlock and the deterioration of the traditional family unit frequently entered discussions of societal indiscipline, as did the supposed bad influence of Jamaican reggae music or violent films from Hollywood and Hong Kong. It was also, of course, a problem of the youth, exhibited in delinquency, loitering, truancy, foul language, loud music, immodest dress, and lack of respect for elders. In fact, the letter quoted above was responded to by another reader who claimed her child was among those training for Mass Games at Farnum Playing Field:

Are the children to be allowed to kick and fight without being

disciplined? Should they pelt dogs and cows and even pull sheep tails without being scolded? Must they be allowed to behave like a pack of monkeys without being punished after trying to spoil the overall effect of the presentation?⁷⁶

Mass Games was also commonly derided as an exercise in "brainwashing" with questionable educational value, and of course the debate born of such charges unfolded predictably along partisan lines: what was education and culture to an admirer of Burnham was propaganda and indoctrination to an opposition supporter. However this type of criticism of Mass Games was part of a broader frustration with a Burnham era phenomenon of mandatory participation in Party-controlled activities, whether forcing workers and students to attend political rallies, or conscripting citizens into auxiliary organizations like the People's Militia and the Guyana National Service (GNS). While parents and students typically based their views on Mass Games on the experience of their children or students, liberal intellectuals and journalists critical of the regime often focused on the association with North Korea in order to demonstrate its supposedly sinister purpose:

It is robot-like. This, however, does not necessarily mean that it is without a purpose. North Korean instructors were brought here because they were "experts" in this type of exercise. Why? Is it because the political culture of that country has gone further, perhaps, than any other in the deliberate and relentless destruction of human individuality?⁷⁷

It is clear, however, that the greatest obstacle

to Mass Games gaining popular support was the widespread fear of parents that their children's education was suffering due to the training which occupied nearly three months of the school year. This concern was voiced by parents and teachers repeatedly from the inception of Mass Games in 1980 until its demise with the fall of the PNC in 1992. From the beginning the government attempted to assure parents that all lost class time would be compensated for, but whether this was being adequately achieved remained an unsettled debate between supporters and critics. Ironically, the same Guyanese cultural disposition - especially strong within the middle class - that places tremendous emphasis on the importance of education both explains, at least in part, the PNC's great enthusiasm for projects like Mass Games, and the difficulty they had in getting parents to embrace it.

That notwithstanding, parents' fears that their children's education was suffering as a result of Mass Games was also symptomatic of a broader public anxiety over the state of public education during the 1980s. The severe economic turmoil of the decade meant that the PNC was unable to adequately sustain the greatly expanded system of universal free education they had initiated in the 1970s, and qualified teachers were among the mass exodus of educated Guyanese taking place at the time. Common complaints from parents and teachers were of crumbling facilities, poor salaries, overcrowded classrooms, unqualified teachers, "political" appointments and dismissals, and shortages of textbooks and materials. Naturally, in these circumstances it was easy for Guyanese to question the time and resources being devoted to Mass Games. "The collapse of the education system" became a major theme of the government's opposition, and one which it could link to the PNC's overall handling of the economy and its unpopular decision to accept IMF loan programs.

The other central obstacle to achieving public

support for Mass Games lay in the complicated intersection of race and politics in Guyanese society. Generally speaking, most Indo-Guyanese loathed Burnham, and viewed PNC rule as an illegitimate racial dictatorship in which their community was excluded, silenced and neglected. While Burnham's handling of "the race issue" in Guyana is beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say that the PNC had an enthusiasm for programs which took young Guyanese out of their neighborhood or village and placed them in new, Party-controlled environments where they would interact with youth of other ethnic groups and from different regions while being exposed to PNC ideology. In addition to Mass Games, the central project designed to achieve this was Guyana National Service (GNS), in which all citizens were required to spend one year in military-style settlements in the hinterland engaged in basic combat training, agriculture and manufacturing, in order that that they might become "truly Guyanese citizens."⁷⁸

In the 28 years of PNC rule, possibly no other policy generated as much fear and resentment within the Indo-Guyanese community as GNS did. Most Indo-Guyanese parents were mortified at the idea of their children – particularly their daughters – being taken from their homes and sent to remote camps where they would have little protection or recourse against potential abuses by Afro-Guyanese soldiers, all in order to serve the agenda of a regime they despised. Moreover, over time, stories began to circulate within the Indo-Guyanese community of daughters returning home from GNS pregnant, giving birth to "dugla pickney" (children of mixed Indian and African ethnicity); graver still, reports of sexual assaults and rapes emerged. While Mass Games was not as threatening as GNS in this regard, similar stories of sexual assaults of girls during Mass Games training emerged as well. Like so many issues in Guyanese politics, it is impossible to draw a neat line between a very real and serious problem (sexual violence

against young women, whose victims and perpetrators are not limited to any ethnic group), a traditional, patriarchal view of gender within the Indo-Guyanese community which denied women independence in relationships, Guyana's deeply partisan political culture and anti-African racism. Regardless, what is clear is that Guyana's deep-rooted ethnic division, and Indo-Guyanese mistrust of the government in particular, was a major barrier to gaining widespread acceptance of Mass Games.

In late 1988, simmering public discontent over Mass Games erupted into a fiery debate carried out through the newspapers and radio. Central to this dialogue was *Stabroek News*, founded two years earlier and the first independent daily newspaper to arise since the PNC's nationalization of the country's media industry in the 1970s. This public discourse over Mass Games, like the rise of *Stabroek News* itself, was symptomatic of the gradual liberalization – what was sometimes referred to as "Guyana's glasnost" – occurring under Burnham's successor, Hoyte.

One of the first major initiatives was undertaken by the distinguished poet and novelist Ian McDonald, who launched an attack on Mass Games on the radio program *Viewpoint*. In addition to reiterating the common complaint about the students' loss of class time, he argued that Mass Games was desperately out of sync with Guyanese culture:

There may at first have been nothing wrong in at least trying a kind of exercise that produced such spectacular and colorful examples of mass popular discipline in other countries. Nothing wrong with experimenting. But the simple truth is that Guyana is not North Korea and it is surely obvious by now that the idea has not travelled well. It is not for us. It does not fit

our psyche. The attempt to enforce mass discipline and call it fun does not suit our temperament, our traditions, or our deepest inclinations. Let us admire the massed phalanxes of North Korean children as they wave and smile and dip and move and gyrate in strict unison. But let us admire from afar.⁷⁹

McDonald's editorial set off a flurry of responses and rebuttals in the letter sections and op-ed columns of newspapers and on public radio, and the North Korean embassy protested to the management of the Guyana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC). One of the most virulent replies to McDonald was a front-page editorial in the PNC party organ *New Nation* entitled "Mass Games and McDonald's Quackery." The anonymous piece claimed that McDonald's "class prejudice" and "emotionalism" prevented him from appreciating Mass Games, and accused him of defaming school teachers, demanding a "gentlemanly retraction."⁸⁰ The editorial questioned whether McDonald had even seen a Mass Games performance, and suggested that in choosing such negative phrases to describe the event, he "had no regard for meaning and was merely engaging in an illicit sexual encounter with words."⁸¹ It further argued that anyone who attended a Mass Games performance could see clearly the "great creativity and the joyous enthusiasm with which the children perform,"⁸² and that although North Korean in origin, they had become something thoroughly Guyanese:

It is true that we have been taught the techniques of Mass Games by the North Koreans. But we have developed our own style and our own approach to organization and choreography. There is nothing North Korean about the spirit of

our Games. They have a distinctive Guyanese flavor.

...We must beware of any kind of idiotic mind-set that prevents us from drawing upon the cultural heritage of the world to stimulate and enrich our own cultural development."⁸³

Moreover, *New Nation* attempted to counter the image of Mass Games as something radical and distinctly North Korean by grouping it with other forms of mass spectacle found worldwide:

Surely, [McDonald] would have seen on his TV monitor the marvelous exhibition put on by the South Koreans for the Summer Olympic Games in Seoul. And did he not see a similar kind of spectacle put on by the Canadians for the Winter Games in Calgary? He has never seen, or read or heard of similar kinds of shows in the USA? These cultural manifestations are found in one form or another, under one name or another in many countries in the world with different social systems.⁸⁴

Additional rebuttals to McDonald put forward other arguments in support of Mass Games, for example, that it improved children's academic performance, and that it was on its way to becoming an internationally recognized sport, on par with football or cricket, in which Guyana stood to excel and produce world champions.⁸⁵ The latter suggestion was not so far-fetched in the Cold War 1980s, as several of North Korea's allies were staging Mass Games, including Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, East Germany, Ethiopia and Tanzania. Meanwhile as the exchange continued critical parents and

teachers began to coalesce around the demand that the government produce data that proved Mass Games had any tangible benefits for the student participants.

Ian McDonald shot back at his critics on the following episode of *Viewpoint*. He argued that Mass Games, in its exclusion of individual achievement, and its "mechanical, utterly unalterable discipline"⁸⁶ made it incomparable to the great sports such as football or cricket; there could be no Rohan Kanhai or Michael Jordan of Mass Games, as some of his critics had suggested. Likewise, the comparison to the Seoul Olympics or Canadian Winter Games was weak:

Do Canada and South Korea have Mass Games enshrined in their school curricula from the earliest age? There is a difference after all between the occasionally staged grand military parade which everyone can enjoy and military marching up and down as a way of life.⁸⁷

Perhaps aiming for compromise, McDonald toned down his earlier calls for Mass Games to be abolished, instead proposing it be reduced to one performance every three years, that children under twelve participate less and the youngest children be exempted altogether, to make children's' participation dependent on parental consent, and to ensure student class time was not compromised.⁸⁸ History, however, would favour McDonald's original demand, when four years later Burnham's successor Desmond Hoyte allowed the first free elections in Guyana since 1964, and the PNC was swept out of office, bringing an abrupt end to its twenty-eight-year reign. The new Indo-Guyanese-based PPP administration began a dramatic reversal of course in Guyana, Mass Games was discontinued, and efforts were taken to extirpate all trace of its twelve-year

legacy.

Conclusion

The PNC's decision at the end of the 1970s, in a time of severe economic and political crisis, to divert considerable state resources in order to force Mass Games on a wary public, followed the logic of Burnham's ideological convictions. Burnham subscribed to a particular strain of socialist thought which essentially inverts Marx's concept of substructure and superstructure, arguing economic development is dependent on the proper transformation of peoples' ideas and values, therefore making radical, ambitious educational and cultural projects like Mass Games a central priority of the regime. In this, Burnham inherited a tendency within the Marxist-Leninist tradition which dates back to the Russian Revolution, but which reached its most extreme form in the North Korea of Kim Il Sung, presenting a model from which Burnham and other PNC leaders took inspiration. Such a strategy of socialist development, however, also had antecedents in Caribbean leftist thought, particularly the idea that the people of the Caribbean needed to break the "mental chains" of colonialism as a prerequisite to building the new society. Moreover it appealed to the large number of teaching professionals within the PNC leadership, to a certain elitism typical of the Guyanese middle class, and a more ubiquitous Guyanese cultural sensibility which places tremendous importance on formal education. Ironically, the latter was also a chief obstacle to Guyanese embracing Mass Games, as parents proved unable to happily accept their children losing class time during the nearly three months of training each year. This, along with Guyana's historical ethnic divide and in particular Indo-Guyanese intransigence towards the government, were the primary factors preventing widespread public acceptance of Mass Games.

Ian McDonald's argument that Mass Games,

with its rigid collectivism, discipline, uniformity and leader-worship, was simply incompatible with Guyanese cultural sensibilities, certainly hits upon a certain truth. To many Guyanese living under the PNC, the array of communist-style trappings introduced – the propaganda billboards urging Guyanese to work harder and produce more, the giant portraits of the Comrade Leader, people addressing one another as "comrade" – always seemed like an alien import, hastily forced into a society in which they did not belong. Even some former PNC officials today concede that the attempt to institutionalize a Burnham personality cult was grossly at odds with Caribbean political culture, in which leaders are viewed as quite ordinary people by a cynical public, and, as Burnham's vice-president Hamilton Green remarked, "we cuss them when the time comes."⁸⁹ There seems an insurmountable distance between the Kimist aesthetic of North Korea and the uninhibited, organic character of Caribbean art; likewise, familiar clichés about the easy-going tempo of Caribbean life seem a world removed from the Stakhanovite rhetoric of discipline and efficiency introduced by the PNC.

On the other hand, it is important to remember that those libertine and lackadaisical elements that colour popular stereotypes of the Caribbean – the wild abandon of Carnival, the vulgar lyrics of calypso and reggae music, the vices of rum and marijuana – mask another side of Caribbean life, one much more conservative, which holds firm the virtues of modesty, etiquette, hard work, eloquence, education, sobriety and piety. In Guyana, and throughout the Anglo-Caribbean, these two currents co-exist in constant tension, and the PNC were quite in tune with the public mood in their constant agonizing over the "indiscipline" seen as plaguing society. It is in this way that the PNC project of remolding people into a more disciplined, educated, civic-minded body resonated with many Guyanese.

While Guyanese people today remain divided on the legacy of Mass Games, its image has actually improved with the passage of time, as student performers have grown up and begun to share their experiences. Although perspectives and opinions among former performers vary, it is fair to say that many, quite possibly a majority, remember the experience in a positive light. The explanations as to why are not complex – Mass Games was fun, and it offered relief from the standard routine of the classroom. A kind of nostalgia market within the Guyanese diaspora has emerged, with people sharing their stories of participating in Mass Games via online forums and social media. Dr. Prince Inniss, a sociologist at Saint Leo University in Florida, has shared her childhood recollections as a Mass Games participant for the blog *Everyday Sociology*. Yolanda Marshall, a poet and writer based in Toronto, has written an in-depth account of her experience as a dancer in the 1986 Mass Games, an event that remains for her a cherished piece of her childhood. Interestingly, rarely do former participants remember the experience as indoctrination or "brainwashing," and many are unaware that there was any political or ideological purpose to the event at all. What they remember is a celebration, a performance; the physicality and emotion, bodies, sounds, images, colours, anticipation, excitement. This, coupled with the fact that among former performers a positive memory of Mass Games does not necessarily correlate to positive sentiment towards Burnham or the PNC, suggests that Burnham may have vastly overestimated what his project would achieve. It also, however, lends credence to the arguments sometimes put forward by the PNC that Mass Games was not something radical or extreme, that it was no less authoritarian or propagandistic than other forms of mass spectacle seen in the Western democracies, and that it was generally enjoyed by the young performers.

Can it be said that the seven-member team of

North Korean artists who spent a year in Guyana imparting the artistic techniques of Mass Games have had a lasting influence on the world of Guyanese art? It is a worthy question. George Simon went on to become one of Guyana's most prominent artists, his acrylic paintings on canvas, paper and **twill fabric** gaining him international recognition, including the Anthony N. Sabga Caribbean Award for Excellence in 2012. Citing Mass Games as a pivotal chapter in his development as an artist, he continues to use the method of painting while sitting cross-legged on the floor, as his North Koreans teachers did, and the techniques of large-scale painting allowed him to later transition into the medium of mural art, which today includes some of his best known work.⁹⁰ Today these skills have been passed on to a new generation, as Simon has continued in his role as teacher and dedicated himself to fostering young talent, particularly within the Amerindian community, an effort that has given birth to a virtual renaissance of indigenous peoples' art in Guyana. Critically acclaimed murals by Simon and his students now adorn a number of prominent public sites, including the National Cultural Centre (*Universal Woman*, 2008) the Umana Yana (*The Spiritual Connection Between Man and Nature*, 2008) and the University of Guyana (*Palace of the Peacock: Homage to Wilson Harris*, 2009).

To North Korea watchers, on the other hand, the story of Guyana's adoption of Mass Games remains a lens into the shifting perspective with which the secretive regime views the outside world, and its own place within it. The decade in which Mass Games was a major facet of Guyanese cultural and political life was possibly the greatest success of North Korea's experiment in exporting its culture and ideology to the rest of the world, particularly the developing world. More broadly, it leaves us with a fascinating case study of the kind of artistic innovation and trans-national cultural collaboration borne of the post-colonial era under the pressures of the Cold War^{ms1}, and the

way in which socialist ideas and the promises they embodied were received and reinterpreted by Third World intellectuals and politicians struggling with the challenges of the post-colonial terrain.

Moe Taylor is a writer and documentary filmmaker living in Toronto. He holds an MA in Latin American and Caribbean studies from Columbia University.

Recommended citation: Moe Taylor, 'Only a disciplined people can build a nation': North Korean Mass Games and Third Worldism in Guyana, 1980-1992, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 13, Issue 4, No.2, January 26, 2015.

Related articles

• **Rudiger Frank**, [The Arirang Mass Games of North Korea](#)

Notes

¹ "Mass Games will be stupendous affair," *New Nation*, 27 January 1980.

² George K. Danns, *Domination and Power in Guyana: A Study of the Police in a Third World Context* (New Brunswick, USA and London: Transaction Books, 1982) 108.

³ Ralph R. Premdas, "Guyana: socialism and destabilization in the Western hemisphere," *Caribbean Quarterly* Vol. 25, No. 3, Social Change (September 1979): 25-43.

⁴ Italics in the original.

⁵ Forbes Burnham, *A Destiny to Mould: Selected Discourses by the Prime Minister of Guyana*, C.A. Nascimento and R.A. Burrows, ed. (Trinidad and Jamaica: Longman Caribbean, 1970) 70.

⁶ Forbes Burnham, *Declaration of Sophia* (Georgetown, Guyana, 1974), PNC Collection, National Archives, Georgetown, Guyana.

- ⁷ Timothy Ashby, *The Bear in the Back Yard: Moscow's Caribbean Strategy* (Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1987) 143-145.
- ⁸ Tyrone Ferguson, *To Survive Sensibly or to Court Heroic Death: Management of Guyana's Political Economy, 1966 -1985* (Georgetown, Guyana: Public Affairs Consulting Enterprise, 1999), 251-255.
- ⁹ Ashby, 145-146.
- ¹⁰ Gail A. Eadie and Denise M. Grizzell, "China's Foreign Aid, 1975-78" *The China Quarterly*, No. 77 (March 1979), pp. 217-234.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Charles K. Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950-1992* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013) 168.
- ¹³ John Chay, "North Korea: Relations with the Third World," in Jae Kyu Park and Jung Gun Kim, eds., *The Politics of North Korea* (Seoul: Institute for Far Eastern Studies, 1979), pp. 263-276.
- ¹⁴ Chay, p. 268-269, 273-274.
- ¹⁵ "After 34 years the struggle continues," *New Nation* (Georgetown, Guyana) 1 July 1984.
- ¹⁶ "Pak Song-Chol Speaks at Banquet for Guyanese Vice President," Pyongyang Domestic Service in Korean, reprinted in *Korean Affairs Report* (US Department of Commerce, Springfield, VA) 21 May 1982.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Hamilton Green, interview with the author, 11 December 2010.
- ¹⁹ Rudiger Frank, "The Arirang Mass Games of North Korea," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 11, Issue 46, No. 2 (December 2013) .
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Lisa Burnett, "Let Morning Shine over Pyongyang: The Future-Oriented Nationalism of North Korea's Arirang Mass Games," *Asian Music*, Vol 44, No 1 (Winter/Spring 2013): 3-32.
- ²³ Kim Jong-il, *On Furthering Mass Games Gymnastics: Talk to Mass Gymnastics Producers, April 11, 1987* (Pyongyang: Foreign languages Publishing House, 2006), 1.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 1-2.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 2.
- ³¹ Ibid., 2-3.
- ³² *New Nation*, 27 January 1980.
- ³³ "The People Who Made Mass Games Possible," *New Nation*, 16 March 1980.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Fr Andrew Morrison, SJ, *Justice: The struggle for democracy in Guyana, 1952-1992* (Guyana: self-published, 1998), 106.
- ³⁸ George Simon, interview with the author, 30 April 2012.
- ³⁹ *New Nation*, 27 January 1980.

⁴⁰ Patricia Cambridge, interview with the author, 29 July 2013.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Simon, 30 April 2012.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ This was the title of one of the PNC's earliest and most central development goals: national self-sufficiency in food, clothing and housing production. The original target date was 1976, but as this proved overly ambitious FCH morphed into an open-ended campaign throughout the Burnham era.

⁴⁶ *New Nation*, 16 March 1980.

⁴⁷ Raschid Osman, "Mass Games a resounding success...and spectacular," *The Chronicle*, 29 February 1980.

⁴⁸ "The People Who Made Mass Games Possible," *New Nation*, 13 April 1980.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "Mass Games at Albion: a truly spectacular affair," *New Nation*, 17 June 1984.

⁵¹ "MASH - our biggest mass participation event," *New Nation*, 12 January 1986.

⁵² Yolanda Marshall, interview with the author, 2 November 2010.

⁵³ "Thousands Thrilled At Mass Games Spectacle," *Guyana Chronicle*, 24 February 1985.

⁵⁴ MASH - our biggest mass participation event," *New Nation*, 12 January 1986.

⁵⁵ "Mass Games '87 to highlight Guyana's beauty," *New Nation*, 17 August 1986.

⁵⁶ Such a tribute to Jagan, leader of the opposition, would have been unthinkable in Burnham's time, and reflected the new direction being initiated by Hoyte.

⁵⁷ Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow(1884-1958), dock worker who founded the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU) in 1917, the first trade union in the Caribbean.

⁵⁸ "Preparations for Mass Games '88 underway," *New Nation*, 20 December 1987.

⁵⁹ On Guyana's economic challenges during the Burnham era, see Hope (1985), Jeffery & Baber (1986).

⁶⁰ Clive Y. Thomas, "State Capitalism in Guyana: an Assessment of Burnham's Co-operative Socialist Republic," in *Crisis in the Caribbean*, Fitzroy Ambursley and Robin Cohen, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983): 32-36.

⁶¹ Percy Hintzen, *The Cost of Regime Survival: Racial mobilization, elite domination and control of the state in Guyana and Trinidad* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), 93-94.

⁶² In Burnham-era Guyanese parlance, a slacker.

⁶³ Taken from various issues of *New Nation* during 1979-81.

⁶⁴ Burnham (1970), 61-62.

⁶⁵ Ferguson, 158.

⁶⁶ Kim Il Sung, *Works*, Vol 20 (Pyongyang: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1984), 451-452.

⁶⁷ "National Cultural Construction is an urgent question in the independent development of newly emerging countries," *Kulloja*, No. 12, (December 1983): 55-60.

⁶⁸ Ferguson, 158.

⁶⁹ A number of scholars have discussed a historic tendency of the middle-class leadership of the Caribbean Left to gravitate towards a particularly elitist variety of vanguardism. See James 1962, Wilson 1986, Mars 1998.

⁷⁰ Ferguson, 189.

⁷¹ Burnham (1974), 26.

⁷² Ferguson, 332.

⁷³ "A Mass Games Perspective," *New Nation*, 2 February 1980.

⁷⁴ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 94.

⁷⁵ Paraphrased by McDonald on the Guyana Broadcasting Corporation radio program *Viewpoint*, 22 November 1988. The author thanks Ian McDonald for sharing the written transcript of the broadcast.

⁷⁶ Jenny Persaud, letter to the editor, *Stabroek News* 30 November 1988.

⁷⁷ Janet Forte, letter to the editor, *Stabroek News*, 16 Nov 1988.

⁷⁸ "Where national service beckons we follow," government advertisement, 1980, PNC Collection, National Archives, Georgetown, Guyana.

⁷⁹ Radio program *Viewpoint*, Guyana Broadcasting Corporation, 22 November 1988. The author thanks Ian McDonald for sharing the written transcript of the broadcast.

⁸⁰ "Mass Games and McDonald's Quackery," *New Nation*, 27 November 1988.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Radio program *Viewpoint*, Guyana Broadcasting Corporation, 6 December 1988.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Green, 11 December 2010.

⁹⁰ Simon, 30 April 2012.