

# PUBLISHING WORLDWIDE SOUTH AMERICA

## Suriname's Demographics A Challenge to Publishers

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There's nothing Latin about Suriname except for its location, on the northeastern shore of South America. Formerly a British colony, swapped by the Dutch in exchange for Manhattan (present-day New York City), Suriname, with half a million people, is now a country with unusual religious diversity.

Suriname's population is a conglomeration of Hindus (37 percent), Creole (31 percent), Javanese (15 percent), Maroons or Bush Negroes (10 percent), Amerindian (2 percent), Europeans (1 percent) and others such as Chinese, Guyanese and Brazilians. Half the population lives in the capital, Paramaribo. Roughly another quarter million Surinamers reside abroad, mostly in Netherlands.

The official language is Dutch with Sranan Tongo (pidgin English, also called Taki-Taki) widely spoken as well. English is getting to be popular with the influence of Hollywood. Around 80 to 90 percent of books sold are in Dutch. English publications are second, ranging from 5 to 15 percent in sales, followed

by Sranan Tongo, which despite being the vernacular, has sales of only 2-5 percent of all titles. The rest are in languages such as Aukan, Saramaccan, and Carib.

Suriname is an unusually pluralistic country. Its capital, Paramaribo, claims to be the only place in the world

account for the remaining five percent.

### *Few publishing companies*

Though the literacy rate in Suriname is quite high (93 percent), the country has no independent book publishing companies apart from the Suriname Bible Society. It

Korea. Why that far? Reverend Erie Deira, director of the Suriname Bible Society, explained that though Suriname is in Latin America it remains closely tied to the Netherlands. Container ships from the Far East make regular calls at Rotterdam. Cargo is then easily transferred to Paramaribo-bound vessels. With shipping costs and favorable currency exchange rates, it is more cost-effective to have Bibles printed in South Korea.

There are two church organizations that assume a publishing role and have bookstores: *Stichting Surinaams Bijbelgenootschap* (the Suriname Bible Society Foundation) and *Stadszending der EBGs* (the Evangelical Center of the Moravian Church of Suriname). Three other bookstores are also dedicated to Christian products: *Majesty Bible Plus*, *Boen Njoensoe* (Good News), and *Stichting Hat Goede Boek* (The Good Book Foundation). There are some secular bookstores that stock a few Christian titles.

All five outfits buy from four to six local Christian authors who use local printers to publish small print



*Bibles and bananas: the Suriname Bible Society's book stall in Paramaribo's Central Wet Market gives shoppers easy access to Scripture.*

where a mosque and a synagogue stand next to each other, and its people pride themselves in their tolerance for other faiths. Surinamers are split four ways: 27.4 percent Hindu, 25.2 percent Protestant (chiefly Moravian), 22.8 percent Roman Catholic, and 19.6 percent Muslim. Indigenous beliefs

releases one to two Bible story titles per year with other Caribbean and South American Bible societies. Since only the text changes while the art remains the same, these low cost editions are printed in Colombia.

For Bibles, the Bible Society employs a printer halfway around the world in South



*Saturday morning sales at Majesty Bible Plus Store.*

runs of their works (1,000 50-page booklets at a time). The most popular and prolific writers are Franklin S. Jabini and Frank Nahar. The authors advance their own money for printing. A weekly radio talk show helps Nahar, a pastor, to promote his many books.

### *Christian literature sales*

The Good Book Foundation goes to other towns and cities with a four-wheel drive full of books. This store-on-wheels functions well as a neutral buying point for all denominations.

One unusual Bible Society strategy is to have a stall in Paramaribo's Central Wet Market side by side with vegetables, fruits and butchers.

"The standard and low-budget, but time-consuming, ways of marketing such as going to churches, preaching and having book tables, or talking to Bible study or cell groups have their limits," says Deira. "The sustainable way for the Suriname Bible Society to generate sales are mainstream advertisements."

Newspaper ads placed twice a month generate 75 percent of the Bible Society's sales; radio spots bring in an additional 24 percent. With

more funds, the Bible Society would like to explore television commercials and billboards. Majesty relies on mainstream advertising as well.

Majesty's store supervisor,

Shannon Lotulung, says newspaper ads generate significant walk-ins, more than enough to cover the cost of producing and placing an ad.

To capture holiday and expatriate spending, Majesty partners with radio and television stations. Emigrant Surinamers living in Holland, when visiting, buy Bibles and Christian books in bulk, since prices are 40 to 60 percent less than in Holland. On the average, the visitors spend 200 Euros in one shopping trip, versus about 9 Euros (or 30 Suriname dollars, SRD) for local customers.

International sales are important in this small market. In 2004, the Bible Society sold 11,000 Bibles in Guyana and French Guiana. These sales, together with local earnings, helped the Bible Society earn 600,000 SRD (about US\$200,000) last year. This meant a small profit, including financial support by the United Bible Society in the United Kingdom. Other international markets include the Caribbean islands of Aruba, Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States.

Cyber cafés are almost everywhere in Suriname, yet Christian organizations have not taken advantage of this medium. Only the Bible Society has a Web site as part of the overall network of the United Bible Societies ([www.biblesociety.org](http://www.biblesociety.org)). It is primarily an information medium, not a selling tool. This is regrettable considering one cannot serve thousands of emigrant Surinamers who can order and pay online for purchases by their families and friends back in Suriname.

### *Is there a viable market?*

Christian demographics and the existence of five Christian bookstores seem to indicate the affirmative. But with an annual per capita purchasing power of US\$ 4,300 (2004), poverty at 70 percent of the population, and an unemployment rate of 17 percent, can Suriname grow its publishing industry?

"There are opportunities for growth," says Deira. According to the Bible Society, half of all Surinamers profess to be Christian, yet only six percent of them have a Bible for the entire family. The rest, 94 percent, still need a Bible.

Majesty Bible Plus, the biggest Christian bookstore, reflects the real market's demographics. At least 50 percent of its clients, says Lotulung, are non-Christians. Among Hindustanis, there is a preponderance of searching young people. Many Muslim Javanese are seeking peace of mind. All are welcome.

"Surinamers love to pray," adds Lotulung, "even if they are not Christian."

Surinamers are some of the most highly patriotic peo-

ple in the world. *Dei Boekoe* (the universal Moravian Daily Textbook) is printed in Dutch in both Holland and Suriname. What's the difference? The Suriname edition has two pages on the local Moravian church. That's all. "Yet, even emigrant Surinamers buy the Surinamese edition," said Constan Landvreugd, director of the Evangelical Center of the Moravian Church of Suriname.

"With so many imported publications," says Jabini, "Surinamers want more local content. But, training for writing without publishing will not help," he adds. More publishers are needed to bring God's Word to Suriname and the rest of the Guyanas.

With its unique ethnic and religious mix, Suriname reveals that Christian publications should be marketed to both Christian and non-Christians. ♦



*Above, author Franklin S. Jabini. Below, works of Frank Nahar. Both are self-published.*

