Ethnologies

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Volume 43, numéro 2, 2021

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088196ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1088196ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Chand, S. J. & Thomas, L. B. (2021). ‘Toshao’ as Strategic Link for Cultural Continuity and Resiliency among Amerindians During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Guyana. *Ethnologies*, *43*(2), 85–113. https://doi.org/10.7202/1088196ar

Résumé de l'article

Cet article se concentre sur la réponse de la gouvernance autochtone à la pandémie de COVID-19 en Guyana. Plus précisément, il explore la figure du *Toshao*, le chef du village, en tant que lien stratégique entre le gouvernement et les peuples autochtones, les Amérindiens de Guyana, dans la mise en oeuvre des mesures COVID-19 imposées par le gouvernement. De plus, cet étude examine le rôle des *Toshao* dans le maintien ou l’ajustement de la continuité des pratiques culturelles et de la résilience des Amérindiens pendant la pandémie de COVID-19. Nous avons utilisé une approche qualitative exploratoire à travers des entretiens approfondis, menés à distance via des téléphones portables, avec six *Toshaos* de différentes régions administratives. Certaines conclusions préliminaires indiquent que les Amérindiens s’engagent dans des valeurs culturelles, des traditions et des croyances pour contrer les restrictions liées à la COVID-19 et chercher des solutions alternatives aux mesures imposées par le gouvernement. Les styles de leadership des *Toshaos* sont essentiels pour naviguer dans les espaces sociopolitiques entre le gouvernement et les Amérindiens et, en même temps, leur donner les moyens d’être résilients pendant la pandémie. Nous prévoyons que les conclusions de cette étude seront utiles aux planificateurs de politiques pour élaborer des politiques en cas de pandémie en collaboration avec les Amérindiens qui sont sensibles à leur culture et socialement favorables à eux.

'*Toshao*' as Strategic Link for Cultural Continuity and Resiliency among Amerindians During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Guyana

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Introduction[2]

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all communities world-wide, and indigenous ones are no exception. Indigenous populations in many countries are among the most marginal and vulnerable (ECLAC *et al.* 2021; Pramanik *et al.* 2021; UNESCO 2020; Urt 2016; Walters *et al.* 2021). They have been threatened by colonialism, globalization, climate change, to name a few, and currently by the COVID-19 pandemic (Belfer *et al.* 2017; Lambert and Scott 2019; Lauderdale 2008; Tigre 2021). The World Bank (2020) estimates that there are 476 million indigenous people in over 90 countries comprising 6.2 percent of the global population. More than 5,000 distinct indigenous communities are believed to exist, speaking about 4,000 different languages (IWGIA 2019).

Studies have focused on the impact of the pandemic on the mainstream communities (Finlay *et al.* 2021), governments' mandate to support indigenous peoples (Azocar *et al.* 2021; Landau *et al.* 2020; Palamim *et al.* 2020), and indigenous communities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Banning 2020; Berger 2020; Diaz *et al.* 2021). Yet little is known about

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2. The authors wish to thank Mr. Oladele Iheonye Manifold, a graduate student in Educational Leadership and Administration at USC, for assisting with and transcribing telephonic interviews with the *Toshaos* in Guyana, and Dr. Carlton Drepaul, Associate Professor of English, for providing valuable comments on drafts of this paper.

the responses by the indigenous governance and Amerindian people in the Caribbean to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The experience of a pandemic is not new to humanity (Huremović 2019) and particularly to the indigenous peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean. These peoples have learned to cope with diseases and pandemics while living close to and interacting with their environment. Through historical accounts we know that indigenous peoples have built their worldviews due to long periods of observation of their environments and have incorporated values and traditions in their belief systems (Le Saout *et al.* 2013; Lugo-Morin *et al.* 2019; Scott and Vare 2020).

Historically, excess mortality from infectious diseases like smallpox, measles, and other imported diseases eliminated up to 80% of native populations in the Americas following European contact (Nunn and Qian 2010). Moreover, the H1N1 influenza pandemic of 2009 resulted in 3 to 6 times higher mortality rates among the indigenous peoples than the non-indigenous populations of the Americas and the Pacific (La Ruche *et al.* 2009).

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have the largest percentage of indigenous population throughout the world. Poverty, discrimination, and lack of information pertaining to the health of indigenous populations are profound barriers to health services in these regions and are compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic (Flores-Ramírez *et al.* 2021). According to the Pan American Health Organization (2021), as of 16 August 2021, the confirmed and probable COVID-19 cases and deaths from the South America and the Caribbean and Atlantic Ocean Islands are 37,558,629 and 1,126,719, respectively.

Currently, there is a rise of COVID-19 cases among the indigenous population in Guyana particularly in the areas bordering Brazil and Venezuela due to the large influx of migrants from these countries (PAHO 2020). The rising infection rates in the indigenous populations in Guyana are believed to be failures by the government to keep their promises, intrusion of non-tribal gold miners in the interior areas, and a large influx of migrant populations in areas with indigenous populations (Ministry of Health, Guyana 2020). Therefore, in the current climate of the COVID-19 pandemic, indigenous leaders world-wide are taking their stand, engaging in campaigns and indigenous approaches to government, community social programs, and economic development that guarantee cultural continuance (Walters *et al.* 2021).

This study illustrates some of the ways in which indigenous governance and people have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in Guyana. Specifically, we examine the role of the *Toshao* (village chief) as a strategic link between the government and the indigenous people in implementing government-imposed measures, while maintaining or adjusting cultural practices to tackle the changing situations brought about by the pandemic. In the end, we shed light on innovative and resilient socio-cultural practices employed by the Amerindians of Guyana to comply with or counteract the government-imposed COVID-19 protocol.

Theoretical Framework

This section presents the theoretical underpinning of the key terms used in this paper: indigenous governance, indigenous peoples, indigenous leader (*Toshao*) and indigenous leadership styles, cultural continuity, and resiliency.

Literature in "indigenous governance" describes it as a field of scholarship addressing subjects of indigeneity, indigenous knowledge, self-determination, indigenous nationhood, colonialism, and race. It also challenges and offers solutions to the continued marginalization of indigenous people (Erazo 2011; McMeeking *et al.* 2020; von der Porten and de Loë 2013). Furthermore, indigenous governance is referred to as the ways in which indigenous peoples have governed themselves despite colonization, even in contemporary times (Lee-Nichols 2013). In this perspective, the practices of indigenous governance fall under three broad categories: those that occur (1) independent of, or prior to, colonization by an external political entity; (2) in coordination with, or formally sanctioned by, the colonial power; and, (3) in opposition to colonial power (paragraph 3). It is most likely that indigenous governance can take any one or more of the forms of practices within the formal structures of colonial power while simultaneously modifying or resisting them or operate independently in the indigenous cultural environment. Also, indigenous governance is evolving according to the needs of the indigenous peoples and their responses to various crisis situations (Lee-Nichols 2013).

With regards to the term "indigenous peoples," the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples asserts that they are "equal to all other peoples, while recognizing the right of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such" (United Nations General Assembly 2007: 1). While historically,

the term "indigenous" has commonly denoted peoples subjugated by the European colonies since the late 15th century (Coates 2004), "indigenous peoples" are "distinct from the dominant society that surrounds them, including practices such as communal ownership of land and resources, and a spiritual attachment to [their] territory" (Hannum 2003: 72). In Latin America, indigenous peoples, as well as other tribal peoples including Afro-descendant groups, have achieved legal recognition as distinct groups (ILO 2019). In this paper, "indigenous peoples" is used interchangeably with "Amerindians," the indigenous peoples of Guyana.

A crucial term in this case study is *Toshao*. According to the Amerindian Act of 2006, *Toshao* represents the indigenous leadership at the village level. The village council is elected by the community for a two-year period and is presided over by a Captain or *Toshao*, who is also elected for a two-year period. *Toshao* is a member and chairman of the Village Council and a member of the National *Toshao* Council. Above all, he or she is responsible for good governance and peacekeeping in his or her village (Amerindian Act 2006).

Given this context, we now turn to discussing the qualities that characterize good indigenous leadership, which pre-exists European settler colonialism across the globe. Literature in indigenous leadership focuses on themes ranging from collective leadership from an indigenous perspective, insights into ethical leadership, and modelling indigenous leadership to biographies and stories of successful indigenous leaders (Baker 2016; Haar 2019; Katene 2010; Spiller *et al.* 2019; Warner and Grint 2006). Scott Gorringe (2008) describes indigenous leadership styles through the metaphor of "The Currents of Culture." These leadership styles are: (1) Rocks in the river, which represent the elders with extensive wisdom of cultural knowledge, language and practices, who hold a strong collectivist mentality and use indigenous knowledge to keep themselves and their communities grounded; (2) Down-Stream Kayaker, where indigenous leaders display difficulty in understanding the Rock's (elder's) style of not adapting to changing times. They strongly believe in the power of indigenous peoples' successful contributions to dominant society; (3) Mainstream Current, where indigenous leaders hold on to capitalist, individualistic, and monetary ideologies. They favour peoples' need to change their cultural ways to adapt to the mainstream ideologies; and (4) Whirlpool leaders, where indigenous leaders use creativity and openness to provide safe spaces for new ideas and dialogue. These leadership styles are like the metaphoric river, where indigenous leaders play unique parts

in navigating the water to balance indigenous values and traditions with the tenets of western leadership governments.

This leads us to the fourth crucial term of "cultural continuity," where indigenous leaders mediate between the indigenous peoples and the government-imposed mandates, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The term "cultural continuity" refers to the ability to preserve the historical traditions of a culture that is potentially enduring with an identifiable past but is carried into the future (Krieg 2016; Oster *et al.* 2014). The concept of cultural continuity is linked with cultural identity that encourages indigenous peoples, particularly the youth, to believe that reconnection with their culture benefits them at the individual, family, and community level. However, after years of colonization and assimilation in the western culture, the indigenous youth feel disconnected from the cultural values and traditions espoused in indigenous communities (Krieg 2016). Additionally, cultural continuity situates culture as being dynamic through the maintenance of collective memory, which may change over time (LaRocque 2011). Cultural continuity lends to another key term explored in this paper: "indigenous resiliency."

Scholars agree that sociological theories on enculturation and acculturation have been instrumental in conceptualizing indigenous resiliency as a protective factor against historical trauma, oppression, and discrimination (Augur 2016; Tousignant and Sioui 2013). In this perspective, resilience is the ability to continue learning, self-organizing, and developing in dynamic environments when faced with uncertainty and the unexpected (Folke 2016). Scholars allude to indigenous peoples as most resilient given their historical persistence based on their worldviews that are sources of their beliefs, values, and traditions (Ford *et al.* 2020; Kirmayer *et al.* 2011; Nagle *et al.* 2017). However, few studies have examined indigenous resiliency from community-based perspectives. This paper aims at unravelling the ways indigenous peoples, as builders of their resilience, are defining elements of cultural continuity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in today's global society.

Methods

Exploratory research design was employed to address the objectives of this study. Six *Toshaos* were selected as participants using snowballing techniques and convenient sampling. All the *Toshaos* interviewed were newly elected to the office but had served as village councillors prior to their

election. Interviews were scheduled and conducted with the participants through telephone calls. Each interview was 45 minutes to 1½ hours long. Interviews were conducted in English, as all except one of the *Toshaos* could speak the language fluently. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All ethical protocols, including securing informed consent from the participants and IRB approval, were followed.

Poor Internet connectivity in the remote villages, non-availability of the *Toshaos* during the Christmas break, and village elections were among the limitations we experienced in our fieldwork.

The following section provides an overview of Guyana as a geo-political landscape, as well as the indigenous governance structure in the forms of village council, National *Toshaos*' council, and District *Toshaos*' council.

Geo-political landscape

The name "Guyana" is derived from an Amerindian word meaning "land of many waters," aptly describing the country with its extensive network of rivers and creeks, numerous rapids, and waterfalls. Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America, has a land area of 197,000 square kilometers. It is bounded to the west by Venezuela, Brazil to the west and south, Suriname to the east, and a 430-kilometer stretch of Atlantic coastline to the north and east. There are three main geographical zones: a) the coastal plain occupying about 5 percent of the country's area with more than 90 percent of the inhabitants; b) the white sand belt on the south of the coastal zone, which has rich reserves of bauxite, gold, and diamonds, and attracts miners from across the borders; and c) the interior highlands with series of plateaus, flat-topped mountains, and savannahs extending from the white sand belt to the southern boundaries (Merrill 1992).

Politically, Guyana is divided into ten Administrative Regions. Each one is controlled by a Regional Executive Office under the authority of the Ministry of Local Government. According to the latest official census report, the population of Guyana is 746,955 (Bureau of Statistics 2012a).[3] It is home to nine distinct indigenous peoples: Waraus, Wapishanas, Arawaks (Lokono), Caribs (Karinya), Patamona, Makusi, Wai-Wais, Arecunas, Akawaios (Kapoh) (Bollers *et al.* 2019). The Amerindians number 78,492 or about 10.51 percent of the total population. The

3. As of August 5, 2021, the population of Guyana is 790,692, according to the Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data. See https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/guyana-population.

remainder of the population is of African, Asian (East Indian, Chinese), and European (Portuguese, English, Dutch) descent. The non-indigenous population lives predominately on the coastal plain while the indigenous peoples occupy the coastal forests, tropical forests, and savannahs of the remaining 90 percent of the land (Bollers *et al.* 2019; Bureau of Statistics 2012b). The coastal Amerindians are the Kalihna (Carib-Galibi), Lokono (Arawak-Taino) and Warau, whose names reflect the three indigenous language families. The interior Amerindians are classified into six groups: Akawaio, Arekuna, Patamona, Waiwai, Makushi, and Wapishana. All these interior groups originally spoke Carib except for the Wapishana, who are within the Taino-Arawak linguistic family (Merrill 1992).

Prior to 2015, indigenous peoples were called Amerindians in official publications and general literature. "Indio" or "Indian" was a misnomer introduced by Christopher Columbus to refer collectively to the native people of the Americas, which he had mistakenly believed to be India. When the East Indians from the Indian sub-continent were brought to Guyana as indentured labourers from 1838 to 1917, the term Amerindian was introduced to distinguish the East Indians and the Native Indians. However, since 2015, the official and preferred term has been "Indigenous peoples" in the effort to correct the historic misnomer. Today, the indigenous villages in Guyana are being renamed in tribal languages (Bollers *et al.* 2019).

Indigenous Governance

The Village Council

There are 75 Amerindian village councils in the local government system of Guyana. The primary law governing the indigenous peoples is the Amerindian Act of 1951, amended in 1961, 1976, and 2006, enacted by the Parliament of Guyana (Amerindian Act 2006, 5). It is an expanded version of the 1902 Aboriginal Indians Protection Ordinance, issued by the Government Legislation of Guyana (Baines 2005: 5).

The Amerindian Act of 2006 provides for limited indigenous self-government through an appointed and elected village council. The village council is elected by the community for a two-year period and is comprised of *Toshao* (or the Captain), Deputy *Toshao*, secretary, treasurer, and councillors. Under the Act, the minister of Amerindian Affairs has the right to remove *Toshaos* and councillors and replace them at its discretion.

All Amerindian lands are owned collectively by the whole community (technically called a "Village") and administered through a village council. The important functions of the village council, *Toshao*, and councillors are outlined in the Amerindian Act of 2006. Some outstanding functions of the Village Council are making rules governing village life, providing strategic directions, particularly during crises like the current COVID-19 pandemic, presentation and growth of Amerindian culture, protection of sacred places and artefacts within the village, and preservation of the village's intellectual property and traditional knowledge.

National Toshaos' Council

The National *Toshaos*' Council (NTC) is a semi-autonomous body comprising all *Toshaos* in Guyana. It has an executive committee including one *Toshao* from each of the ten administrative regions. This body is responsible for promoting good governance in the villages; preparing strategies and plans for protection, conservation, and sustainable management of village lands and natural resources, and for reducing poverty and improving access to health and education and other critical services (Thorne 2019).

District Toshaos' Councils

District *Toshaos*' Councils are inter-community bodies set up to reinforce the traditional jurisdiction over shared farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering grounds; coordinate internal collective decisions; and enable joint dialogues with the government over land tenure, development, resource use, and conservation issues. These inter-community councils work to support the long-standing struggle of the Wapichan people to obtain legal title over the full extent of their ancestral lands in the South Rupununi. Initiatives include community mapping of traditional occupation and use, and a collective agreement to develop a territorial management plan based on customary use and the communities' own proposals for promotion of traditional practices, self-development, sustainable use, and community conservation (David *et al.* 2006).

Demographic information

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the *Toshaos* interviewed in this study. It includes the location of the villages, region-wise, gender, and age of the *Toshaos*, names of the indigenous group, village

Village Location	Gender	Age	Indigenous Group	Village Population	Ethnic Composition	Economy
Amerindian village settlement in Region – 2	Toshao1 Male	51	Akawaio	1050	Amerindians, African descent, East Indians	Gold mining, subsistence farming, small businesses
Amerindian village settlement in Region – 2	Toshao 2 Male	49	Akawaio	1050	Amerindians, African descent, East Indians	Gold mining, subsistence farming, small businesses
Amerindian village settlement in Region - 9	Toshao 3 Male	34	Wapishana	1069	Predominantly Amerindians	Farming, Fishing, Forestry
Amerindian village settlement in Region – 2	Toshao 4 Female	28	Arawak	480	Predominantly Amerindians	Logging, small-scale farming
Amerindian village settlement in Region – 1	Toshao 5 Male	38	Warrau	601	Predominantly Amerindians	Tourism, small-scale farming, heart of palm harvested and bartered with AMCAR (Amazon Caribbean) company
Amerindian village settlement in Region – 2	Toshao 6 Male	47	Caribs	587	Predominantly Amerindians	Gold mining, farming

Table 1. Demographic information of the Toshaos interviewed.

population, ethnic composition, and the economic activities of the villages. *Toshaos* #1 and #2 belong to the same village; however, *Toshao* #1 was interviewed prior to the village council elections in May 2021 and *Toshao* #2 was interviewed after being elected as the new village chief.

Structure of the indigenous governance at the village level

An Amerindian village is comprised of the administrative structure that includes both the local governance and the government "arm" to run the daily affairs of the community. According to *Toshao* #2, "Administratively, the village council is in charge of the community." The elections are held every three years to elect the members of the village council. One of the key areas in the local governance that the village council oversees is land ownership. *Toshao* #2 explained,

> We don't have house lots but what we do have as we call it is a title land, is a large expanse of land given to the village community and that is being covered by the village council. So, we own these lands collectively,

> whatever resources it could be: timber, forest whatever mineral we own it, the river, the fish and the birds. Once they are within the area, we have the ownership with them.

However, if a government land is within the village's jurisdiction, the village council has no control over it as it is a state land unlike the title land owned by the village community.

Toshao #2 further stated,

> OK, in terms of land administration, we have no control over it. But in terms of engaging with residents and people we have no problem… When they want to live or use a land on our land then they come to the council, the village council and then depending on the application and whatever justification they offer, you know, we consider them. Most likely, most times they do little bit of mining and when they are finished, they go back.

District hospitals are present in at least two villages, which cater for the entire district. The hospital personnel are government employees. Other government administrative structures at the village level are police station, post office and regional administrative office supervising the different departments like education, health, and agriculture.

Role of Toshao at the village level

The Amerindian Act of 2006 outlines a range of duties and responsibilities for *Toshaos* to function effectively in the villages and wider communities. Notable among the duties elucidated by the *Toshaos* are welfare services for men, women, elderly, differently abled persons, orphans, and victims of domestic violence. School feeding is an upcoming project sponsored by the council members for children from low socio-economic status, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown, when schools closed the feeding program. In the words of *Toshao #1*,

> Another activity, in terms of infrastructure, we proposed to the government and even to our own community, we finance our own projects. For example, very soon we will start our own school feeding building project; that is village funding. When children go to school, they have to have a hot meal and there must be a dining house/hall for them.

One of the female *Toshaos* said,

> So basically, I am leader for the village, leading out in the village. And checking matters and ensuring that everything is order for the villagers. Anything as it relates to the leadership that I usually do.

Toshao #5 emphatically stated,

> …if there is any issues that I have to deal with and in terms of security if there are any problems, I have to go and deal with that...I actually manage the entire village when it comes to anything that's affecting the residents…I must say I rate it like at 80% because sometimes we will have to take it further and because some of these issues we can't really handle it in the village but I rate it at like 80%.

All the *Toshaos* are newly elected to their offices and conversed enthusiastically about their roles and responsibilities as *Toshaos*. In particular, as we outline in the next section, we examined the leadership styles of the *Toshaos* as indigenous leaders in their communities.

Results

We now present the major findings of this study.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic by the Toshaos

Awareness about the COVID-19 virus was disseminated in all the Amerindian villages before the first case was detected in Guyana in March 2020. *Toshaos* hold meetings with the community leaders and *Toshaos* of other villages to seek guidance and exchange views on measures to implement that are culturally acceptable to their community members. Different leadership styles emerge as each *Toshao* engages in implementing the COVID-19 measures in their villages. Six approaches are evident among the *Toshaos*:

(1) no plan of action, leaving it to the government and task force to deal with the situation.

> No, the government and task force to [will] deal with the situation. (*Toshao* #3)

(2) to follow the government-imposed COVID-19 protocol strictly, and when the community members resist, the police are called in the village to enforce the protocol.

> Yes, we have a curfew. Actually, we go with the government curfew… whatever they say, that is what we go with. […] As leaders for our village we can sit and plan. I tell the residents what we put in place but then some of them are very, very stubborn and so we had to get a police joining our task force, as well as, the commander...sorry the head commander, and so it wasn't an easy task, you know, bringing a police on your own

> people but because of that we were able to execute it right away and they got scared and they tried to listen and so on. (*Toshao* # 4)

(3) to follow the government protocol and add their own rules to it, as well as ensure that the protocol is followed.

> …we had a screening station. We actually set up rules that if anybody leaving this village, they should get a "pass"… […] For now, I must say that we (are) actually having the people to make sure that they wear their mask…make sure that they sanitize going out of the village or returning back into the village and advise them in public places, make sure that they follow all the guidelines…and encourage them also to take the vaccines right now… (*Toshao* #6)

(4) to work hard for the community's well-being and to continue moving forward with the protocol even when community members resist and are non-compliant. Additionally, he/she believes in taking help when necessary for positive outcomes.

> I think generally, the village itself, the council itself, the tourism committee have been working really hard to get the message out because there is a lot of misinformation going out…so their response in the past month has really increased in terms of obeying the protocols, so we have seen progress from the hard work, so we are encouraging people again.

> …meeting with individuals as well…visiting families, like anything else some people don't listen but what you have to do? You keep doing what you have to do.

> But normally, like normal people, they wouldn't listen sometimes to the leader but what he (former *Toshao*) did is call in for some external help like the doctors to come in and do more sensitization. (*Toshao* # 5)

(5) to act as mediators and a link between the parties for giving and receiving information.

> …Also, the village council organized themselves to be the link between the Task Force and villagers with the main aim of giving and receiving information. (*Toshao* #1)

(6) to be proactive and engage in innovative practices, even when this means adjusting to or rejecting the government protocol.

> OK, first thing, when we were aware of it, we organized a kind of an awareness session with the community members, when it was not in Guyana yet. So, they were aware of it. […] And so, the task force was

> organized, and they had restrictions on their own. For example, we were not allowing people to go out to Georgetown. Came together and said only emergencies, in emergencies, people can go to Georgetown. Which worked well but it was to a great discomfort and inconvenience to certain people. […] And so, it turned out that the government said whatever you are doing, just follow the protocol, wear mask and stuff like that and so. So, that kind of arrangement broke down especially when the new government took over. (*Toshao #2*)

In essence, all the six *Toshaos* demonstrate their unique approaches to leadership style in the COVID-19 situation. These leadership styles vary from being a non-participant leader in the implementation stage of the COVID-19 protocol to a rigid one to a more liberated, proactive, and innovative one.

Indigenous peoples' response to the COVID-19 protocol

Indigenous peoples' response to the COVID-19 protocol are expressed from the Toshaos' perspectives. Interestingly, most of the *Toshaos* believe that about 50–90% of their village members comply with the COVID-19 protocol.

> Most of them complied. I would say 90%. (*Toshao #4*)

> So, well the majority [are] actually accepting and following the guidelines…we have some of them who are not…but they are responding at least…I am comfortable with the response I am actually getting. (*Toshao #6*)

> I would say no, I wouldn't say the majority in the beginning, I would say just a small group of people started to listen but for the tourism yea, we did listen because it is what we are involved in, and we had to learn and learn quick … Right now, I would say majority meaning more than 50% maybe 70-75% have been observing the protocols, there is still maybe 25% who still believe in rumours … (*Toshao #5*)

> But at that time, because it was not here as yet…there was a great reluctance to, you know. Even though that would have been in the [capital city], because [village] geographically is away from the [city], then people didn't take it serious that it will reach here until it reached. (*Toshao #2*)

> Most of the population did not comply. (*Toshao #1*)

Mask wearing

For many indigenous peoples of Guyana, wearing masks is an alien practice. They feel uncomfortable wearing it, complain of difficulty in breathing, sweating, and the quality of material of the mask. Three approaches are observed in relation to mask wearing: (1) total rejection of wearing masks; (2) wear a mask only when necessary and then throw it away; (3) wear only the homemade masks.

According to Toshao #2,

> So, when the meeting is over, they will throw away the mask and they are gone home…so especially for public spaces, we try to practise. But when they go home, they are back to their farms and bush, and they don't need no more masks and so on.

Furthermore, there are some mixed views on mask wearing and the spread of COVID-19 among the indigenous peoples. They say that COVID-19 is spread using masks. Toshao #2 said,

> So, there was a big reluctance at some point in time. Why they would conclude that? There were some in the villages who would have access to and wearing masks and when they learned that this [virus] is [in] higher humidity…they used it as an evidence to say that yes, they were wearing masks, were more cases, and so they used justification, 'We don't wear mask, but we are not doing it, so we are not getting it'. So, one village had over 100 cases. And that is where the government put …wearing masks. And so, when they heard the number, they see what's happening 'is the mask bringing COVID'. So, they made their own judgements and conclusions.

Hand washing

Most of the *Toshaos* concur that hand washing is another practice that many indigenous peoples of Guyana do not engage in regularly. Toshao #2 observed,

> Well hand washing, it was explained…like I said that the belief, they didn't believe that hand washing is so much important. And so, when you have hand washing material or equipment like in the offices, they do not want to wash their hands but when they are required then they will go and wash. It wasn't something that was easy to follow, someone had to remind them go there and wash, they will do it then. Free will that wasn't practised.

Hand washing is a routine when visiting the toilet and before eating

the meals. Otherwise, washing hands outside the supermarket is seen as unnecessary by these indigenous peoples.

Social distancing

Indigenous peoples in Guyana are generally communal and engage in activities that are collectively conducted. Therefore, social distancing protocols are not adhered to despite all enforcement by the task force at the village level.

> …traditionally, indigenous people live in a kind of collective life. For example, they go work and plant farm together, they would celebrate, you know wherever they need to celebrate, so that social distancing was not …difficult to put into practice. (*Toshao* #1)

Indigenous peoples' resistance to the government-imposed COVID-19 protocol paves the way to their alternative pathways to cope with the pandemic. Many beliefs are associated with mask wearing, testing for virus, and vaccination.

Indigenous beliefs about the COVID-19 pandemic

Some beliefs that indigenous peoples of Guyana harbour toward the COVID-19 have moved them to reject the government-imposed protocol and adhere to their beliefs and value systems that seem to contradict the protocol. Some of the prevalent beliefs are those in supernatural occurrences, herbal plants to build immunity, self, strong mindset, low death rates, and belief that this pandemic is a normal sickness.

Belief in supernatural occurrences

Many Indigenous peoples in Guyana believe that nature communicates with them. They strongly believe that the occurrences of natural disasters like fires are predictions of future diseases or disasters. One of the *Toshaos* related the following:

> I learnt recently that, you would have heard about Amazon on fire, Amazon Forest some months back and then there was another one in Australia and another one in California, and some other places. Their prediction was that once forest burns and creatures are destroyed, and all kinds of living things are destroyed and non-living, the outcome will be sickness, so they were expecting it, but they didn't know that it is called 'Covid.' And so, now they have analyzed on their own and come to conclusion that that is the result of the fires around the world. And

> so, they will take their precautions. They don't have the idea that OK, they don't have any scientific evidence but by experience and by danger they know that something will happen and this COVID is the outcome of fires and so on. And so, it is not strange for them because they say that years ago, they had fires in their country and sickness followed and people died; so take it as part of life and nature and disasters.

Most *Toshaos* believe that this notion is shared among the other indigenous peoples across the region, and many have retreated to the deeper parts of the forests in search of medicinal plants to treat the COVID-19 virus.

Belief in herbal medicinal plants

Two of the *Toshaos* (#2 and #6) expressed the efficacy of herbal medicine in treating conditions like diabetes and blood pressure and even the COVID-19 virus. One of them stated that the elders of the community are seeking the plants in the forest to find a cure for the COVID-19 virus. The elders claim that a concoction of herbal plants and spices relieves people from the viral infections. Many of these observations have been made by *Toshao #2*. In his words,

> …more of the adults or big people are now doing more research in the sense that they are doing trial and error about certain plants and so on. And so, they try it on their own and when it works they say: "look this is working," and so they are doing something on their own and they don't have a scientific background in the sense that there is no testing done, they just sample, take sample of plants and so on and try it and if it works, then after a while they say this could work just as good as the other one, like I gave you lemon grass. So, as I said, those are some common ones but there are some new ones that they may have which are not made public as yet, but some are working on those kinds.

The quest for a cure for the COVID-19 virus attracts the young generation to join with the elders to research the plants and experiment so they can replace the vaccines with the natural remedy with no or limited side effects and anxiety.

Belief in self and strong mindset

Another interesting concept that integrates into their belief system is the perception about self and body image. For indigenous peoples, a life of dignity is paramount. *Toshao #2* seems to spend more time with the community members and understand their socio-psychological dimensions.

He said,

> …they don't want to be looked upon as Covid person and psychologically they will be affected and so they just want to be themselves.
>
> So, it is nothing to do with their belief or non-belief in the medical practices, it is just that about their body image, what they think about themselves is more than taking help of the medical care. So, they don't have problem with the medical care, but they are more concerned about how people will look at them. They do not want to be looked down. So, those are some of the things we are investigating in this not about the nitty gritty of the governance but with the structure of governance we are understanding the beliefs that people have to do what you told them to do.

Indigenous peoples in Guyana maintain health and vitality by living close to their natural environment. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic's invading their spaces, they are apprehensive of contracting the disease, suffering, and dying. Therefore, they invest all their efforts in isolating themselves from the infected persons and mainstream society.

Another quote from *Toshao* #2 captures the mindset of the indigenous peoples and their deep-rooted fears on contracting the COVID-19 virus. He said,

> …did not want to be tested, simply because they feared…they believe that they were strong…strong people can't get Covid and so that had mental effect on them…[…] …even though they might feel sick, they are not sick like the coastal people and they don't want to, let's say, they don't want to think that they have Covid even though they may feel not well, they just ignore, not accept the fact that they have Covid; they have a strong mindset, so I believe that it has a connection with mindset, strong mind versus Covid and they just feel themselves "I believe in Covid but I overcome it by not accepting the fact that I have it."

Similarly, the indigenous peoples' thoughts about being sick but not suffering or dying is another reason to resist the COVID-19 protocol particularly when they have tested positive for the virus.

> So far in the [village] we may be five cases not bedridden but no deaths but in other villages may be two or three deaths. So generally, that is the mindset of the indigenous around this area. (*Toshao* #1)

The last notion relates to their mindset and reluctance to get tested or vaccinated. The indigenous peoples believe that "pandemic is a normal sickness" like any other common ailments which takes its course of time,

and the person recovers ultimately.

Government-imposed COVID-19 restrictions affecting the Socio-cultural practices

COVID-19 measures were implemented in Guyana before any case was detected in the country. Some of these measures include hand washing/sanitizing stations, screening stations, partial or full lockdown of the villages and counties, blocking of all the entry points into the villages, issuing of "passes" to individuals who need to enter in emergencies, wearing of masks in public places, no communal gatherings or celebrations, and social distancing. The *Toshaos* identify some of the common cultural practices affected by the COVID-19 restrictions issued by the Task Force in their respective villages. Some of these practices are: (1) collection of medicinal plants and materials for crafts which requires walking long hours into the forests, (2) working, communal meals, large gatherings, and religious gatherings, (3) gathering of ladies in the village to make cassava bread, (4) heritage celebrations, (5) inter-village football competitions, and (6) visiting neighbours.

According to *Toshao* #5,

> It is really hard for the village. Our custom is that we tend to visit neighbours, we tend to share on a regular and on a daily basis, so I think it is really difficult people have to adapt and change which I think was the tough part…it is like "man, I don't care, man", that is my neighbour, you know…. that was a little amm… ting [*sic*, thing]. But then people would still... I think they have adapted a little bit but not as we expected.

Building resiliency during pandemic

Indigenous peoples' resistance, non-compliance, or hesitancy with regard to the COVID-19 protocol is viewed within the context of cultural continuity. Their drive to maintain cultural values, traditions, and belief systems makes them resilient during the pandemic. These traditions have historically persisted and have bound the indigenous peoples together. In this section, I include some quotations from the Toshaos narrating experiences of resiliency in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building resiliency through herbal medicine

> But we had recommended herbal medicine from all over the country because the persons who living in [village] presently migrated from

different villages across the country...so amm….they had/got families and friends from those other villages and they send recommended herbal medicines for us to use, and that is one of the main reasons people recover very fast...by using herbal medicine especially you are suffering with high blood pressure, sugar and those things in their system...you know...they use those herbal medicines and they recover very fast...(*Toshao* #6)

Building resiliency through small settlements

And others would spend a lot of time in what we call 'bagdams' for building settlements, so it's OK bagdams, that is kind of ...bagdam is like a little settlement, a little home in a farm or it could be in a mining place. (*Toshao* #2)

Building resiliency through home-made masks

The village council would have started the small project where the women will sew masks, white cloth ones. And they were more comfortable with because it was locally produced unlike the mask coming from town. Because as I said, somebody told them masks will spread the virus, so any product from town was a no-no…they will prefer a locally sewn something, they are more comfortable to wear it. (*Toshao* #1)

Building resilience through staying home

OK, when Covid entered [village], they were still not wearing masks but try as much they can to keep away within their own homes, not engaging too much with any public life. […] So, since the school closed also these people are now living in …little interaction with the Amerindian village…clearing exams…go back….one hour away or two hours away and so that is kind of protect themselves and like I said they are only mixing home themselves to do farming and so they develop their own system in taking precaution without the mask and without social distance. (*Toshao* #2).

Building resilience through fishing, hunting, and farming

No, in terms of cultural practices, the fishing, hunting, language speaking, craft, all of that I think is still ongoing. The only thing that has really been affected is visiting neighbours and going and share but besides that families would still go and hunt, go and fish, go to farm. One of the things as well, the farming has increased, farming has really stepped up. (*Toshao* #5)

But if they gather in the bush far away in the farm, they feel that is

> safer because they are interacting with those living within those areas, particularly those who do not have COVID but did not trust people in [village] who are actually living every day, because they have exposure to kind of people travelling …[village] is like the transit point. So, they don't trust people actually …[village] day to day. They more or less have that thinking that living in the farm they are safer and so they will interact more with them, organize work and so on. (*Toshao #2*)

Building resilience through cultural celebrations and social media

> …we still have the younger ones who practise their culture, we have dances and so on... heritage (yearly Amerindian celebration in September) we still do it...we do it virtual last year...we just had it over Facebook...but otherwise for that everybody is still doing their normal thing...baking cassava, catching fishes, hunting...so they are still being involved in the cultural practices...but it was affected but not 100% but it was...[…] By letter...we send letters, we use social media, we use Facebook...we use WhatsApp...yea...that's the way actually...so we have close contact through social media. (*Toshao #6)*

Building resilience through strong mindset

> They believe that they were strong…strong people can't get COVID and so that had mental effect on them and some of them, they said, "we do not want anything like that, we are strong," …(*Toshao #2*)

The *Toshaos* articulate numerous approaches their village members are undertaking to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. These approaches address various dimensions of their community and individual lives, notably the heath, social, economic, cultural, emotional, and security aspects. These approaches seem to make the indigenous peoples resilient and creative in adapting to the COVID-19 protocol. They seek measures and strategies for alternative solutions to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Plan of Action proposed by the Toshaos

The *Toshaos* propose a plan of action to deal with current issues and view the prospects. Five models emerge from the findings (refer to the responses of the *Toshaos* in the section "Response to COVID-19 Pandemic by the Toshaos"):

> 1: Non-Participant approach: Government and Task Force deal with the situation. There is no involvement of the *Toshao* or the Village Council in pandemic matters.

> 2: Government Directed approach: Interactions among the Government, Task Force, and the Village Council to strictly implement the protocol. The indigenous peoples can be invited to the meetings, and may or may not be involved in the decision-making process. External force can be applied in case the indigenous peoples resist or are non-compliant.
>
> 3: Government Supported approach: Both Village Council and Task Force are merged and work hard to get quick results. The *Toshao* will follow the Government protocol and get the entire village vaccinated.
>
> 4: Government Village-Supported approach: More close interactions between the village residents and the Village Council. The *Toshao* is interested in forming a network outside the village and connecting the villages where family members are residing, as well as promoting indigenous medicine to treat all ailments and find a cure for the COVID-19 virus.
>
> 5: Government–Indigenous Leadership–Elder Folks Partnership approach: The *Toshao* will find the common line of dialogue between the Government and the Indigenous leaders. The *Toshao* will meet the Elders of the Village and engage in discussion with them on seeking alternative medicine for COVID-19 virus and vaccine.

According to *Toshao* # 2,

> The plan so far is to balance what the government wants us to do with what traditional offers us so that there can be cooperation, there can be a common line…And that is where we want to start. Secondly, we have a plan that we meet with the older folks who may have had experimented on herbal treatment or herbal intake to come up with a kind of, let's say, a list of things or activities of things they would have been practising to overcome this. We want to have kind of more dialogue and more understanding so that we can have a bank of knowledge so that if there is a repeat or an increase, we are armed with some solutions to face that kind of thing other than vaccine.

Discussion

The narratives of the *Toshaos* indicate their clear perceptions of their roles and responsibilities as leaders in their communities. They are honest in declaring the compliance rate of their community members with the government-imposed COVID-19 measures. A key element observed is their "self-determination" as they deliberated on their leadership styles and plan of action for the future amidst the COVID-19 crisis. Although scholars, including von der Porten (2013), have alluded to problematic approaches

to indigenous self-determination, the United Nations General Assembly (2007: 4) clearly states that

> Indigenous peoples [may] freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development…[and] have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired.

Furthermore, Gorringe's (2008) metaphoric "river" aptly describes the *Toshao*'s strategic link between the government and the local governance, as he or she navigates between the socio-political spaces to identify common ground to collaborate and integrate the indigenous knowledge and culture into the framework of the government policies for the common good of the indigenous people.

Indigenous peoples' resistance to the government-imposed COVID-19 protocol is evident among the indigenous peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean where they exercised their right to self-determination by closing borders and monitoring people's movements to prevent the transmissions of the virus, using and promoting traditional medicine, and ensuring food security, to name a few (ECLAC *et al.* 2021). Cultural continuity among the indigenous peoples of Guyana is linked to their strong mindset of "being who they are" and "strong people can't get COVID." They believe that a strong mindset can overpower their susceptibility to contract the virus. This is in line with Oster *et al.*'s (2014) study on cultural continuity among the Cree and Blackfoot leaders in Alberta, Canada, where they concluded that the First Nations that preserved traditional culture were better protected from diabetes.

Toshaos' perspectives on resiliency among the indigenous peoples indicate their keen observations and close interactions with them on a regular basis. Indigenous peoples as builders of their resilience through herbal medicine, home-made masks, living in self-isolation, cultural celebrations through social media, and being strong minded define the elements of cultural identity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This holds true to the scholars' conceptualization of indigenous resiliency as a protective factor against historical trauma, the ability for self-learning, and organizing in uncertain and unexpected environments (Augur 2016; Folke 2016; Ford *et al.* 2020).

Conclusion

There are unique characteristics among the indigenous peoples of Guyana that are distinct from the non-indigenous ones. Their existence and residence in the deep forests and hinterlands give them the freedom to uphold their customary use of biological resources within their traditional practices and ancestral territories. However, their exclusion from the major decisions and consultations held by the central government prevents them from fully reaping the socio-economic, educational, and health benefits that the mainstream society enjoys. In this scenario, the *Toshao's* role as a leader, strategist, initiator of community development projects, and strategic link between the government and the indigenous governance has become critical for promoting COVID-19-related precautionary measures that are culturally acceptable and, therefore, have a greater chance of being supported by community members.

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