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Should the Coastal/Inland Model of the Caribbean Island Environment be Re-examined? Case in Point: The Isle of Saba (Netherlands Antilles)

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Introduction

- 1 In order to understand the Caribbean environment, the issue should be raised as to its borderlines and in general, its very definition. For the past few years, two different concepts have opposed each other: On the one hand, those who refer to 'The Caribbean Region' and on the other, those who speak of 'The Caribbean Islands'. It is evident that such an opposition remains the keystone to any attempts at explaining and comprehending the dynamics of the basin. Hence, considering such factors as history, the course of socio-economic, and political territorial dynamics, several issues should be examined on :how to interpret the Caribbean environment. In fact, wouldn't the Caribbean fit in with the definition: 'unity through diversity'? Or, perhaps it is this spatial diversity which forms the basis of 'The Caribbean' as a highly regionalised and diverse area. Faced with such queries, our analysis will focus mainly on the coastal/inland model which will likely have to be re-thought in several of the islands of the region and in particular, the island of Saba.

1. From the "Barrier Island" to the "Isle of Sugar"

- 2 For numerous researchers – whose works deal with historical, civilisational and political factors – the island of Saba represents the Caribbean archetype of the 'sugar isle'. Located at 17°38' north latitude and 63°13' west longitude, Saba is the smallest of the five islands of the archipelago of the Netherlands Antilles. Its small size (approx. 13 km²) is marked by

an accentuated orography, protected by a thick tropical forest which contrasts with its coastline formed of rough, very jagged cliffs.

Photo 1. Aerial view of the North-eastern sector of the island of Saba



- 3 For a considerable time, this island remained untouched. The initial inhabitants (the Arawak Indians) called it “Siba”, meaning rock. In reality, it is in 1493 that Christopher Columbus conferred upon it the name of Saba; it was then similar to a veritable barrier island. It wasn’t until the period 1632-1635 that the first settlers (British) occupied the island, defying the powerful Atlantic waves and impressive coastal cliffs. The British occupation was quite marginal, since in 1816 the first Dutch settlers developed the beginnings of their future colony. Thereafter, Saba conformed to the model – well beyond the geographical realities – of ‘sugar isle’, typical of a colonial plantation society. Despite the absence of any welcoming coastal area and although the inlands present a tormented morphology, as of 1840, Saba participated in the sugarcane, tobacco, indigo and spice trade and more generally in produce, which provided self-sufficiency to the island in terms of foodstuffs.
- 4 Its coastal areas being inadequate for any form of occupancy or human activity, most of its trade took place in the inlands, hence overcoming the difficult process of farming. Despite its dynamic economic momentum, this island was unable to maintain its production capacity, which faded towards the middle of the XIXth century. Since then, Saba is but a toneless island.

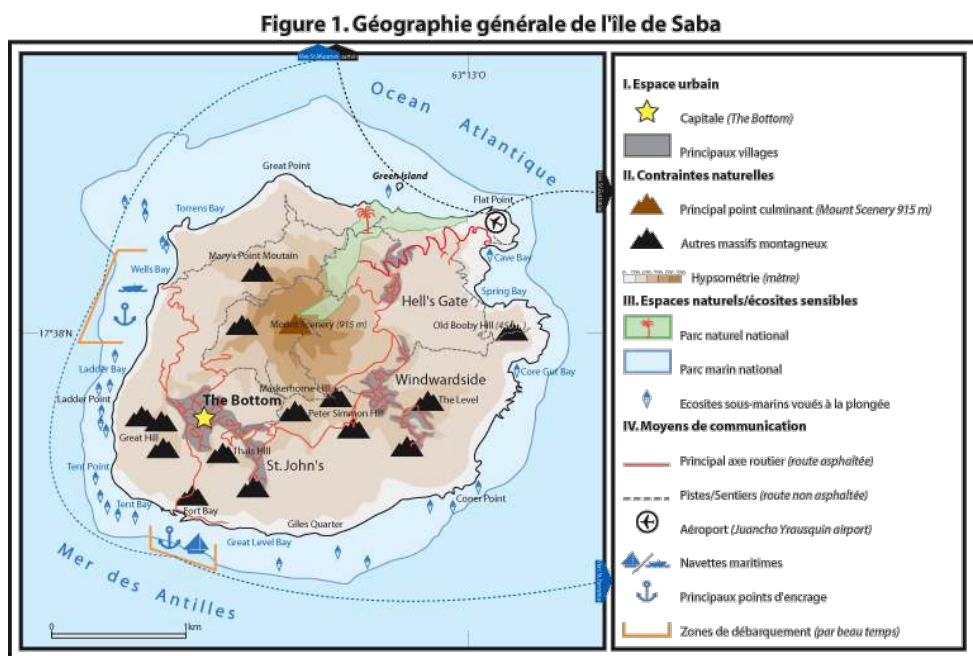
2. The coastal/inland model: a model to be re-examined

- 5 Most of the research dealing with Caribbean islands refers to the coastal/inland model. This implies a method of development based on coastal areas which play an essential role, whereas the inlands play a much lesser role. Although this applies to most of the Caribbean islands, this model is nevertheless debatable because it applies to insular

volcanic systems, hence to the 'high islands' but is poorly adapted to the 'low islands' (limestone islands).

- 6 Today, the island of Saba is viewed as not being an example of the coastal/inland model. Even though its mountain ranges are extensive, and have an almost total absence of any useable coastal zone, the dynamics of this island lay within its inland territory and not along the fringes. It should be noted that Saba does not have any appreciable demographic growth, since it only recorded 1,349 inhabitants in 2001, against today's 2005 census of 1,424. The capital is a simple traditional village and regional center for the three other villages of the island (figure 1). The mountains, although modest (average of 500m altitude), nevertheless cover 92% of the territory and are characterised by deep valleys and steep hills, whose main peak is *Mount Scenery* (915m). The roadway is formed by a single road running through the island from north-west to south-west. The flattest spot (*Flat Point*) houses the smallest commercial airport in the Caribbean with a runway whose length does not exceed 400m (photo I & figure 1). Sea transportation is possible from two points, when the weather permits: in the south at *Fort Bay* or the north-west at *Ladder Bay* (figure ci-dessous). This closed-in configuration impacts the economic fabric of the island all the more and has been the case from the outset.

Figure 1. Overall geography of the island of Saba



- 7 Saba's main economic activity is tourism, particularly ecotourism. Indeed there is a wealth of fauna and flora both on land and in the sea which attracts large numbers of tourists. The tourists expenditures provide financing for the local government's provision of the territory's infrastructure and support for economic sectors suffering difficulties. A cottage industry, however, is able to survive due to a modest market in artisan products such as rum, spices, embroidery and lace, which boasts a well-established reputation. Finally, the primary sector, based on food crops, remains only marginal, although it does provide the basis for the island's self-sufficiency in food. A small-scale fishing industry also attempts to survive, despite more meager catches.

- 8 Regardless of its ongoing, marginal economic activities, Saba is gradually losing its dynamism. The youth of the island, in search of better economic opportunities are moving to the other islands of the Netherlands Antilles i.e Saint-Maarten for tourism, Aruba and Curaçao for the oil and refinery sector).

Conclusion

- 9 Saba asserts itself as a 'barrier island' with waning dynamics. The harsh mountain topography, along with the absence of a welcoming coastal environment, renders it a counter example of the coastal/inland model. This would tend to support the diverse nature of the Caribbean Region or more precisely, the Caribbean Islands. Indeed, in view of historic, socio-economic, political and cultural elements, Saba confirms the homogeneity of the developmental paths common to the islands of the Caribbean. As with the model confirming a dichotomy between the coast and the inlands, the notion of The Caribbean Region or The Caribbean Islands should not be affirmed as a premise unique to the Caribbean region, but as a rule asserting the Caribbean region as a being part of a totality of global structures or hyper structures. Is this not the typical aspect of an archipelagic world?

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