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**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:
RELIGION IN FRENCH GUIANA**

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Religion in French Guiana

Country Overview

French Guiana is an overseas department of France located on the Atlantic coast of South America, bordered by Brazil to the east and south, and by Suriname to the west. It is a tropical land, whose capital, Cayenne, is only five degrees north of the Equator. Its 83,534 km² (32,253 sq mi) of land is home to an estimated 217,000 people (2009), most of whom are of African descent. The territory has a very low population density of less than three inhabitants per km², with almost half of its population living in the urban area of Cayenne, its capital (2006 census = 100,323 inhabitants), located on the banks of the estuary of the Cayenne River.

Though sharing cultural affinities with the French-speaking territories of the Caribbean, French Guiana is not considered to be part of that geographic region, because the Caribbean Sea is actually located several hundred kilometers to the west, beyond the arc of the Lesser Antilles. However, the boundaries of what people have defined as the Caribbean today has changed. Historically, the boundaries of the Caribbean were at their greatest extent during the 17th and 18th centuries and as such French Guiana was situated on the edge and during some periods maybe thought to be part of the Caribbean proper.

Geography. French Guiana consists of three main regions: the coastal plain in the north, a hilly plateau in the middle, and the Tumac-Humac Mountains in the south along the Brazilian border. Most of the interior (83 percent of it) is dense tropical rain forest.

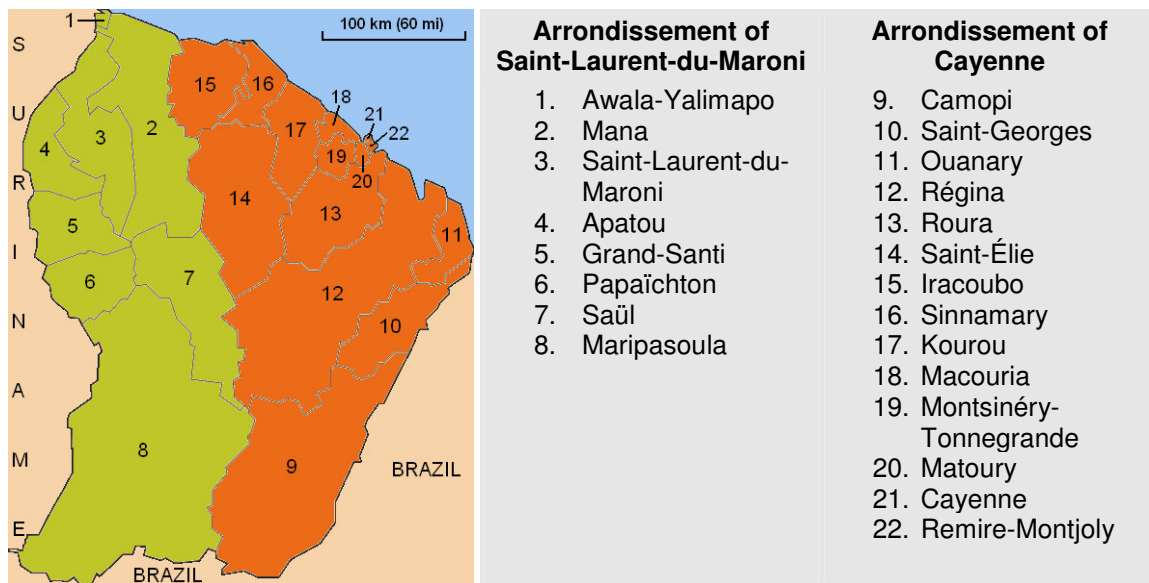
As of 2007, the Amazonian forest located in the most remote part of the department is now protected through one of the nine national parks of France, the *Guiana Amazonian Park*. The territory of the park covers some 33,900 square kilometers (13,090 sq mi) in the communes of Camopi, Maripasoula, Papaïchton, Saint-Élie and Saül.

French Guiana's highest peak is *Bellevue de l'Inini* (851 meters). Other highland peaks include *Mont Machalou* (782 meters), *Pic Coudreau* (711 meters) and *Mont St. Marcel* (635 meters), *Mont Favard* (200 meters) and *Montagne du Mahury* (156 meters). Several small islands are found off the coast: the three Salvation Islands (*Îles du Salut*), which include Devil's Island (*Île du Diable*), Royal Island (*Île Royale*) and St. Joseph Island (*Île Saint Joseph*), and the isolated *Iles du Connétable* bird sanctuary further along the coast towards Brazil.



French Guiana is a land of rivers, many flowing north from the southern mountains. The major rivers are the Maroni and Lawa, forming its (disputed) border with Suriname; the Oyapok, forming a long natural border with Brazil, and the Approuaque, Camopi, Mana and Tompok. The *Barrage de Petit-Saut* hydroelectric dam in the north of French Guiana forms an artificial lake and provides hydroelectricity.

French Guiana is divided into 2 *arrondissements* (Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni and Cayenne), 19 *cantons* (counties) and 22 *communes* (municipalities, towns and villages).



Ethnic Diversity. French Guiana's population of 229,000 (January 2009 est.), most of whom live along the coast, is very ethnically diverse. According to the 1999 census, 54.4 percent of the inhabitants were born in French Guiana, 11.8 percent were born in Metropolitan France, 5.2 percent were born in the French Caribbean *départements* (Guadeloupe and Martinique), and 28.6 percent were born in foreign countries (primarily Brazil, Suriname, and Haiti).

Estimates of the percentages of French Guiana's ethnic composition vary, which is compounded by the large proportion of immigrants (about 20,000, nearly 10 percent). *Creoles* (people of mixed African and French ancestry) are the largest ethnic group, although estimates vary as to the exact percentage depending upon whether the large Haitian community is included as well. Generally, the Creole population is estimated to be between 60 and 70 percent of the total population if Haitians (comprising roughly one-third of Creoles) are included, and 30 to 50 percent with the Haitians excluded. There are also smaller immigrant groups from various Caribbean islands, mainly Saint Lucia and Dominica. About 14 percent of the population is of *European* ancestry: the vast majority of these are of French heritage, though there are also people of Dutch, British, Spanish and Portuguese ancestry. The main Asian communities are the *Chinese* (3.2 percent, primarily from Hong Kong and Zhejiang province) and *Hmong* from Laos (1.5 percent). Other Asian groups include *East Indians*, *Lebanese* and *Vietnamese*.

The main ethnic groups living in the interior are the *Maroons* (formerly called "Bush Negroes") who are racially black African, and the *Amerindians*. The Maroons, descendants of escaped African slaves, live primarily along the Maroni River. The main Maroon groups are the Saramaca, Aucan (both of whom also live in Suriname), and Boni (Aluku). The main Amerindian groups (between 3-4 percent of the population) are the Arawak, Carib, Emerillon, Galibi (now called the Kaliña), Palikour, Wayampi and Wayana. During the late 1990s, there was evidence of a remote uncontacted group of Wayampi.

Languages. The official language of French Guiana is French, but a number of other languages are also spoken. Regional languages include French Guiana Creole, six Amerindian languages (Arawak, Palikur, Kali'na, Wayana, Wayampi and Emerillon), four Maroon dialects (Saramaka, Paramaccan, Boni and Djuka), as well as Hmong Njua. Other languages spoken include Portuguese, Hakka, Haitian Creole, Spanish, Dutch and English.

Economy. French Guiana is heavily dependent on mainland France for subsidies, trade, and goods. The major industries are shrimp and fish processing (accounting for three-quarters of foreign exports) and aerospace. Lumber, construction and mining are secondary industries. The Guiana Space Centre in Kourou (commune 17) accounts for 25 percent of the department's GDP and employs about 1,700 people.

Agriculture is largely undeveloped and is mainly confined to the area near the coast: sugar and bananas are two of the main cash crops. The agricultural products are sugar, rice, manioc, cocoa, vegetables and bananas. Cattle, pigs and poultry are the main livestock animals.

There is very little manufacturing in the department. Natural resources include: bauxite, timber, gold (widely scattered), cinnabar, kaolin, fish, and shrimp. Tourism, especially eco-tourism, is a growing industry. However, unemployment is a major problem: between 20 to 30 percent of those in the labor market.

The major exports are shrimp, lumber, gold, rice, rum, rosewood essence and clothing. France bought the bulk of the products, more than 60 percent, with the USA, the European Union and Japan buying the rest.

Politics. As an integral part of France, its head of State is the President of the French Republic, and its head of Government is the Prime Minister of France. The French Government and its agencies have responsibility for a wide range of issues that are under the National Executive, such as defense and external relations.

The President of France appoints a Prefect (resident at the Prefecture building in Cayenne) as his representative to head the local government of French Guiana. There are two legislative bodies, the 19-member General Council and the 34-member Regional Council, both elected. The current Prefect is Daniel Ferey, the President of the General Council is Alain Tien-Liong, and the President of the Regional Council is Antoine Karam.

French Guiana sends two deputies to the French National Assembly, one representing the communes of Cayenne and Macouria, and the other representing the rest of French Guiana. This latter constituency is the largest in the French Republic by land area. French Guiana also sends one senator to the French Senate.

French Guiana has traditionally been conservative, although the **Guianese Socialist Party (GSP)** has been increasingly successful in recent years. The GSP is currently the majority party in the Regional Council and has one seat in the French National Assembly. The **Union for a Popular Movement (UMP)** is a center-right political party in France and French Guiana. The UMP's leader, Nicolas Sarkozy, was elected President of France in 2007. The UMP is currently one of the minority parties (seven seats) in the Regional Council and has three seats in the General Council. Another principal minority faction is the **Walwari party** with seven seats in the Regional Council and one seat in the General Council.

Public security is handled by the National Gendarmerie (militarized Police Force) and the French Foreign Legion, a unique military unit in the French Army, established in 1831. A chronic issue affecting French Guiana is the influx of illegal immigrants and clandestine gold prospectors from Brazil and Suriname. The border between the department and Suriname is formed by the Maroni River, which flows through rainforest, and it has proven difficult for the public security forces to patrol.

Transportation. French Guiana's main international airport is Cayenne-Rochambeau Airport, located in the commune of Matoury, a southern suburb of Cayenne. The department's main seaport is Dégrad des Cannes, located on the estuary of the Mahury River, in the commune of Remire-Montjoly, a southeastern suburb of Cayenne. Almost all of French Guiana's imports and exports pass through the port of Dégrad des Cannes, which was built in 1969 to replace the old harbor of Cayenne that was congested and could not handle modern shipping.

An asphalted road from Régina to Saint-Georges de l'Oyapock (a town by the Brazilian border) was opened in 2004, thereby completing the road from Cayenne to the Brazilian border. It is now possible to drive on a fully-paved road along the Atlantic Coast from Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni on the Surinamese border to Saint-Georges de l'Oyapock on the Brazilian border.

Current Status of Religious Affiliation

The vast majority of French Guianans are Roman Catholic (about 86 percent). According to 1999 estimates by *Almanaque Mundial 2000* (1999: 178), religious affiliation was as follows: Roman Catholic 85.8 percent, Protestant 4.2 percent, other religions 5.0 percent, and none 5.0 percent. Other religions include indigenous Amerindian animistic beliefs and practices, Chinese Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam among Asian Indians, and African-derived religions among the Creoles and Maroons.

Overview of Social, Political and Religious Development

The primary American Indian (Amerindian) people who inhabited the land when Spanish explorers first visited the area were the Caribs, who had displaced the earlier residents, the Arawaks. Further inland dwelt other peoples, including the Oyampi, Cussaris and Emerillon, who practiced a variety of related Amerindian animistic religions, some of which have survived to the present.

The Spanish and then the French, who occupied the coast in 1604, brought Catholicism with them. The land was disputed territory through the rest of the century and at different times was

controlled by the Dutch, the British and the Portuguese. French control was finally reestablished in 1676. Various efforts to build the colony with French citizens met with mixed results due to the climate, and even now most of the population resides along the coast and on the nearby islands.

European settlement in this region during colonial times resulted in the creation of three colonies: British Guiana (now Guyana), Dutch Guiana (now Suriname) and French Guiana. The three are still often collectively referred to as the Guianas. After the Treaty of Paris in 1763, King Louis XV sent 12,000 settlers to French Guiana to colonize the region. However, only a few hundred survived the ordeal.

Between 1852 and 1939, more than 70,000 French convicts were deported to French Guiana where they were interned in penal settlements, collectively known as the *Cayenne Penal Colony*, including the infamous *Île du Diable* (Devil's Island). In 1938, the French government stopped sending prisoners to the Cayenne Penal Colony, and in 1952 the prison was closed. Most of the prisoners returned to metropolitan France, although some chose to remain in French Guiana.

In 1901, the population of French Guiana was 32,908, including 4,097 convicts at hard labor and 2,193 on ticket of leave. The capital city, Cayenne, has a population of over 12,000. The colonial government, appointed from Paris, was assisted by a council of five members, in addition to which there was an elective assembly; the colony was represented in the Paris chamber by one deputy. The chief industry was placer gold-mining.

Roman Catholicism

The history of Catholicism in Guiana begins with the Portuguese missionary effort after the Treaty of Tordesillas between Spain and Portugal in 1494 gave this territory to Portugal. However, no important success was achieved in the conversion of the aborigines until the 17th century. Catholicism was established in 1636 and became the principal religion soon afterwards. Efforts were made to convert the indigenous population, and most immigrants were of a Catholic background. Accompanying colonists of the French West India Company to Cayenne were some Dominican friars, who were followed by Capuchins. In 1666, the proprietary company brought the Jesuits to Cayenne, and they labored among the Negro slaves and the Amerindians.

Among the most remarkable Jesuits in this missionary field were Fathers de Creully, Lombard, d'Ayma, Fauque, Dausillac, and d'Huberland. De Creully spent 33 years in the mission (1685-1718), and during a large part of the time he travelled by boat along the coast and preached to the natives. Other Jesuits established settlements among the Amerindian "converts" based on the model of the Jesuit Mission in Paraguay, known as "reductions." The Jesuit Mission in Cayenne continued until the anti-Jesuit movement in continental Europe brought about the expulsion of the Jesuits from this field in 1768. The French Revolution (1787-1799) limited the efforts of the secular clergy to continue what the Jesuits had begun in Cayenne.

In 1900, there were about 20,000 Catholics, 27 churches or chapels, 18 mission stations, 22 priests, and five schools with about 900 pupils. The Sisters of Saint-Paul de Chartres administered the hospital at Cayenne between 1818 and 1900. The mission was the scene of the heroic labors of Mother Anne-Marie de Javouhey (d. 1851).

The Apostolic Prefecture of French Guiana-Cayenne was established in 1651, and was separated from Martinique in 1731. It remained an Apostolic Prefecture until elevated to a Vicariate in January 1933, and finally became the **Diocese of Cayenne** in February 1956. The Diocese is currently a suffragan of the **Archdiocese of Fort-de-France** on the island of St. Pierre. The church authorities were very slow in creating indigenous leadership, and no native Guianan was ordained as a priest until 1971. The current bishop is Msg. Emmanuel Marie Philippe Louis Lafont, appointed in June 2004. Today, about 75 percent of the population is Catholic.

Catholic Charismatic Renewal?

The Protestantism Movement

Protestant families began to arrive after 1624 and remained, despite having, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, no governmental support. No indigenous Protestant church was started until the 20th century.

In the early 1900s, a member of the **Christian Brethren** (Open Plymouth Brethren) came to Guiana from Barbados to begin work. He was followed much later by representatives of the following denominations.

Seventh-Day Adventist Church (1940). In March 2003, there were 1,936 Adventist church members worshipping in 16 congregations.

The Church of God (7th Day) is related historically to the Church of God (Seventh Day), which split into two factions in 1933: the Church of God (Seventh Day) in Stanberry, MO (later moved to Denver, CO) and the Church of God (7th Day) in Salem, WV. Elder Dugger was affiliated with the Salem, WV, and moved to Israel in 1953 to establish its world headquarters and publish the *Mount Zion Reporter*. Many of the churches affiliated with this movement use the name “Mt. Zion Church of God (7th Day).” This denomination (headquarters in Jerusalem, Israel) reports affiliated churches in the USA, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean (USVI, Antigua, Dominica, French Guiana, Grenada, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Martin, Trinidad-Tobago, St. Vincent), Central and South America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, England and India. (Source: <http://www.cog7day.org/>)

Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (1982): five churches with 380 members in 2000.

Evangelical Churches of the West Indies (ECWI, 1986). This denomination was founded by a U.S.-based evangelical mission agency, World Team (formerly known as West Indies Mission in the Caribbean). It reported five affiliated churches with 470 members in 2000 in French Guiana.

The Church of the Nazarene (1988). In 2000, this denomination reported three affiliated churches with 570 members.

Church of Christ (1990). A church of Christ (*a cappella*) was planted in the capital city of Cayenne as a result of the work of Don Starks, Boyd Williams and Bill McDonough.

Church of God of Prophecy (1991). There was only one church with 46 members in 2000.

The Evangelical Church of French Guiana (1997, *Eglise Evangelique de la Guyane Francaise*). This denomination was officially created in summer of 1997 to serve an ethnic group of French military and civilians coming mostly from France (also called “metropolitains”). One of the congregations meets in the military fort in Cayenne, and it maintains a chaplaincy within the French Army stationed in this country. The denomination is a member of the CEEFE (Commission of French-speaking Evangelical Churches Abroad) and thus has close relationships with the *Fédération Protestante de France*, which incorporates 14 Protestant denominations and missions within France.

The Christian Church of French Guiana (1997). This organization is related to the independent Christian Churches & Churches of Christ (instrumental) in the USA, which are related to the North American Christian Convention, with offices in Cincinnati, OH. The work in French Guiana was begun by Dr. Wesley Stepp, director of the Bible Institute of Christian Missions in Jacksonville, FL. The Christian Church of French Guiana became incorporated in 2005.

Other Protestant denominations exist but their founding dates are unknown: The Anglican Church (one church with 60 members), The Salvation Army (prior to 1987, one church with 190 members), Streams of Power (Pentecostal, three churches with 350 members), Evangelical Crusade (Pentecostal, one church with 130 members), the Assemblies of God (Pentecostal, five churches with 900 members), and the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

Other Religions

Marginal Christian groups include: the **Jehovah’s Witnesses** (Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society) (1945) reported 34 churches with 1,950 members in 2008; and the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)** (1981), with two congregations and 316 members.

Through the centuries, numerous people have moved into French Guiana from other lands, especially Brazil, Suriname and Haiti. There is also a measurable community of Asians, mostly of Chinese and Asian Indian heritage. The massive movement of immigrants into French Guiana has led to the establishment of a variety of different religions, including Afro-Brazilian spirit-possession groups (**Animism-Spiritism**), **Vodou** from Haiti, **Buddhism** and traditional Chinese religions among the Chinese, and **Hinduism** and **Sikhism** among the Asian Indians. Also, there are an estimated 2,000 **Muslims** (0.9 percent of the population), mostly of Javanese or Lebanese extraction, and a small community of **Baha’i Faith**.

French immigrants have brought the esoteric **Rosicrucian movement** (Ancient Wisdom Tradition), most noticeably members of the Pythagore Lodge in Cayenne, affiliated with the **Ancient and Mystical Order of the Rosae Crucis (AMORC)**, a U.S.-based group that has been quite successful in France.

Freemasonry. Lodge No. 204, L’Anglaise, at Bordeaux, France, chartered a lodge at Cayenne in 1755 and gave it its own name. Other Lodges were organized by French authority, both of the Grand Lodge and the Grand Orient, at different times throughout the years.

Amerindian religions (animist) are present in the interior among the Arawak, Carib, Emerillon, Galibi (now called the Kaliña), Palikour, Wayampi and Wayana. The **Maroon religion** exists among former African slaves and their descendents (called “Bush Negroes”) in the interior.

The Maroons in Suriname and French Guiana in general are acquainted with a polytheistic and animistic form of worship. Polytheism coexists with monotheism. A portion of the Maroon societies adhere to Christian beliefs. The Roman Catholic Church and a number of Protestant churches, particularly the **Moravian Church**, have carried out missionary work among them. But, as already mentioned, people believe in a variety of divinities. They believe in a Supreme God known as *Keeydi Amua Keeydi Anpon*, or *Gaan Gadu a Tapu*, meaning "the great God above." The deity named *Gaan Gadu* is believed to be the most powerful of all gods. *Gaan Gadu* rules the world by delegating tasks to his lower gods, who in turn exert influence on humankind. He does not use human beings as mediums through which to manifest himself directly; only the lower gods manifest themselves through mediums. (Source: Polimé, no date)

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