

Saint Martin: historical overview?

- Given a colonial history whose effects are eminently of lasting effects, since they are still present in certain aspects of our current reality.
- Given a poorly planned and uncontrolled economic development that has produced irreversible social, societal and political transformations.
- Given the profiles of our political leaders.

The question for me is:

WHAT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PATH IS FIT FOR SAINT MARTIN (the island)?

To answer that question it is indispensable to know some of the events that marked our recent history. Hereafter is a simplified account of that.

The "hard core" of Saint Martin's traditional reality is born out of colonial history. That is what explains in particular :

- the anglophony of the indigenous people ("people french and dutch though speaking english much", as the song puts it).
- the predominance of Afro descendants
- the religions practiced
- musics and dances
- customs, traditions and beliefs (Jollification, Journey cake, funeral rites, ...)

And this history did not unfold in a quiet and linear way. There have been times of great economic and social agitation, followed by long years of lethargy.

Remembering because...

We should not forget, the "wrongs" that were done,

We should not forget the "wrights" that were done.

Around 1763, the new commander of the French part of the island, Auguste Descoudrelles, made the bet that this part of the french colonies could also produce sugar and become rich like Martinique and Guadeloupe (of which we were already administratively dependent).

To this end, he carried out a policy of (re)settlement by inviting colonial planters accompanied by enslaved laborers, who were offered "squares" of land at low prices. It turns many English settlers with their black workers who responded to Descoudrelles' offer.

This explains the Anglophony of the island's traditionnal people.

It was a winning bet because the sugar economy became very flourishing.

In 1775, there were 17 sugar factories that used more than 1000 enslaved blacks .

In 1786, there were 24 sugar factories where around 2500 blacks worked.

This explains the predominance of Afro descendants on the island.

The Dutch part of the island also had a very flourishing plantation economy.

This economy came to a slow decline when England abolished slavery in 1833 in the British colonies, particularly on the island of Anguilla, located less than 10 km to the north of Saint-Martin. Many blacks were able to escape to this land of freedom, while the plantaion owners could no longer apply the same "power of the whip" to the workers, at the risk of a mass rebellion and exodus.

The abolition of slavery in the French part of the island occurred in 1848, which marked the de facto end of slavery in the Dutch part, where abolition did not occur until 1863.

From then on, the sugar economy declined significantly on the whole island. Many landowners left

and some sold or transferred lots of land to their former enslaved workers. Thus, it can be considered that 1763 marked the birth of a stable social entity that matured and became permanent with the end of slavery on the island in 1863. Most of the large traditional families of today can easily trace their ancestry back to that time.

(For more détails see <https://simplicityofmythoughts.wordpress.com/2020/08/21/the-tides-of-history-a-fictionality-part-2-low-and-slow-post-slavery-tide-when-families-made-the-one-sinmartin-people/>)

The post-slavery period was characterized by an economic and social hibernation that lasted a good hundred years, until the 1960s.

During that time, the specific identity of the people of St. Martin became a reality. During that time the central administrations of the so called mother countries were mostly absent. The inhabitants lived in quasi autarky. They had to fend for themselves. Solidarity and internal self-management of the island are then important factors for the survival of all. Nobody could get rich but neither men nor animals had to be hungry or thirsty, and each one had to make sure to have a roof with the help of his neighbors (Necessity being the law, the practice of "lending a hand" or "jollification" was then generalized).

The exploitation of the salt ponds had developed well after the decline of the sugar cane but was never enough to make the population wealthier.

The first half of the 20th century was marked by a high level emigration.

Indeed, the Panama Canal was under construction, oil from Venezuela was exploited in the Dutch colonies of Curaçao then Aruba. The fuels produced in these islands played an important role in the outcome of the Second World War, being the main source of supply for the Allies. Hundreds of Sint Maarteners found opportunities to "get their feet out of their old shoes". The American dream also attracted many. Some went to Santo Domingo where large sugar cane plantations still existed.

When economic circumstances became more favorable in Sint Maarten, many returned from Aruba, Curacao or Santo Domingo, and were able to invest their savings from abroad to build a good home for their families. Houses that have resisted well to hurricanes, since they were built with the hurricane risk in mind. Thus, we can better understand a certain tolerance of the people of St. Martin towards foreigners.

In the meantime, 1946 marked the official end of the colonial period on the french part, characterized not by decolonization, but by the departmentalization proposed by Aimé Césaire (among others), and the formal integration of the communes of Saint-Barthélemy and Saint-Martin into the department of Guadeloupe.

The economic circumstances became favorable around the 1960's onwards, thanks to tourism, which developed rapidly in the Dutch part of the island. In 1970, the Mullet Bay Hotel was under construction. It opened in 1971. In 1980, it had 850 rooms and employed 1800 people, a significant proportion of whom were from the French part of the country. At that time, the economic growth of the Dutch part reached or exceeded 12% annually. The inhabitants of the French part benefited from the internal solidarity of the island, since a regulatory provision of the labor legislation, taken by the "Island Council" in Philipsburg, authorized them to work in the same way as the "Dutch", provided that they could prove that they were born in Saint-Martin. (There were then, with some exceptions, only Saint Martiners who were born in Saint Martin, whether on one side or the other)

1963, in the French part of the island, marks the transition from traditional St. Martin to modern St. Martin (according to Daniella Jeffry in "1963, année charnière"). There were about 5400 inhabitants in 1931, 4500 in 61, 6200 in 74 and 8100 in 82.

Public electrification was inaugurated between Grand-case and Saint-James in 61.
 The sub-prefecture was installed in 63
 A first bank, the Crédit Agricole, opened its doors in 63
 The seawater desalination plant arrived in 1965
 The airport of Grand-Case Espérance is put into service in 72

This ends this period of creation/construction of a sufficiently strong and reputable Saint-Martin identity to deserve the title of friendly island, obtained at the beginning of the tourist era. This period started in 1763 with a (re) settlement.

The next period also... with a new settlement.

The flourishing tourist economy of the Dutch part of the island attracted workers from other Caribbean islands, and the population had already started to grow, but a sharp increase occurred as a result of the **1986 Pons law on overseas tax exemption (commonly called defiscalization law)**

Here are some of the observations we were able to make, without any moral judgment.

It is a matter of taking into account what happened in order, on the one hand, not to make the same mistakes again, if possible, and on the other hand, not to have to reinvent the wheel

The major impact of this law was the resulting demographic explosion:

Evolution de la population		
Années	St-Martin	Sint Maarten
1982	8072	14272
1990	28518	27378
1992	28649	32221
1995 : Luis		
1999	29112	30948
2001	30642	30594
2008	36661	32675

Sources : INSEE et
Department of Statistics Sint Maarten

This demographic tsunami has overwhelmed all the public institutions of the territory, in particular

- **The educational system**, which took a long time to think about adapting to the quantity as well as the new qualities of the students:

Faced with the important increase in school enrollment, consecutive to the massive and uncontrolled influx of new populations on the territory, it became necessary to invest in new schools, the Region for a Professional High School (rue du Spring,1991), the Commune for the

elementary (E. Choisy, 1993), the Department for a college (Soualiga, 1997).

Saint-Martin has absorbed many classes of beginners teachers, many of whom came from Guadeloupe, often against their will. Many of them were eagerly awaiting the opportunity to return to their native Guadeloupe, and rightfully so. As a result, a high turnover of inexperienced teachers faced with a school population that had become even more difficult and complex socially, culturally, and linguistically, in overpopulated school buildings, resulted in several generations of school populations that were far less successful than their counterparts within the same school district of Guadeloupe.

ACADEMIE DE LA GUADELOUPE
EVALUATIONS DIAGNOSTIQUES 2011

Effectifs = nbre élèves évalués. Les résultats des élèves sont exprimés en %tage de réussite. (RES<33% est le pourcentage d'élèves ayant eut un résultat inférieur à 33% de réussite)

CIRCONSCRIPTIONS	EFFECTIFS	RES<33%	RES>50%
SAINTE-ROSE	618	19,00%	53,00%
BAIE-MAHAULT	665	20,00%	55,00%
BOUILLANTE	320	16,00%	54,00%
BASSE-TERRE	565	16,00%	57,00%
POINTE-A-PITRE	598	15,00%	63,00%
SAINT-FRANCOIS	626	15,00%	59,00%
ABYMES 1	647	22,00%	46,00%
ILES DU NORD	662	48,00%	29,00%

- **Precarious and unhealthy housing** had developed considerably. "Ghetto" villages where hundreds of people lived, in the greatest promiscuity, without running water, without toilets, without electric meters, were built outside all rules. Hurricane Luis arrived in 1995 and made these villages disappear, and the problem of lack of decent housing worsened considerably. A voluntary return program was set up by the State but did not produce the expected results. This urgent need for housing had to be addressed. A report from the "steering committee of the RHI of Quartier d'Orléans, piloted by the SEMSAMAR translates well the atmosphere of the times.
Excerpts:

(approximate translation)

“As early as 1991, two years after the passage of Hurricane Hugo, the municipality of Saint-Martin began operations to requalify the affected neighborhoods and sought solutions for rehousing people.

Quartier d'Orléans has benefited from this dynamic. It was selected as one of the sectors likely to receive disaster victims.

Located in the east of the island of Saint-Martin, on the RN7 linking Marigot to Philipsburg, Quartier d'Orléans has experienced during the last two decades, an aggressive, rapid and poorly controlled urbanization that has resulted in a marked level of insalubrity of its buildings and an important precariousness of a part of its housing stock housing stock, exposed to flood risks.

In 1999, 1001 dwellings were counted compared to 760 in 1986, for a population of 3277 inhabitants.

To stop the urban and social degradation of Quartier d'Orléans, to eradicate its insalubrity, and to allow it to accommodate the affected populations, the State and the Municipality of Saint-Martin have undertaken several actions:

- In 1991, the Commune of Saint-Martin initiated a process of requalification of the district*
- On June 9, 1994, the City of Saint-Martin and the State signed the 1994-1999 City Contract, which integrated the problem of insalubrity in Quartier d'Orléans*
- In 1996 the process of realization of an operation of resorption of the insalubrious habitat in Quartier d'Orléans was initiated.*

On April 18, 1996, the Prefect of Guadeloupe signed the decree of insalubrity of Quartier d'Orléans”.

“The second phase of the RHI was the subject of a financing order on December 1, 1998, for a State contribution of 13,045,380 francs (1,988,750 euros).

In order to deal with the post-hurricane reconstruction following the passage of Hurricane Luis in September 1995 on the island of Saint-Martin, the initial phasing was abandoned. The municipality and the State, with the exceptional financial support of the Regional Council, have redirected the RHI towards the priority construction of social housing intended to rehouse the disaster-stricken families of the entire island. Most of the construction programs were carried out outside the RHI perimeter. The passage of hurricanes Georges, on September 20, 1998, and Lenny, in November 1999, led to the continuation of these orientations”.

New areas of concentrated housing were created, but not all the necessary infrastructure were put in place in due time, such as recreational facilities or wastewater management.

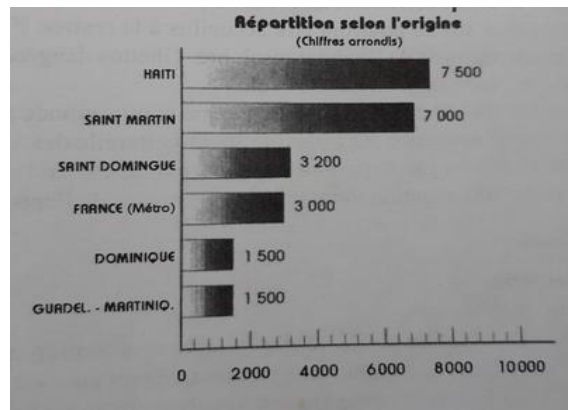
- **The hospital**, which had been renovated in 1983, had to adapt to the quantity as well as the quality of the new users, particularly in order to deal with the augmentation of births. (1986 : 481 - 1990 : 860).

At the same time, the AIDS epidemic was raging. The budgetary difficulties of the hospital became structural since the establishment had to accommodate a disproportionate number of patients without social security coverage and without financial means. (Between 1985 and 1990, more than 60% of parturients were of foreign nationality, oftentime undocumented). This is how a new group of "born here to stay here" was created, who are now between 30 and 40 years old and are an integral part the Saint-Martin of today. A new, larger hospital was built in 2003.

The traditional population has become a minority in what they consider to be "their" territory, resulting in a strong sense of frustration and community animosity expressed in the often-heard

phrase "I born here".

(Estimates of the size of the main communities in 1990, in Consensus Populaire Saint-Martinois' "Saint-Martin: Objective Status").



But 30 years later, it is reasonable to consider that most of those who were born here, as a result of these migrations, and who made this place the center of their material and moral interests (as it is said), and who ended up melting in and being integrated in the cultural continuum of the territory, all the while adding the color of their origins, have really made the society evolve towards its present reality.

I think it was a mistake to allow so many real estate projects in such a short period of time. It was necessary to plan better in time, to distribute better on the territory and to make the sedentary population benefit better.

The SEMSAMAR, which was created in 1985, played a major role in the management of this acute growth crisis, by creating new infrastructures, by building social housing and by its ability to overcome the municipality's cash flow shortages. Jean-Paul Fisher, its iconic director, influenced most of the public policy decisions of the time.

The mayor relied heavily on his advice, resources and actions. The commune should have had its own experts.

It is in this context of societal transformation that took place...

The Customs Crisis

In his speech of July 14, 1990, the mayor (Albert Fléming) expressed his opposition to the installation of the customs on the communal territory, imminent installation announced by the Prefect of Guadeloupe. The mayor expressed his fear that the tax and customs exemptions which benefited the "northern islands" would be called into question, which would further accentuate the economic imbalance between the two parts of the island, to the benefit of the southern part, which did not ask for so much. Following important popular protests, the Prefect of Guadeloupe was forced to modify his project. The customs will be installed in Saint-Martin, but will only deal with

the fight against illicit trafficking (drugs, weapons...)

Chronology of events : (in Bulletin Municipal n° 11, September 1991)

14 JULY 1990

In his speech for the celebration of Bastille Day Mayor Albert FLEMING reacted to rumors that the French government is planning to install customs in Saint-Martin in September 1990.

17 JULY 1990

First deliberation of the Municipal Council asking the French government to postpone this installation and to replace customs by specialized agencies in drug trafficking.

27 SEPTEMBER 1990

Second deliberation of the Municipal Council reacting against the conditions whereby the French government wishes to install customs



Pétition présentée à Mr. le Sous-Préfet par Mr. R. Richardson, R. Rassion, Mrs. Hunt et Arnell

THE CUSTOMS CRISIS

in Saint-Martin without consulting the elected officials of the commune.

10 OCTOBER 1990

The Prefet of the Region of Guadeloupe together with the Regional Director of customs arrives in Saint-Martin to explain why they are installing customs. They maintain that customs will be installed "whether the elected officials and the population like it or not, even if two squadrons of gendarmes have to be dispatched to the island", the Prefet says.

11 OCTOBER 1990

Arrival of 3 customs officers which will be followed by 4 others at the end of the month.

12 OCTOBER 1990

A public protest and barricade of the entrances to Marigot are put in place by an organizing committee. The Mayor of Saint-Martin sends a letter
- to the President of the Republic of France
- to the Prime Minister.

15 OCTOBER 1990

Mayor FLEMING calls a meeting of all political leaders, union leaders, social cultural and professional organizations, and concerned citizens. A consensus is reached to form a committee to prepare for a change of administrative status. Appointment of the 7 members of the committee is approved.

16 OCTOBER 1990

The Municipal Council takes four deliberations:

- 1- Refusal to accept the installation of customs in Saint-Martin.
- 2- Creation of an interministerial commission who would immediately come to Saint-Martin to meet the elected officials and the population in order to be notified of the specific nature of the commune of Saint-Martin within the Region of Guadeloupe and the French Republic, and to make proposals on the changes needed in the administrative services and the relationship with Europe.
- 3- Project for a new status in the form of an administrative change which will take into

consideration the free port and fiscal situation and enable the local authorities to conduct the affairs of the island in a more adequate manner.

4- Permission to organize a local consultative referendum for the purpose of knowing the choice of the population on the following question:

"Do you want the commune of Saint-Martin to be outside of the customs territory of the European community and still remain part of the European community for the other aspects of the treaty of Rome ?".

23 OCTOBER 1990

Letter from the Prefet to the Mayor of Saint-Martin confirming that there will be no creation of a common law customs brigade in Saint-Martin.

MAYOR'S OFFICIAL STATEMENT

The Mayor informs the population of SAINT-MARTIN that he met with the Prefet at his request on Wednesday, October 10 at 2 PM in the TOWN HALL. The Regional Councillor and the Deputy Mayors took part in this meeting also. The Prefet was accompanied by the Sous-Prefet and the Regional Director of Customs.

The Prefet informed the elected representatives that Customs would be installed in SAINT-MARTIN on Thursday, October 11. He stated precisely that this installation would take place whether the elected representatives and the population like it or not, even if "two squadrons of gendarmes" have to be dispatched to the island. He wished for the Mayor's collaboration and asked him to participate in this installation and requested that he

The association **Consensus Populaire Saint-Martinois** was born out of these demonstrations. It conducted a systematic analysis of the structural handicaps from which the island was suffering (education, health, immigration, judicial services, delinquency, cooperation, transportation and traffic, etc.).

A broad political and socio-economic coalition was formed with the aim of obtaining a change of status, aimed at :

- Bringing the decision-making process, which was located mainly in Guadeloupe, closer to the territory, (a preoccupation carried essentially by the political personnel)
- Preserve the historical social and fiscal assets (a preoccupation carried mainly by the socio-professionals)
- Preserve the traditional identity of the island, language and other cultural aspects (concern carried by some politicians and cultural activists, grassroots, "born here" etc)

The institutional evolution

The events of 1990 were only the result of a feeling that had been growing for many years, a feeling clearly expressed, for example, by Dr. Petit (Mayor from 59 to 77), that the commune was being treated unfairly by the authorities located in Guadeloupe, the Prefecture, the General Council and later, the Regional Council.

On November 12, 1990, the first "unity march" took place.

"The first day of unity was the occasion to identify ourselves peacefully... We wanted to affirm without any ambiguity that a special status is the only solution..."

...Saint-Martin is subject to an unusual paradox: it is excluded from the French customs territory but is well within the European Community customs territory..."

It should be remembered that the Single European Act signed in 1986 provided for the completion of the internal market by January 1, 1993.

The application of the Single European Act should logically lead to the establishment in 1993 of a materialized border between Saint-Martin and Sint Maarten...

The concern about this deadline of the Single European Act was shared by the political leaders and the economic world of both Saint-Martin and St. Barthélemy, especially since the so-called Octroi de Mer tax, which did not concern the Northern Islands, was to be reformed. The elected officials of the two northern municipalities therefore drafted a joint resolution dated March 12, 1991

RESOLUTION

In order to preserve the customs and tax exemptions of Saint-Barthélemy and Saint-Martin, and to avoid that new taxes penalize their populations, these two communes must be expressly excluded :

1° - from the provisions of the Octroi de Mer reform, as submitted to the opinion of the Regional and General Assemblies of Guadeloupe.

2° - from the Single Market of the West Indies, on a par with the Department of Guyana.

3° - the scope of application of the Value Added Tax.

Signed :

Albert Fleming, Mayor of Saint-Martin,

LC Fleming, Regional Councilor

Robert Weinum, General Councilor

(municipal bulletin of November 1991)

Daniel Blanchard, Mayor of Saint-Barthélemy

Nordeling Magras, Regional Councilor

Christain Lédée, General Councilor

A second "Unity March" took place on July 7, 1991.

*"...Its objective was to remind the public that the project of Special Status is in gestation...
...It brought together the leaders of associations who were able to support their arguments on the need for the people to unite...to remain one people, to achieve one goal, and to follow one destiny.
...The political leaders of both sides of the island were present in force..."*



...It was an opportunity for politicians...to emphasize the unity of the island and its people, despite the administrative divisions...

Commissioner Vance James and Senator Millicent De Weever also addressed the audience.

The French Constitution was modified in February 2003, and after numerous negotiations and exchanges between the Commune, the Department, the Region and the State, a consultation of the voters took place on December 7th 2003. The majority of votes cast opted for a change of status based on (the new) Article 74 of the Constitution.

The Collectivité d'Outre Mer de Saint-Martin and its institutions were inaugurated on July 15, 2007, and since then has exercised the powers transferred from the former commune of Saint-Martin, the powers exercised by the Department and by the Region of Guadeloupe, as well as powers transferred by the State, such as taxation and transport.

In my opinion, to date, the new status has not yet been used to its full potential, for at least 3 reasons:

- The insufficient preparation of the administrative techno structure necessary to take on the new competences. Neither the increase in the skills of communal staff nor the recruitment of local managers has been well anticipated.
- The political instability linked to the "automatic resignation" of the first two presidents due to problems with campaign accounts.
- The weakness of the support expected from the State (management of local taxation, catch-up plan, "miscalculated" grants, etc.). The senior civil servants of the central administration sometimes give the impression of looking down on the overseas governments (and certain distant provinces). Aren't these Jacobinists trying to demonstrate that any attempt at decentralization is doomed to failure?

It is however reassuring for me to note that certain cultural aspects inherited from the colonial and post-colonial past have remained alive, such as St. Martin English. Haitian Creole, Dominican Spanish and other Caribbean English Creoles, as well as French from France have been added to the linguistic ecosystem but have not made the most "visible" aspect of the local tradition disappear: the St. Martin language.

The island's present is marked by the aftermath of a natural disaster, Hurricane IRMA, and a health disaster, COVID19.