

STARTING

MESE

REDTONE

TARRANTULLA

Or talks

with ANOULLA

WALLTRYOF

AK

Surinamese redtoe symbolizes the following humans:

Three friends from Botopasi

Captain Harvey Amania
Gill Josafath (Alies)
Remfry Eduards

Two artist friends who once stayed in my house in Botopasi

Iris Bouwmeester
Nico Krebs

And my Dutch friend, also the best piranha catcher in the village, who often stays in my house and now partly lives in Botopasi

Frans Bijster

Sr: You caught my eye because you look different. When and how did you end up in my hometown, Botopasi?

AK: In December 2018, I booked a one-way ticket to Paramaribo. That was after a long and intense period of working too much, too hard, and on too many projects, mainly on my now most successful work, *Universal Tongue*. I was curious about Suriname from an early age. Between 2004-2008 I lived in Rotterdam above a Surinamese parcel shop on the Vierambachtsstraat. Living there, I learned about Suriname through my downstairs neighbors who worked in the shop. From that moment, my interest in Suriname grew and has been on my wish list ever since. I really wanted to see 'who' and 'what' the country that spoke to my imagination so much, is really like. On December 10, 2018, I arrived in Paramaribo and immediately felt strongly drawn to go inland, up the Suriname River. Online I found a Dutch artist of Surinamese descent, Isidoor Wens. I read that he originated from the village of Botopasi, but had been living in the Netherlands for the past 45 years. I emailed him to ask if I could get to the village where his roots were through him. In this way I got invited to go to Botopasi with his brother Harry and stay with his sister Celes in a hut next to her house. Isidoor himself was in Holland at the time, but introduced me and, as they say in Botopasi, 'brought me to the village'. To this day I am in touch with the Wens family. Celes is, as she told me once, my mother in Botopasi, I can always go to her.

Sr: Did being an artist bring you – directly or indirectly – to Botopasi? And in what way did that happen?

AK: My art is always with me. I don't see my life as an artist as something that I disconnect from. Nor do I see it as purely a professional practice. I am involved with my work in everything I do, always and everywhere. For me, art is the only thing that is really fixed in my life, also the only thing that I know I always have with me and can hold on to. It is my only real certainty, while everything else in life can always change. Traveling and seeing the world is what I've done for as long as I can remember; as a child and teenager with my family and, from the moment my parents allowed me to go out alone or with friends or lovers, it has always been of great importance to me. I have a huge drive to learn about everything that is different from what I know or where I come from. My curiosity about other cultures and natural environments is boundless. However, talking about Suriname specifically, and in this case Botopasi, I must add that the Dutch footprints in Surinamese history and the Surinamese culture still present in the Netherlands created an even stronger drive. Because the country and the people have a relationship with where I come from, it is a country that attracted me more than others. I wanted to get to know Suriname and especially to be open, in addition to what I had already read and learned, to finally talk to people of Suriname and find how they see its complex history and experience its current connection to the Netherlands. I wanted to

open up to learn everything I thought I knew about the country from the Surinamese point of view, and I wanted to make connections in order to gain understanding from the Surinamese perspective rather than from the Dutch or Dutch-Surinamese side.

Sr: What is your happiest memory of this place and what has been your most terrible experience?

AK: My happiest memory... what a difficult question! I have so many, of course. Let me think, really think hard about this... I think waking up in Botopasi for the first time after sleeping in the hut at Celes's.



When I came out of it, there was a little girl, Sulaimi, then six years old, sitting at the door. I loved her immediately, such a little rascal, we gave each other a *brasa* (hug) and she wanted to see what I had brought with me. Before I knew it she was sitting on my lap with my headphones listening to music. A bit later her little sister Naghesa, then two years old, came over and tried to take the headphones because she wanted to listen as well.



To this day we are the best of *matties* (friends) and I love her whole family. Sulaimi is an incredibly fascinating, creative, funny and sensitive child and as adventurous as I am. For example, once I arrived at her house on a Sunday and asked her mother, Natacha, where she was.



Then she pointed skywards, there was Sulaimi as high up in the mango tree, because she didn't want her hair braided (Sunday is hair-braiding day in Botopasi).



Also, when I once gave her money for the collection in church, she took the money, changed it and only put half in the jar, the other half she used to buy fireworks. She also wants to be an artist and so I have said to her, 'we're going to see if you can go to the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam when you are older'. Then the most horrible experience... Surely there are a lot of those as well, unfortunately. I think building the house was the most painstaking and difficult project I have ever done. I was betrayed and scammed so much, by all kinds of men, during this process that at one point I couldn't see the forest for the trees and at the same time wanted to disappear between those trees in the forest and never come back. The stress, the problems, the betrayal and the feeling of not being able to trust anything, really drove me to extreme inner turmoil. Both physically and mentally I completely lost control; there was a moment when I couldn't move. For a week all I could do was lie down in pain. There was a moment when I thought: I'll cut the posts of my house with a chainsaw and set the whole place on fire. There also was a moment when I freaked out completely; in the middle of the night in the dark, by the river, I fell, twisted my knee and could barely walk. Or a moment when I was desperately crying as I was incredibly stressed and I didn't know what to do, so I ran through the village to my friend captain Harvey. Then the people thought: the white woman has gone crazy because in Saramaccan culture it is not normal to cry, only when someone dies or when you are a child; otherwise you don't cry. But I went to Celes to cry it out and several times during this process of more than a year, Celes gave me lots of support and strength.

Sr: How did you get the idea to build a house in Botopasi?

AK: Celes Wens' neighbor, who is also her half-brother, is called Spenkie Petrusi. One day I was sitting on the grass in his garden and he suggested that I go on a forest trip with him – and that I stay longer than the three nights at Celes's. I stayed longer and moved into a cottage he offered as accommodation for three more nights. We got to know each other better on the wonderful journey through the forest and soon he asked me if I would like to build a cottage on the land around his cabin.



to Spenkie Petrusi... After he invited me to build something on his land, I immediately made it clear that I am an artist – I'm not a tourist guide and don't plan on becoming one. I told Spenkie that I would take on the challenge to make a cottage as a work of art. The purpose of the house, besides personal use for me and my best *mattie* David from Paramaribo, would be hosting artists, creatives or people who come to Botopasi with a specific purpose.



A place for guests who are researching the forest, Saramaccan culture or who need the house as a place for rest, reflection, transformation and connection. Spenkie got excited and introduced me to the head captain of the village and so the idea to make my 'jungle art house' was debated and approved by the village council and families.

Sr: There are hardly any stores in and around Botopasi, how did you get all the materials for the house and all those beautiful things here?

AK: That was quite a job indeed, wow! You can hardly buy anything, except the wood used to build the house, in Botopasi.



That means you have to transport every nail, pipe, gutter, toilet bowl (not to mention the entire interior) from Paramaribo with a van, of course with the roof fully loaded, and then you have to unload everything in the port of Atjoni.



That land belongs to Spenkie and his siblings as well as to Celes and her siblings. They all have the same mother and the land is passed down within the families through the matriarchal line. It is important to realize that in the inlands of Suriname it is not possible to buy land. The land on which my house stands belongs to the Wens and Petrusi families and these are the people I belong to according to the village government.



Only after the approval of the village council, which safeguards the interests of everyone in the village, and with the consent of the families who own the land, is it possible to build a house and to be included and accepted as a resident of the village. I opened discussions about rent and it was agreed that I pay the Wens and the Petrusi families a monthly 'rent for the piece of land'. Celes saves my rent in their family jar that she manages.



The Saramaccan people are descendants of maroons, enslaved people who fled into the forests of Suriname in the late 17th and early 18th centuries and took refuge in the rainforest where they eventually settled in the forests along the Suriname River. After slavery was abolished, the people continued to live in what have become villages in the forest with their own culture, governance and laws. Maroon culture is sometimes referred to as Suriname's piece of Africa because maroons did not mix much with other ethnic groups, thus preserving the West African culture of the enslaved and their descendants. To this day, Saramaccan culture has similarities with, for example, Ashanti culture from southern Ghana. I've strayed a bit, so let's get back

That already takes three to four hours. And then you have to load everything onto a *korjaal* (wooden canoe) and sail for another three hours until you reach Botopasi, where you moor alongside some big rocks on the shore in front of the land near my cottage.



There, you unload all your stuff and drag it up the shore because the river bank is about four meters higher, depending on the water level. If the tide is low, you have to carry it even further; if the tide is high, you can get to land faster. There were no stairs back then, now there are. Just imagine, when it rains you have to carry your things up the wet mud with a group of men. Even then you're not there yet – you still have to carry the materials with wheelbarrows about 150 meters through the grass to get to the house. In Botopasi nothing is paved, the paths are just earth and grass and sometimes covered with roots that can easily trip you up.

There are no cars, so no roads made of stones or asphalt. There are hardly any bicycles and everything is carried in wheelbarrows or on the head.



As construction was nearly completed, I got the idea of hauling in another 800 kilos of broken tiles in burlap sacks. I collected these mostly colorful broken bathroom tiles from various cemeteries in Paramaribo. This stuff is free to take because it is material left over after people turned the graves of their loved ones into very creative mausoleums. The staff at the cemeteries were happy because it meant they had less waste,

which means less disposal costs. And, of course, I was happy too, because I had free construction material from which I created a huge mosaic studio floor underneath the house. In addition to the 800 kilos of tiles, we also needed 50 bags of cement. You will understand that transportation to the house was a tough job and when we arrived the men who helped with lugging constantly shouted, 'wómi', which literally means 'man', but when shouted like that, it means something like 'OMG!'. Although it was extremely hard work, we laughed a lot.



My good friend Alies, with whom I still work around the house, and also David from Paramaribo have helped tremendously with the countless trips back and forth from Parbo to Botopasi. Of course we always forget something.



I don't know how many shopping lists and notebooks I kept and ticked off but in the end, with a very long breath, the house got closer and closer to the point of being a place of wonderful living, as it is now. Of course, there is always something to do because a house in the jungle with so much rain requires a lot of maintenance, also because we treated the Basralocus wood, which was cut and sawn nearby, with natural oil and not with a hard varnish as most people do.



As a result, my house is exactly the color of the trees and I love it. I do sometimes think that's the reason why I have so many of your kind or your relatives in my house.

You, Surinamese redtoe, normally live in the trees and you now think that my house is also just a tree or am I seeing that wrong?



Sr: Imagine if you hadn't been an artist and you accidentally traveled back in time and ended up back in 2018, would you build the house the same way? Or would you do it completely differently?

AK: I can't imagine not being an artist, but if I were to go back to December 2018, there is no way I would ever build a house in Botopasi. Looking back, I know how hard it is and how much stress and emotional and physical *trobbie* (problems) it caused. I just had to deal with that at the time yet in retrospect I would have been better off putting my energy into developing other art projects. If I had known beforehand how intensely difficult and tough this project was going to be... Now, of course, several years later, all the construction and decoration is done and everything is peaceful. I am extremely proud of the house and the connection I have with Botopasi, my friends and the children here and I can experience all the value it adds to my life. Now I can appreciate the energy it has taken me and David, seeing how this house became an ideal place for respectful guests and the people I live and work with in Botopasi.



The house functions as a bridge to connect people with each other and with nature. That contact and exchange is really meant to ensure that, by living together and by being in the jungle, there is a deeper connection: an interweaving of people from different backgrounds and of diverse origins with the unique natural environment of the Surinamese Amazon rainforest.



Sr: What do you think of the people from Botopasi?

AK: Some people I like, some I love and Sulaimi I love the most.



There are also people I feel little for and I assume the same is true the other way around. But if you provoke me to generalize, I would like to say that I admire the people of Botopasi immensely and find them to be very beautiful and strong. I find the people so resilient, it is as if the power of the forest strengthens them, the warmth of the sun fills them with love and the colors of the plants, flowers, insects and butterflies vibrate through them and make them shine. The forest, the river and everything within, below and above seems to communicate with the souls of the people and that makes the people of the Amazon rainforest unique. Time and time again I look with amazement at how the people live in this extraordinary nature. If I had to mention something negative, but which also makes me laugh so hard, it is a reluctance to try new things.

For example, if I cook something, it cannot be good because it looks different. Then I really have to try to 'sell' the food, that the weird looking thing I cooked is actually very tasty. Most of the time I don't succeed – but everyone who knows me knows that I can cook quite well. That's funny, isn't it?

Sr: Botopasi and all other maroon villages in the inlands of Suriname have their own governance. Each village has a community council consisting of a granman (the chief captain), several captains, and the bashas: assistants to the captains. What do you think of this form of government?

AK: This form of government has been around for centuries. It was new to me but, when I looked into it, I found out that there were only male captains and *bashas* on the council. I was kind of surprised by that. How was it possible that in 2019 a group of men represents the interests of the entire village? It was quite difficult for me to remain quiet and low-key, which I felt I should, because I am a guest, living in a culture that does not belong to me. Usually when I sense anything like inequality, I stand up and I really can't be a doormat. When it comes to gross gender inequality (as well as other forms of inequality, such as skin color, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or preference), I find it hard to remain silent. I set out to inquire about this men's council among my acquaintances and friends and asked them what it entailed, as well as why it consists solely of men.



As it happens, I was not the only one who had been wondering about this. On a celebratory day the new captains and *bashas* were appointed. There are seven families in Botopasi and they all select someone to be captain, after that each captain chooses two *bashas*. It is traditional during the inauguration of the new board to congratulate each captain in his or her cabin and bring them treats and gifts. It was good to see that the board was enriched with female captains Sita and Claartje and that, besides many male captains and *bashas*, a number of female *bashas* had been elected to the board. Harvey, a good friend of mine, also became a captain.



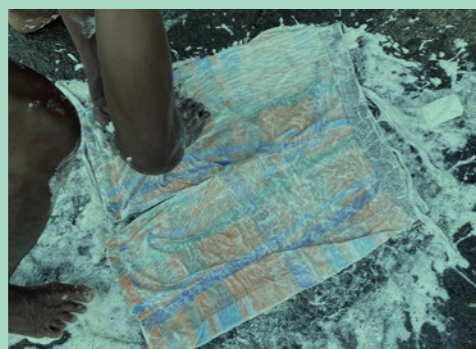
By talking to him, I learned more about the village governance and things going on in the village. But to tell you the truth, I prefer not to get involved.

Sr: With whom did you make a real commitment in Suriname? Do you still feel that way and do you know what makes you feel that way? And have you encountered anyone in Botopasi with whom you would start a love relationship?

AK: Yes I certainly made a real commitment with a number of people. Especially with Sulaimi, as I mentioned earlier. She really feels like my BFF, foster child and little sister that I never had, all in one. Furthermore most notably with David from Paramaribo, whom I have known for as long as I have been in Suriname. He's been through the whole process of construction and helped and supported me a lot. We are good friends and we know we can always count on each other. He helps me where he can and I help him where I can. There is a bond of trust that I know will last forever. I have also known Alies who works with me around my house from the first day I came to Botopasi. Besides doing a lot of work together with him, we have also had fun, and exchanged knowledge about building, art and interior design. If I ever end up in an emergency in Botopasi, I call Alies.



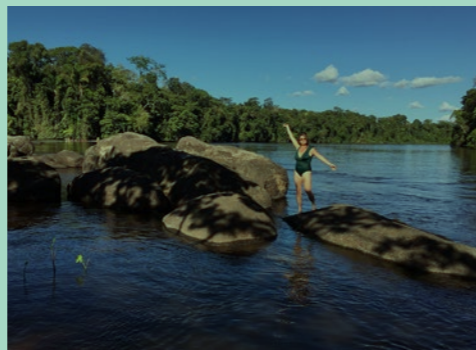
Furthermore, I am *matties* with a lot of the children and that group gets bigger with each visit to Botopasi. I also have about ten adult friends here, like Remfry, Lesley, Pampilla (this name means 'little piece of paper' in Saramaccan) and Harold, mostly men from the village. I find it important to keep good ties with the people I live with and it is nice to have light contact with some people, a chat here and there, an explanation of something they teach me from their culture or nature or just doing something together, like doing the laundry or going to the bakery.



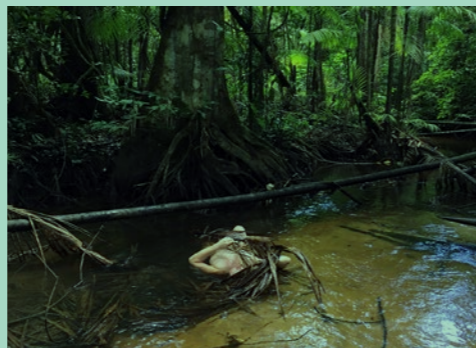
That lightness is also nice, it feels like idyllic village life that I never knew before. I have not had a love affair with anyone from Botopasi and I would like to keep it that way.



I do feel a lot of love for the forest and the Suriname River and the rocks within it. I feel this when I bathe in a creek deep in the forest, when I lie on my back in the middle of the river and float while spreading my arms and everywhere I look all I can see is the sky and the dense treetops.



When the water carries me it feels like all the tension is being pulled out of my head. I transform and come to rest. As if photosynthesis is whispering to me: all is well. It is a bit of a less human-oriented relief which makes me feel strongly connected with nature.



Sr: Do you feel a bond or sense of community with the residents? How and why do you feel that? Do you think the residents feel a kinship with you? On what basis do you think that and how does that bond express itself?

AK: I have been coming to Botopasi for four years now and have a small group of people around me with whom I am close. These are primarily the people I live with and whose names I've mentioned here. The children in Botopasi are the most fun and incredibly endearing. My house is often full of children.



I have Mexican toys as well as books and craft supplies for them to have fun with and I often do creative things with them. At times there are so many children that I almost stumble over them.



They all want to go to my open air pool, which they call a swimming pool and like better than the river where they usually bathe. We often discuss where we are going to bathe because I prefer the river but they prefer the pool with the big shower from which the water falls down. For them that's a much bigger party.



I like to go out alone with Sulaimi, catching crabs together, swimming and jumping over the rocks.



Or we go looking for crazy things in nature, by which she means things that make a special sound if you hold it a certain way or create bubbles if you split open a specific plant and blow on it.



To learn these wondrous things from the jungle from her is a big joy for me. I think many children also feel related to me. When I visit again after a long time away, the *brasa's* are countless. I always make lots of food and my food is different. Funny enough, my inner group of children who know me well are always happy to eat my food. Sometimes I am already baking pancakes at seven in the morning to take to Wómisandu, which is my favorite beach in the middle of the river a few villages away.



Then we all go by boat and hang out, play, listen to music, dance and eat and drink all day; it's always amazing to be there. I always bring way too many treats: chips, cookies and too many sweets. In Saramaccan, they call treats *koekoe* and they call me Anoukoe. After that they say 'dam koekoe', which means something like 'give me a treat'. And from that came *Anoukoe-koekoe*, so this is what the children now call me.



Besides all the fun, I also teach them to swim, read with them, help with homework or we watch a movie on the laptop. Sometimes we even do that in the middle of the forest. After a long walk we watch a movie on my phone. Moving pictures, my bluetooth speaker and my phone that can be under water are most in favor and, of course, technology and the digital world is very enticing here as well.





I clearly remember that the first walk in the village I made with the kids really surprised me. They proudly first took me to the *Digicelpaal* (the telecom antenna) and only then to the biggest mango tree in the middle of the village.



I spoil the children a lot, but sometimes I can't deal with all those children. When the children become too much for me, I have a trick: I make sure I am gone before one o'clock in the afternoon, when school is out and they sometimes come running to my house in groups. I usually escape to my friend Lesley's beach on the other side of the river. When I come back later, they are often offended because where have I been?! If they had come to my house and I wasn't there, they blame me. When this happens I have to laugh so hard, it makes my heart melt. Yes, I really love the kids in Botopasi and I find it very special to feel like a mother to them, even though I am not a real mother myself.

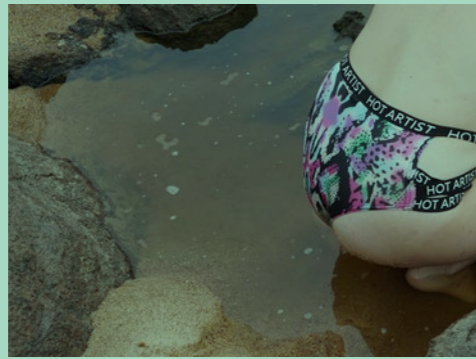


Sr: Do you ever feel like an outsider? Do residents consider you an outsider? If so, where do those feelings come from and how do they manifest?

AK: I have always and everywhere partly felt like an outsider. Back in high school, I never really belonged to any particular group but wasn't really excluded anywhere either. Somehow I was tolerated in being 'different' (whatever that means, because maybe everyone feels that way). Everywhere I go I feel like both an outsider and insider, including in Botopasi.



Anyway, I am an outsider coming from a different country, with a different culture, who looks different and has a profession which is a mystery to many here. People wonder how I can make money with art and what the art is that I make?



Also for example, I do not wear a *pangi*, a brightly colored piece of cloth which serves as a shawl and has all kinds of motifs, with each kind of *pangi* having its own meaning. I prefer to wear a swimsuit with shorts on top.



Only at cultural events, a death or when I go to church do I wear a *pangi*. You rarely see a woman wearing pants here. By returning here again and again, I am slowly becoming more of an insider.



That feeling applies, I suspect, both to me and to the people who know me and with whom I have established friendships and bonds of trust. I am getting more and more included because I keep returning, and opening up and surrendering to how things are and being done here. In my own way I contribute to the village with meaningful things, about which I will say more later.



I feel that I am accepted by the community, for example, because I am invited to spend a day on their *kostgrondje* (field for farming in the forest) to sow or harvest.



I also notice acceptance in the way mothers are handing me their children even if I go far away on a trip with the boat. People often say to David and me that we are 'from Botopasi' because we are accepted to live in the village and then they say, 'You live well in the village'. This is why it is so important to participate in all the cultural happenings. I used to think that the death of a person would be too intimate and that I better stay home because I was not part of the in-crowd and didn't belong to the community in that way. Later I understood that it is insulting if I am living here and don't show up because to the people of the village I am also 'from here' and so I should be present at these kinds of important events.



By now I have learned always to greet, express my condolences and participate by listening and singing during the ceremonies. I now even walk along with the procession when the coffin is carried deep into the forest where the cemetery is located.



On the other hand, I also notice this double role of insider and outsider, because I am allowed to participate in things that are only for men. For example, I once accompanied them into the forest where a grave was being made, which is a male-only affair and is forbidden for women to attend. Yasser, an acquaintance of mine, said I could just come along. We bought a few bottles of beer and a bottle of rum and walked into the forest. The drinks were for the men who were digging the grave. It did feel a little strange because, on the one hand, as a woman, I was the outsider and maybe I was allowed to come along because I am seen as a different kind of woman to the women from here. And on the other hand, I was part of something special that I normally wouldn't have access to, so because I was invited to be part of it, it made me become an insider. When we arrived, the digging men did look with surprise at first and some called out 'wómi', but when they saw me helping to carry the stones, there were some smiles and accepting nods. Alies, who is responsible for me here because I work with him, added, 'She also built a house here, didn't she?' (only men build houses here for themselves or for their wives). 'And she brought drinks to share.'



Sr: The men in Botopasi hunt and fish. I see you hanging out with men more than women, why is that? Do you prefer to engage in activities that are more male-specific in Saramaccan culture?

AK: It is true that I am more among men. This is partly because I have worked with many men through the construction of my house and got to know them through that. Some have really become my *matties*, like Alies and Harold with whom I laid the

mosaic floor, the regular boatmen I sail with and the big brothers of the children who come over to my place. Saramaccan culture is quite gender role-affirming: women cook, wash and raise the children and the men provide food and money. Men are more free to hang out and have a beer and so I encounter them more often. I can talk better with the men here than with many of the women. As you know, I like the forest animals a lot and so I don't like hunting. I could never kill an animal.



I did go hunting with the men once, deep in the forest. Tracking the animals fascinated me: searching for prints on the ground, trying to smell them, listening and watching for irregular movements among the leaves. When an animal is shot, for example a tapir or a *pingo* (boar), it is quite a spectacle to see because they throw such a heavy beast over their shoulders with ease and carry it a day's walk from the deep inside the forest into the village.



When they arrive in the village, the slaughter begins immediately because it is hot here and most people do not have a refrigerator or freezer. The animal is chopped up and sold.



If you want to buy a piece of meat, you have to be quick because it will be gone in no time. When there has been a hunt, I like to watch the animal being dissected and all the blood seeping into the river and turning red. I am usually too late to get a piece of meat but I also don't really need it. A lot of people here never or only occasionally go to Paramaribo and so they really depend on hunting trophies from nature if they want meat. In Botopasi, you can go to *Redoe* (the village store) for basics like canned sardines, toilet paper, cold beer and candy. Behind the store, David works at his bakery. He makes bread buns and sells them from 5:30 in the evening and gone definitely means gone. You never know if you'll be lucky when you arrive for your bread.



Recently I learned how to fish for piranhas. That was quite confronting for me because I always swim freely in the river and then I caught a giant piranha within ten minutes. These piranhas really have enormous sharp teeth, but but hunt other fish and don't attack people.



By the way, I learned piranha fishing from my good Dutch friend Frans, who is by now a child at home in the village. But still, when you see those teeth, my gosh, it's quite gruesome. I will keep on swimming in the river though – nothing has ever happened before. For me the most beautiful fish in the river is the *toekanari* (peacock eye perch). When Frans or Alies catch one, I take quick close-ups of its beautiful scales before it disappears into my oven for supper.



standard. I have to accept that my pronunciation is not perfect. If I can make a joke in another language, as I managed to do for example in Spanish when I lived in Mexico City, I experience that as a small victory. Being able to express yourself with humor in another language is the pinnacle for me and is really the key to getting closer to the unfamiliar. In my house I do have a book to learn Saramaccan and I practise with the children. This past month (December 2022) is the first time I have been less busy in Botopasi. In previous years I was busy building the house, laying the mosaic floor, developing my project *Trans Human Nature* and playing with and caring for the children, all in addition to keeping up with my art(work).



Unfortunately, protected species are also hunted, such as monkeys and 'that black pussy cat' as the children here call a panther. One time on Wómisanu Island, Alies and I saw three Indigenous men in a boat. They had slept on our beloved island and the night before had hunted the green dog head boa. I was allowed to look inside the boat and saw as many as 25 bags, each containing a snake. That really shocked me, not because they were snakes but because these beautiful animals had been captured for trade.



Despite the fact that they spoke a different language, we were able to find out that they were going to sell the animals for 500 SRD (around 20 euros back then). For a moment, I thought about buying them all to set them free, but it was too difficult to communicate and I wanted to be respectful, encountering things like this is also part of respecting their culture.

Sr: How do you communicate with the people in Botopasi? In Botopasi, the people speak Saramaccan. Do you speak it as well? If not, would you like to learn the language to be able to communicate with people better?

AK: It is a dream to be able to speak Saramaccan fluently. Of course, I speak it a little, the basics and I have a level of understanding similar to the level of a child I suspect. Unfortunately I am not a language whiz, even though I can understand foreign languages fairly quickly. I am a perfectionist and I find it difficult to express myself in a language that I have not yet mastered to my self-imposed high



I don't think I've started speaking differently. I have lived all over the world for more than fifteen years and built a full and local life everywhere I've lived. So my Dutch has morphed into a language brew, where the Dutch language is the main ingredient but with a lot of additions from other languages. Saramaccan is very melodious and the tone is very important and I really try my best to adopt that melodious tone when I speak my clumsy Saramaccan but, of course, this causes hilarity with the children. Another example: when I was cooking one day, my neighbor Gausha said, 'Anouk, put a block!' I thought, what does she mean? She meant I should put a little Maggi cube in the soup. She also added that it was impossible to cook food without putting in a cube. People here talk a lot using the imperative, both in Saramaccan and Dutch. 'Anouk, dam wata. Anouk, give me water'. When I ask why people speak, in my experience, in such a commanding way, they say, 'That's just the way we talk.' I suspect this is a linguistic relic of the way the slavers talked (or shouted or screamed).



Sr: I know you've had to spend whole days or even an entire whole week without electricity because there were problems with the generator in the village. How do you cope when there is no power here at all?

AK: Right now I have been here for a week and we have been without power in the village for the entire time. I don't mind and secretly really like it. I have a good power bank and a laptop which I can charge at the neighbors' who own solar panels. And then it's 'wachtie wachtie' (wait a while). I

also have a solar powered lamp and candles. The advantage is that I go to bed at nine and get up at six in the morning.



Living without electricity makes me even more aware of how much electricity we use in Europe. Being here without power makes me realize that dependence on those appliances is all so unnecessary.



Having no electricity makes me feel free, makes me feel grounded, makes me dance with the nature I am in. I like to be guided by nature, by drinking the rain water and waking up with the sun and drinking coffee with her and going to bed when the sun goes down and doing some reading in bed by candlelight.

Sr: I notice that white people are afraid of me and my peers. What about you? Are you afraid of spiders?

AK: Yes, people from the village here always mention that too. It is quite true, because I don't actually know anyone who is not afraid of spiders, and especially of your kind: tarantulas. Some people in Europe keep you as a pet in a terrarium, which to you is a type of prison made of glass. In there you cannot live freely as you do here or make your web inside the *maripa* tree. I wanted to do this interview with you because I am afraid of almost nothing except you and your kind. I want to overcome my fear by talking to you because, after all, you are my neighbor and I respect you and I am a guest in your habitat.



Sr: What kind of creatures have you encountered during your time here? Who are your favorites and who are not, and why? And suppose you could collaborate with one of the local beings, who would it be? What would you create together?

AK: The rainforest is full of creatures. There is so much diversity that I often feel that the wealth of creatures is beyond comprehension. Every day I get up in Botopasi, it's possible I come across a new insect or animal. The most beautiful I find are the blue morpho butterflies, which fly very high in the forest and are very fleeting and fragile. And the sable grasshopper that looks like a leaf. He is funny because he looks like an undercover cop disguised as a walking leaf.



In the time I've been here, I've learned to embrace all insects, even though there are a lot of that sting of course. I sleep carelessly without a mosquito net and I don't get stung much. I deal with insects very differently now than when I first came here because they are constantly around me, in my house, on my skin, in my hair.



There are times I talk to them and basically just leave them alone, even if they come close. If there is a snake or tarantula the children shout, 'Anouk kill it', and I always say, 'No, we just chase them away because they are born here as well.' Then they say, 'Anouk neeheeee' and laugh when I try to sweep them back into the forest with a broom. But the ones who fascinate me most are you and your kind, Surinamese redtoe. You are a tarantula wearing red

socks and, according to certain myths, you possess magical powers. I admire the complexity of your web and at the same time the ease with which you make it. It fascinates me that you are so ingenious that you can spin a thread along which you can also climb up and thus go anywhere you want. I am jealous of your eight legs because I am always busy and I am often short of hands. When I observe you, you make me think. Do you know the famous artist, the late Louise Bourgeois? She said something so praiseworthy about your kind when she said, "The spider is a repairer. If you bash into the web of a spider, she doesn't get mad. She weaves and she repairs it." Your fragile web is simultaneously flexible, strong and won't break if you just pull the right threads. You know this balance perfectly and I take that as an example.

Sr: Do you experience the social and natural environment of Botopasi as liberating? Are there things you experience as oppressive or restricting? Do you want to change them or leave them as they are?

The natural environment of Botopasi functions as a mirror for my emotional life. It can be a quiet place with only the sounds of the trees and plants, crickets, frogs, birds and other insects, but when the wind begins to blow and the storm rises, a turbulent force slowly develops and increases until it reaches a primal climax. For me, the natural environment of Botopasi feels like a psychological roller coaster. If I feel good, then I experience adventure as tranquility and feel enormously free. If I feel bad, for example when I am stressed, down or sad, the forest oppresses me, as if it has a hold on me. At those times, it feels really suffocating because I have nowhere to go, because there are only trees, trees, trees and more trees.

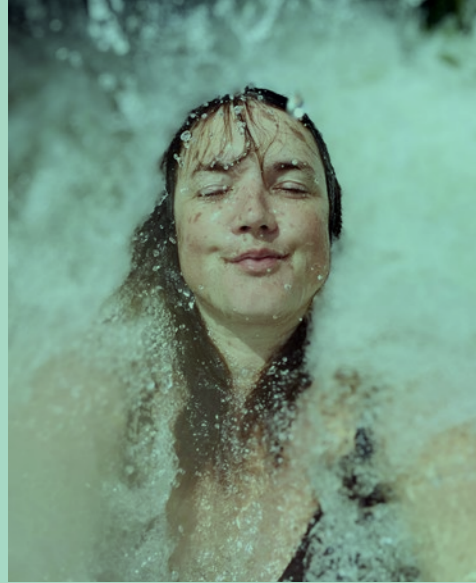


The river is the only way out, but you can only catch a boat early in the morning to the port town of Atjoni.



When this happens the best thing to do is to cool off in the river, sit by the stones for

a while and let the water run down your back and ask it to wash your unpleasant feelings and tears away with the current. Especially when I am sad, I experience the social environment as terribly oppressive. Adult people don't cry here and talking about your emotions is taboo. At emotional moments I can feel very alone and I lock myself up in my home. I have no one to turn to and really feel much more of an outsider than when I am the only white person at a crowded party at night.



It also makes me feel like an awkward Westerner with mental discomfort. It is then that it helps me to learn from this culture because people here are very lighthearted about mental discomforts. My own head is sometimes as complex as your elaborate web, Surinamese redtoe. If I feel good, my head is calm and I am strong, then I undertake things and activate myself. I see my mind as a wave in the river, it can go in all directions but, if you just surrender to the current and let it carry you along, there's really little to worry about.



Sr: In what ways have you changed in recent years? Have your experiences in Botopasi contributed anything fundamental to your personal development?

AK: No one will give me first prize for patience. I have always wanted to become calmer and more patient and I have definitely learned this through living in Botopasi. I have also learned to be flexible. Living in the rainforest and feeling connected to the trees, the plants, the river and being with so many other living things has changed me quite a bit. Occasionally I also use psychoactive substances from nature, such as mushrooms, peyote, ayahuasca and kratom which allow me to feel more strongly in the natural environment. I don't necessarily do this in Botopasi, but I see

the importance of the experience in relation to living in the rainforest.



I have become a lot calmer, more harmonious and less self-centered. I can still react fiercely, intensely or extremely, even though I regard it as very passionate, but I do feel considerably transformed. When you feel just a small part of a much larger whole, are able to zoom out to expand your horizons and learn to be content, you are a much more relaxed person. Life here is much simpler and that has also taught me to be content with less, not everything has to be over the top to experience happiness. This Christmas in Botopasi I celebrated soberly. I ran out of the vegetables I had brought from town and then, as a Christmas present for myself, I bought a cucumber from someone who had just harvested it.



I was very happy with the fresh cucumber and ate it with satisfaction. I really do realize that I have the choice whether or not to spend Christmas without alcohol and a lot of luxury food, but I do make that choice to live here with a certain degree of frugality deliberately. For example, I consciously decided not to have a refrigerator here, even though it averages between 25° and 35° Celsius and fresh vegetables do not last long without a refrigerator. To refrigerate, I use day and night; every evening I put my tray of vegetables outside on the balcony and during the day I bring them back inside.



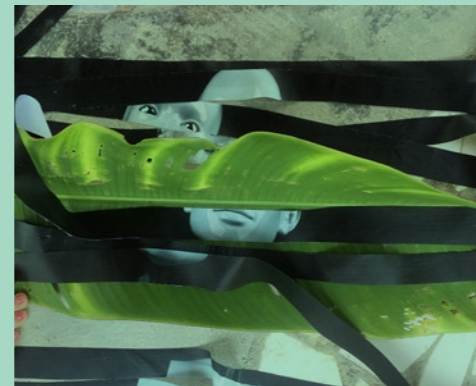
I live here with people for whom the only way to get food is by cutting open a piece of jungle and burning it. They grow their own food on such a *kostgrandje* and whether their harvest succeeds depends on the elements of nature. Some people almost never leave the rainforest and rely solely on the forest and what it has to offer. My life in Botopasi is much more simple compared with my life in Europe and, although I find it is a struggle at times, I also experience it as a relief. Surrendering to what nature and its elements offer me, such as rainwater to drink, a fish from the river, delicious fruits from the garden – this grounds me in the here and now and makes me realize how insignificant I am, which makes me modest and humble. For me it's a privilege to be able to experience this.



I am very grateful and happy with my life in Botopasi, even if I can only get away to that simpler life in the rainforest for a few weeks or months at a time.

Sr: What art did you create in Botopasi? What influence has Botopasi, especially the forest and the river, had on your art?

AK: I see my house as a work of art; that it is actually finished and open to certain people who can stay there, I also see as part of the art project.



In the future, I will show more of it with a website and Instagram account. I have filmed a lot in the past four years and I want to use my video footage for that.



I also developed the project *Trans Human Nature* here, which is my personal observation and reflection on the relationship between the plastic lying around in the forest and or floating around in the river, the technological future and its effect on Botopasi's nature. I was guided by my hypnotic experiences in nature and somewhere between fascination and fantasy made numerous attempts to create staged temporary installations to get closer to and mingle with wild nature. I wondered what would happen if I became plant or stone.



The project shows how humans, our future and our original natural environment mix and mutate and blur into new fertile identities.



Sr: What do you think smells best in Botopasi?

AK: The forest when it has just rained.

Sr: Finally, if the village was talking about you while you are not listening, what would the village say about you?

AK: That white *hanse muyee* (which means beautiful woman and comes from the English handsome and the Portuguese *mulher*), who built that colorful house on stilts 'in the back' of the yard of families Wens and Petrusi. That woman who teaches the children to swim and swims across the river herself or sometimes all the way to the next village Kambaloo. That woman who loves children but has no children of her own. That woman who is involved in Boto-

pasi because she created and donated the village welcome sign.



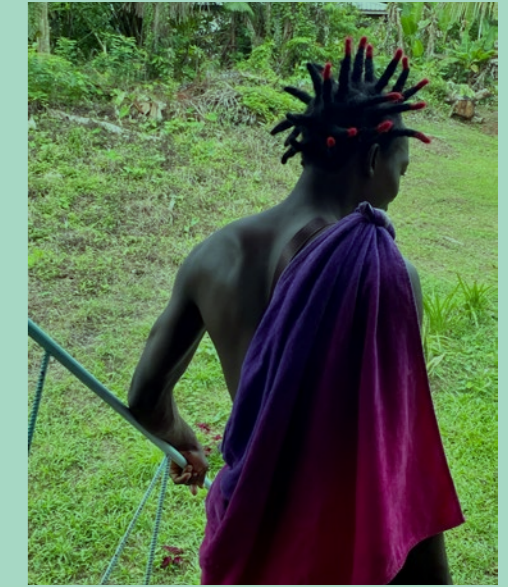
Or because she recently arranged and helped pay for a new (used) water pump for the village when we had been without running water in the village for over two months. That woman who gave the baker a 45-kilogram bag of flour because he had stopped baking bread because, due to currency inflation, flour had become unaffordable and the buns would be too expensive for the villagers to buy.



I think in general people talk positively about me because I have always tried to get involved with the village and the people who live here. I can now say that with certainty, but I do know for certain that this has not always been the case. It took four years to get to this point and, step by step, things got better and better. As I explained earlier, during the stressful and exhausting construction of the house, I wasn't really a normal person and maybe a real bitch at times. I also had to get used to the new unfamiliar culture with its own characteristic ways of doing things, which I found tough and the process of integrating took time. I think people have noticed the difference too. They were so impressed and happily surprised at my open house party where everyone was invited to come by and see the house and eat and drink and dance under the house until late. A few years later, David and I organized a big market with free second-hand clothes and stuff.



More than 100 people came by that day and everything was gone within a few hours. Now when I arrive in Botopasi, Sulaimi is always waiting for me on the stone by the river and when I deliver my gifts or full shopping bags to the people I know best, I can tell by everything that people are happy to see me.



I feel a lot of warmth and love from many people in Botopasi. And when I come home after a long day of adventure, gifts regularly hang on the fence of my house, such as sugarcane, grapefruit, banana, sweet cassava or a delicious piranha on my doormat. That makes me so happy, it really moves me, it almost makes me cry sometimes.

