Part II: Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean

Session 4

Resistance, Survival, Resurgence:
The Caribbean Indigenous Presence, Yesterday and Today

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**Resistance, Survival, Resurgence: The Caribbean Indigenous Presence, Yesterday and Today**

**Videos shown in class:**

  
  Although the indigenous population of the region was decimated by the Europeans, many survived. This programme looks at these survivors from Guyana, Trinidad, St. Vincent, Dominica and Belize, and examines the movements they are making towards exchange, co-operation and united action.

- “Yurumein (Homeland),” by Andrea E. Leland (2014)
  

**The Myth of Extinction**

Theses of extinction have been a hallmark of island Caribbean historiography more than is the case with the mainland. Indigenous island populations were held to be totally extinct especially in the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Puerto Rico), with maybe the sole exception of Dominica in the Lesser Antilles, while mainland Indigenous populations (Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana) have been cast as marginal and on their way to meet the fate of their island precursors. And yet…

**Recognition of Present-Day Survivors**

- States have recognized existing Carib communities in Dominica, St. Vincent, and Trinidad and Tobago.
- In some territories in recent years, some nationalist intellectuals have hailed Amerindians as the bedrock of the modern nation, territorial ancestors whose struggle for freedom could readily be folded into the wider Caribbean quest for independence.
From the late 1980s, Indigenous bodies in Belize, St. Vincent, Dominica, Trinidad, and Guyana cooperated in the formation of the Caribbean Organization of Indigenous Peoples (COIP).

In the Guianas, Indigenous federations have emerged to challenge the erosion of their resource base and to assert rights to their own cultural identities and traditions, often linking themselves to wider South American and Caribbean Indigenous confederations.

Regional Indigenous gatherings have taken place on multiple occasions in St. Vincent, Trinidad, Guyana, Dominica, and Cuba, especially throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

The news media in various territories of the Caribbean have focused greater attention than ever before on the existence and current situation of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous governmental bodies in North America have built supportive networks of exchange with Caribbean Amerindian bodies, including Canada’s Assembly of First Nations, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations.

Agencies of the United Nations and the Organization of American States have recognized, supported, or otherwise worked with Indigenous organizations in the region.

The Internet has witnessed the growth of dozens of sites by and about contemporary Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean.

Many individuals are expressing a new pride in their Indigenous ancestry as they broaden knowledge of their own family and cultural histories.

Ethnographers have documented Indigenous cultural survivals in numerous contemporary Caribbean cultural practices that have previously been taken for granted as simply “local,” generically “creole,” or of “unknown origins.”

In addition, there are more Caribbean Indigenous scholars themselves, including Jose Barreiro and Joseph Palacio.

Territories where, for generations, scholars and commentators had asserted the biological extermination of Indigenous peoples have been shown to not only possess Indigenous descendants, but that such descendants may in fact be in the majority, as in the case of Puerto Rico.

Indigenous Political Resurgence

Indigenous ideologies of renewal and autonomy, in some cases have acquired explicit labels as ideologies, such as “Caribism” in Dominica, or “Garifunaduo” in Belize.

New organizations:
• In Guyana, the Amerindian Peoples Association (APA) and the Guyanese Organization of Indigenous Peoples (GOIP) are two of the more prominent bodies
• In Suriname there is the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders
• In French Guiana, the Association des Amérindiens de Guyane Française
• Where Taínos are concerned, the Indigenous Association of Puerto Rico was formed, and among Puerto Ricans in the U.S., multiple groups exist among which the United Confederation of Taíno People is perhaps the most prominent
• In Central America, the National Garifuna Council and the World Garifuna Organization
• Many of these bodies have joined larger, international, Indigenous federations, such as the Caribbean Organization of Indigenous Peoples, the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, or the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA).

**Indigenous Demographic Resurgence**

- Increased numbers due to increasing birth rates and decreasing death rates, but also through more individuals self-identifying as Indigenous.
- Only rough estimates of current population numbers are available, as most Caribbean states either neglect or explicitly refuse to count Indigenous Peoples as categories in their national census.
- In St. Vincent, whereas less than 40 people in the 1981 census identified themselves as Carib, this figure rose to 1,500 by 1991.
- In St. Lucia, the only surviving community is that of the Choiseul District, on the western side of the Island. It is recognized unofficially. The District would have over 4,000 Indigenous People. The remainder is to be found throughout the Island. The unofficial count would be approximately 12,000 Indigenous People in Saint Lucia.
- In Trinidad & Tobago, there is no “Carib” or “Amerindian” category in the national census, not since the 1800s. The Carib Community in the Borough of Arima, in Trinidad, estimates it represents a total of about 600 people—yet this was only one of 16 Amerindian mission towns. Some have estimated 14,000 people of Indigenous ancestry in all of north-eastern Trinidad, but given the high degree of diffusion through marriage into other ethnic groups, dislocations and movements to areas with available lands, this number could be significantly higher for all of Trinidad.
- Guyana reports one of the largest Indigenous populations, exceeding 55,000.
- One region-wide estimate (Palacio, 1995) placed the total Indigenous population of the mostly Anglophone Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) at roughly 150,000.
- If one consults linguistic databases, such as those of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which span the entire region, both island and mainland, and takes into account all speakers of languages in the main Arawakan and Cariban language...
families, then we have a total that, depending on which territories one includes, can range from 347,000 to 738,380 persons.

- Where extinction was widely assumed and asserted, Puerto Rico, the United States census for 2000 reported a population of 13,336 “Native American Indians”.
- Also see this Chronology of Taíno Cultural and Biological Survival at http://web.archive.org/web/20120922041858/http://www.centrelink.org/EstevezCronos.html

**Indigenous Reserves and Special Territories in the Island Caribbean**

- The Dominica Carib Reserve, or Carib Territory as it is called by its inhabitants, is the oldest official reservation in the Caribbean.
- The government of St. Vincent promised in the late 1980s to cede a 3,500-acre estate to the residents of Sandy Bay (no update on this). The town of Greggs has historically been a Black Carib town.
- In Trinidad, the Santa Rosa Carib Community has officially won support from the state for the grant of 25 acres of land, after numerous previous promises and even a miniscule portion of 5-10 acres previously made available. There are plans for the construction of an Amerindian Village.

**“Mixture” and Peasant Survivals in the Caribbean**

- Caribs were, historically, notorious for their non-belief in any concept of “race” or “blood purity”—even by the early 1600s, colonial reports indicated that most of the Caribs on the island of Dominica were already multilingual, multiracial, and multinational, having incorporated both African and European captives, both men and women.
- Modern-day peasant communities throughout the Caribbean still maintain key Indigenous cultural practices, in terms of agriculture, medicine, and some religious beliefs.
- Among the largest, named, peasant communities are the Guajiros of Cuba, the Jibaros of Puerto Rico, and the misleadingly named Panyols of Trinidad.
- In Puerto Rico, the Jibaros still plant and farm in the native way using conuco (multicropping) and erone (mound cultivation) techniques. All Jíbaro continue to plant by the cycles of the moon, just as their Taíno ancestors did, and they use many of the same plants for herbal and medicinal purposes. Like their ancestors, the Jíbaro continue to cook on a round plate made of clay, formerly called the burén by the Taíno, known now as a fogón.
- “On many islands some people trace part or all of their ancestry back to those who lived here before Columbus’s voyages. On nearly every island, the modern inhabitants relate to the environment in ways they learned from the Indians: they
grow some of the same plants for food and other uses, fish the same reefs in the
same ways, and follow the same seasonal patterns. Also, on nearly every island—even
those where none of the Indigenous people have survived—the Indians are
powerful symbols of Caribbean identity, national identity, and resistance to
Caribbean,” in The Indigenous People of the Caribbean, ed. Samuel M. Wilson

**Histories of Resistance and Rebellions**

- Puerto Rico, the Indian war of 1511; Spain did not fully colonize the interior of
  Puerto Rico until the mid-1800s.
- Hispaniola (Santo Domingo under the Spanish): 1519 rebellion by Cacique
  Enriquillo, who took control of large parts of the southwest of the island for 13
  years.
- 1511: After a decade of armed resistance on Hispaniola, a Taíno cacique, Hatuey, left
  with 400 fighters for Cuba, where he was joined by Guamax, to initiate a general,
  regionalized war of resistance that would carry on to the 1530s, even after Hatuey
  himself was captured and executed in 1512.
- Relatively late colonization of Dominica by the British only in 1763, with the island
  not secured until later.
- January 24, 1654: an uprising in St. Vincent involved Caribs storming a Catholic
  chapel, clubbing the priest, Pere Aubergeon, to death at the altar, and killing two
  more French clerics.
- Mid-1600s: Dominica Caribs, massacred all the French settlers in the island of Marie
  Galante.
- Pere du Tertre reports in his History of the Antilles that at the beginning of the year
  1654 the signal for a total war against the French had been passed from island to
  island; it was one of the bloodiest revolts ever staged by the Caribs.
- Antigua and Barbados, known to have English settlers on large plantations, were
  singled out for attacks by the Caribs. All British colonists in these islands suffered
  the high price wrought by Carib revenge—plantations were destroyed and colonists
  irrespective of age or sex were massacred. Vincentian Caribs returning from this
  punitive expedition discovered along the coast of St. Lucia a British colony engaged
  in turtle fishing—all of the British residents were also massacred.
- St Vincent as the Carib Centre of resistance in from the mid-1600s: “c’est la le centre
de Republique Caraïbe; c’est l’endroit ou les sauvages sont en plus grand nombre”. When
any one of the neighboring islands was in trouble it was to the St. Vincent
Caribs that other Caribs appealed for assistance. Vincentian Carib canoes could
transport hundreds of warriors to any island, from Tobago to Antigua. When in 1634
the French attacked Guadeloupe there was an appeal for a Carib total war. St.
Vincent’s Carib warriors arrived on the spot at a moment’s notice.
1699, Trinidad: Uprising of San Francisco de los Arenales. In this uprising, residents of an Indian mission run by the Catholic Church rose up against the priests, killing all three in the church itself, and then laying an elaborate ambush along the roads leading to the mission in anticipation of the arrival of troops and the Spanish governor of the island, who was due to visit. The governor and his entourage were all killed.

Eastern Venezuela, Carib rebels sent emissaries to the Lesser Antilles to solicit French aid, during the 1669-1673 Carib rebellion against the Spanish. In July 1683, a joint force of Caribs and French drove the Spanish from Trinidad. This rebellion resulted in the Spanish abolition of all enslavement of Caribs in the Trinidad-Orinoco-Guiana region.

The Caribs of St. Vincent, and the Garifuna of Belize

According to some European chroniclers, St. Vincent was called Youlou by its Indigenous inhabitants; others say the name was Youroumei.

A tale (not historically corroborated) of a ship filled with African slaves, breaking apart off the coast of Bequia, involves the story of the Caribs of St. Vincent taking in the survivors, and eventually incorporating them into their society. This tale is also used to explain the distinction between the so-called “Yellow Caribs” and their mixed-descendants, the “Black Caribs.”

Exile of Vincentian Black Caribs: The Black Caribs led the resistance against British invaders, and as they succumbed they and some “Yellow Caribs”, together numbering about 5,000, were shipped to Balliceaux and on February, 25, 1797, placed on board transports and escorted by the HMS Experiment to the coast of British Honduras, specifically to the island of Roatán. From there they fanned out along the Caribbean coast of Central America, where the largest numbers are to be found today in Belize, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

Yet, in 1804, remaining Caribs in St. Vincent, who escaped to the “bush,” continued to harass the British and attempts to capture them were unsuccessful. In 1798 Samuel Clapton, a British settler, was killed by the Caribs—in order to reduce the degree of harassment, the British in 1804 gave the Black Caribs a reservation in the same area as the foothills of Mt. Petit Bornum. Today the village is called Greggs.

On St. Vincent, today the town of Greggs is composed mainly of Black Caribs; Sandy Bay contains the highest concentration of Yellow Caribs in St. Vincent; Greggs’ population is over 1,500 people while that of Sandy Bay is over 1,400. Along with Sandy Bay, other nearby villages also have Carib residents, including Orange Hill, Overland, Sandy Bay, Point, Owia and Fancy. Greggs is primarily Roman Catholic, while Sandy Bay is largely Seventh Day Adventist.

A conference held on Indigenous People in St. Vincent in August 1987 influenced the birth of a new Carib organization in St. Vincent known as the Council for the Development of the Carib Community (CDCC). The CDCC was launched on
December 28, 1988—with six committee members chosen from the six villages North of the Rabacca Dry River, elected by residents of the respective villages.

- In 1995, a Garifuna delegation from Belize travelled to St. Vincent, for the bicentennial anniversary of the death of the famed Carib resistance leader, Joseph Chateauyer (sometimes spelled as “Chatoyer”).
- To this day, Belizean Garifunas maintain the greatest elements of Island Carib culture, including the spoken language, food cultivation and preparation (especially involving cassava), craft work, music, and dances, and they boast of several types of traditional dances, including the Punta, Hunguhungu, Wanaragua and the Sambai.
- On March 18, 2001, UNESCO proclaimed the Garifuna language, dance and music one of the leading “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”. See: http://www.unesco.org/bpi/intangible_heritage/

Some useful references for further reading


