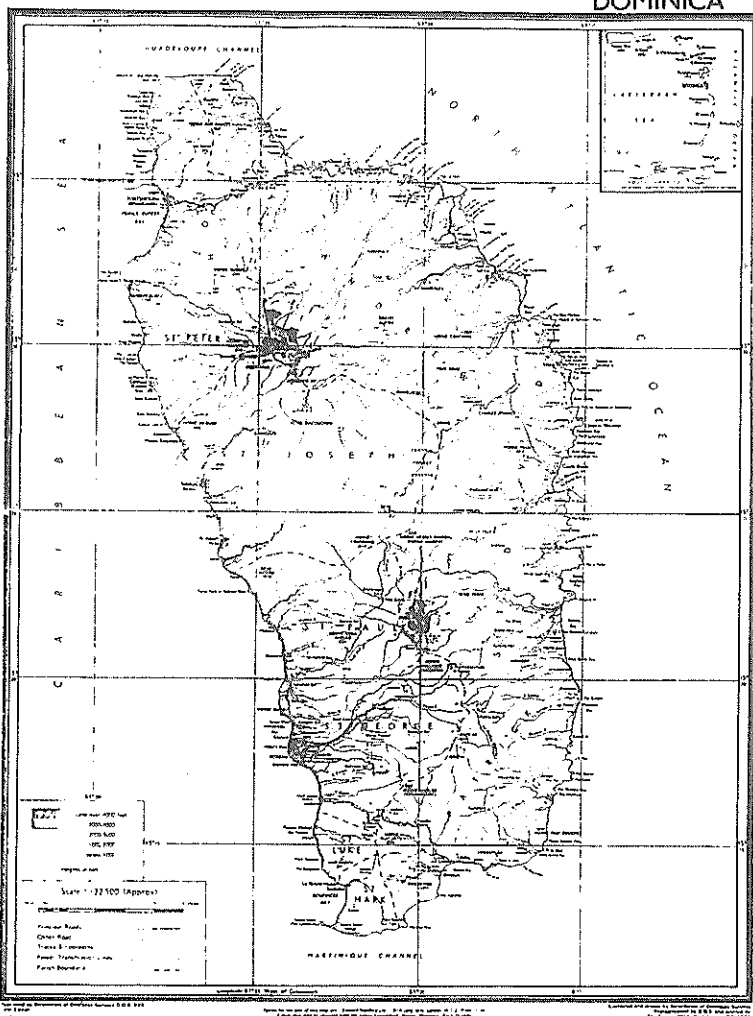


DOMINICA



The Carib Indians of Dominica Island in the West Indies

Five Hundred Years after Columbus

Simone Maguy Pezeron

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To my children,
Christophe, Stéphane, Georges, and Magali

FIRST EDITION

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triangular formation, and the cooking is done above the fire with dry fish or meat to be smoked on a wattle. A frame of sticks supported by four forked stakes is used as a drainer. Very few Carib homes have water tanks.

In terms of the family structure, there are normally father, mother, and children; sometimes, some of the children are from the mother's pre-marital relationships and some are grandchildren, perhaps left behind by a daughter living overseas. Occasionally in the same family group, there are unmarried daughters with their children; this is a more common phenomenon if the mother of the house is a widow. Previously the Carib family typically had between six and nine children, and even today some young couples still have many children; often the girls are pregnant as early as fourteen, although some of them are now beginning to take the contraceptive pill.

Clothes

When the first Europeans came to the islands, the Caribs were naked, with only their hair and the *roucou* as coverings; they mixed the *roucou* with castor oil in a *coui* and used it to make their skin red and protect it against the sun and the mosquitoes. For special occasions or ceremonies like assemblies, feasts, and wars, the Carib wives decorated their men with several black stripes made from the juice of the genipa apple, and they marked circles round their eyes; these black stripes remained for nine days. It was a morning ritual for the wife to put *roucou* on her husband's body and on her own. The hair was long, black, and shiny, worn with a fringe on the forehead; they combed the hair every day with castor oil and sometimes it was tied at the back with red cotton dyed with *roucou*.

Later, when Father Labat met the Caribs, the men wore a rope round the waist, which supported a piece of cloth five or six inches wide and long enough to reach the ground. The women wore a piece

of cotton cloth called a *camisa*, decorated with beads of *rassade* in different colours; it was ten inches long and four or five inches wide, with a fringe. The women also wore a strip of cloth just above the ankle and another above the calf—these were tied tightly so that the calf became bigger and harder than it would normally have been. Father Breton reports how these strips became painful when they were wet so that when the women wanted to cross a river, the men supported their legs and they walked across on their hands. The women also wore belts, necklaces, and bracelets made of *rassade*, a kind of enamel in different colours; on important occasions they used to hang bells on their belts and necklaces to mark the rhythm of the dances. -

A few days after their birth, the Carib babies used to have their ear lobes, lower lip, and nasal partition pierced. In each of these openings, they inserted *caracolis*, which were pieces of jewellery that they usually bought or took from their enemies, the Arawaks; the *caracolis* were a mixture of silver, gold, and copper, usually in the shape of a crescent, with the size varying according to the place where it was to be used. When they had no *caracolis*, they used small sticks or green stones and sometimes the men used parrot feathers. The men's necklaces sometimes bore a flute made from the bone of a dead enemy or from the tooth of an *agouti*. The Carib men had no beard, and they would laugh at Europeans who had red hair or were bald.

Today, the Caribs dress just like other Dominicans, and usually their clothes and shoes are not the best quality; at home and on their plantations, they wear their oldest clothes and are bare-footed. They put on their best clothes and shoes when they are going to town or to church. They no longer use *roucou* or their ancestral jewellery and ornaments; they prefer modern bracelets and necklaces but usually cannot afford them. They still use castor oil to comb their hair. The women have braids or long pig-tails while some men wear their hair long on their shoulders; the men do not have beards and have no hair on their bodies. The women usually wear skirts, and

they only rarely put on trousers. In modern times the babies only have their ear lobes pierced, not their lips or nasal partitions.

Food

The Caribs used to collect things that grew wild: e.g., guavas and hot-pepper, and they also planted other vegetables: e.g., cassava and sweet potatoes. Many food products that are common today were introduced after colonisation: sugar-cane, oranges, breadfruit, mangoes, bananas, cocoa, yams, limes, and pawpaws. In earlier days, only the women worked in the garden, using a stick to turn the soil. The Caribs used to scrape the cassava roots and then they grated them; their grater was a piece of wood with chips of stone set into it. The cassava paste was then pressed into a *couleuvre*, which was a kind of cylindrical basket. This basket was hung in a tree and using a stone, they extracted the hydrocyanic acid. The resulting flour was passed through the *hebichette* (a kind of sieve) and was then spread out on a plate and heated above a fire; afterwards the *cassavas* were put in matatou ready for eating.

The cassava plant was also used to make the Carib drink, the *ouicou*. Pieces of cassava were chewed by the women to begin the fermentation. They then added water and coloured it with *roucou*; the fermentation lasted three days. Sweet potatoes were also used as roots or to make another alcoholic drink, the *mabi*, which had a thirty-hour fermentation period. Today the Caribs still make *cassavas* from the flour and they still use the *hebichette*, but the *couleuvre*, grater, and matatou have been replaced by modern utensils. They no longer make *ouicou*.

The Caribs rarely raised stock, and they were not great hunters. Occasionally they might catch a few birds for eating, but most of their food came from the sea, for they were fine fishermen.

In modern times each of the Carib families has a "plantation" and also sometimes a small garden near their home. The main

products now are the root vegetables: tannia, dasheen, sweet potatoes, and yams. They also grow bananas, bread-fruits, and coconut, and they make their own "cocoa" from the cocoa tree. They drink this in the mornings with a mixture of toloman, which is another root used for flour-making and as a baby-food. For lunch they typically eat their own garden produce with fish or occasionally meat. They raise hens, goats, and pigs, but cows and horses are rare. They have an abundance of tropical fruits like pawpaws, guavas, mangoes, and grapefruits, but only a few of them grow vegetables like carrots, turnips, or cabbages.

Social and Economic Organisation

Social Organisation

Politics

The Caribs have always had a chief. Before the advent of colonisation, there were two Carib chiefs in Dominica, one on the leeward coast and one on the windward coast. When they were engaged in a war, they appointed one chief who was chosen for his bravery and leadership. When the Reserve administrator, Hesketh Bell, proposed the extension of the Carib lot to thirty-seven hundred acres in 1903 and the foundation of the Reserve, the Carib chief was Francois Auguste and he was the first one to receive an allowance, which at that time was six pounds a year. (It is worth noting here that Bell's 1903 creation of the Reserve was not actually legalised until the Independence of Dominica in November 1978 when the Carib council officially received the legal deed for the thirty-seven hundred acres and a "council village law.") Hesketh Bell wrote on page eleven of his 1903 report:

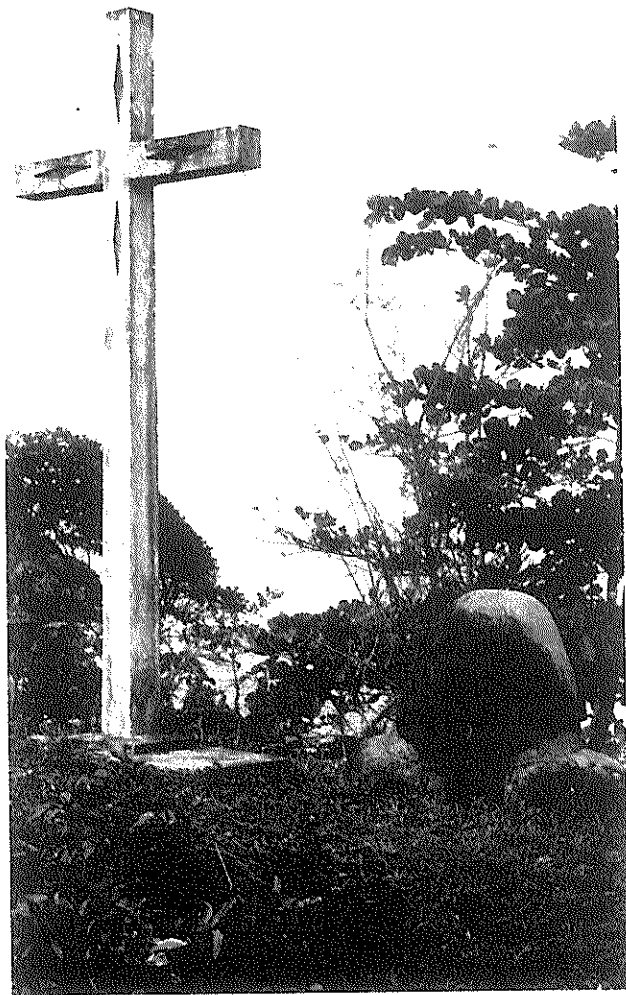
The present headman, Auguste Francois, is very poor, and has not long to live. I doubt if his subjects contribute much to his support, and I believe that an allowance of £6 a year would be gratefully received. The stipend might be paid out of the Crown Land Funds.

A chief was formally appointed, and his role was to advise and direct his people and settle disputes; he was also responsible for the upkeep of the coastal bridle path through the Carib Territory and

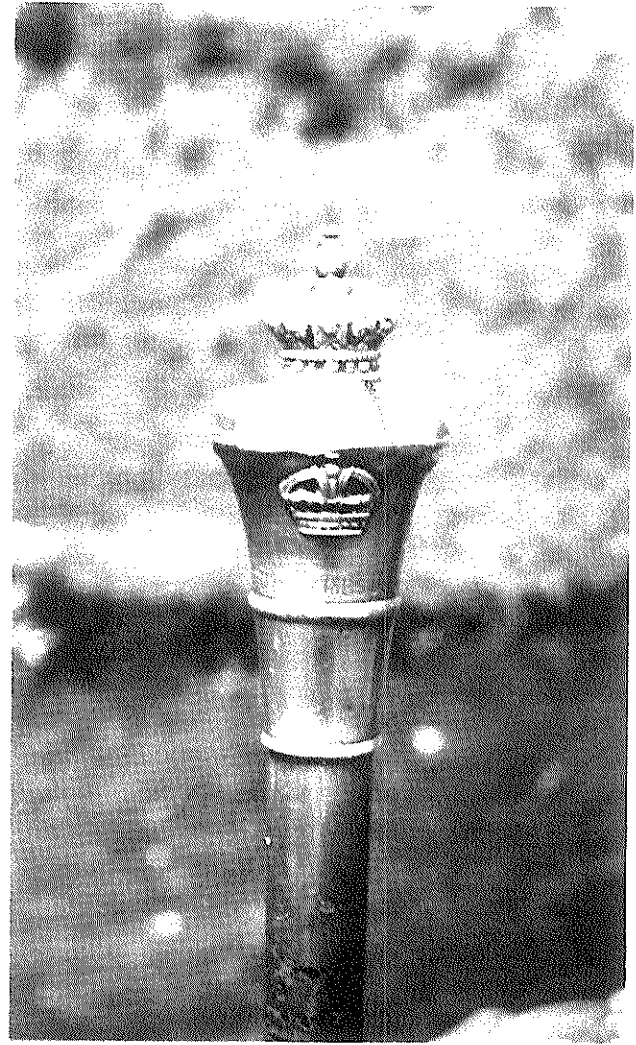
for the registering of births and deaths. The oldest Caribs in the Reserve now explain that the government had taken the map of the Reserve and the *Registers* from Mr. Auguste because his eyes were bad and his wife could not help since she could not read. The *Registers*, which are now back in the Reserve, have been the responsibility of Mr. Arthur Burton in Bataca since 1948; the *Register of Deaths* goes back to 1917 and the *Register of Births* to 1950. It is therefore not possible to find out Mr. Auguste's dates of birth and death, though it is reported that he was an excellent huntsman, hunting birds with bow and arrow with unflinching accuracy.

Mr. Jules Coriette was the first Carib chief to officially receive a staff and a sash to acknowledge him as the chief. People who have seen the staff describe it as big and heavy, looking just like a bishop's crosier; it could be folded and looked as if it were made of gold. The sash had "Chief of the Caribs" written on it in large script. On the date of the inauguration ceremony on 22nd July 1916, a photograph was taken, but at the time of the research visit, Mr. Coriette's adopted daughter had sent the photograph to Saint Thomas to be framed. Mr. Coriette died on 9th February 1933 in Salybia at the age of eighty and when he resigned, he had been replaced by Thomas Jolly John.

Thomas Jolly John became a hero figure for the Carib people. He could read and write well, and he is remembered as a chief who always tried to help his people. Unfortunately, during his time as chief, there was an unhappy incident in the Reserve on 19th September 1930: the road to Roseau on the western side of the island was not completed until 1960, so the Caribs were still in the habit of going to Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe, and Martinique to sell wood and return with rum, sugar, and tobacco. It was suspected that the Caribs were engaged in smuggling and the Dominican police were sent into the Reserve; tension rose and in spite of the chief's attempts to avoid confrontation, there was an ugly clash and the police opened fire on the crowd of men and women, killing two



Monument and cross to the heroes



Carib chief's staff

and wounding others. On the following day, Jolly John was arrested and suspended from his duties. The police went to his office and confiscated his staff and sash; from that time the staff and the sash disappeared without trace together with Jolly John's official map of the Territory. Since this incident the Caribs have never had an accurate and definitive map of their land.

Even today the Caribs refer to the 1930 incident with great sadness and bemoan the injustice of it. When Jolly John was released, his people still had great respect for him and he was saluted as the chief until he died of tuberculosis on 30th April, 1941 when he was fifty-five years old. The report, which was written about the incident by a commission appointed by the governor of the Leeward Islands in July 1931, shows that the events and the circumstances surrounding them were in no way clearly defined. The Caribs, even in their prevailing condition of poverty, tried to commemorate the date by building a monument to their heroes, a big, well-shaped stone supported by two smaller ones close to a big cross near the cemetery; they had the intention of having an annual celebration in honour of the victims. After the incident a police station was built in the Reserve; initially it was near the church, but now it is close to the main road in Salybia. There are four Dominican policemen at present in office. The oldest Caribs, still alive, regret this period of their history when there were restrictions on who could stay in the Reserve: foreigners were not allowed to sleep there and if a Carib woman wanted to marry a black man or any foreigner, she had to leave the Territory because it was considered that Negroes or outsiders would want to establish domination as soon as they settled there.

After the 1930 incident, there was no official chief and the government appointed instead a five-member council headed by a chairman. Fortunately, the Caribs were allowed to have a chief again from 1953, which meant a gap of more than twenty years without a chief. The new chief did not have the same staff or sash, since the originals were never seen again. Instead he was given what

one Carib described as "an ordinary stick to scold dogs"; this replacement staff is a wooden stick, one metre long, with a crown at the top in silver, which bore the inscription "Chief of the Caribs, Dominica." The other section is also in silver and is about ten centimetres long. By this time things had changed in the Reserve. Black people entered the Territory more regularly after Jolly John's period of office and according to some Caribs, the subsequent chiefs gave other Dominicans anything they asked for in exchange for money and rum. The system at this stage was to elect a chief for a five-year period, and the elections were controlled by the government; four councillors were chosen to help the chief.

Simon John was chief in 1953 for six months and after him, Whitney Frederick was in office from 1953 to 1959. Jermondois Francis was then chief for thirteen years before resigning through illness; his sash was grey and purple, but he used the same staff, which had first appeared in 1953. Nasclem Frederick was chief from 1972 to 1975, and he was followed by his brother, Faustilus Frederick, until 1978. In October 1978 there were supposed to be elections again, but at the same time, Dominica was preparing for its Independence, so Faustilus Frederick remained as chief until March 1979. Everyone can vote from the age of eighteen, and the elections are organised by the government. In the reserve there are two polling stations; everyone has access to the results and the whole thing is open to public scrutiny.

In the elections of March 1979, one of the candidates was a man called Hilary Frederick, who was to be the youngest Carib chief, the first Carib to be a senator in the House of Assembly and the most educated Carib of his generation; he was only twenty-two years old when he was elected as chief. In spite of his name, he was not related to the other Frederick chiefs. He went to the Salybia primary school and then at the age of sixteen, he had the opportunity to get to a high school in the United States. From the time of Independence, the chief's period of office was still to be five years, but there were to be six rather than four supporting councillors. The

elections were dissolved in 1980, and Hilary Frederick was reelected chief for the term of five years. In fact he remained chief until 1984.

It is edifying to list some of the achievements of this young chief, for he did much for his people in a short period of time. During the five years he spent in the United States, he visited Indian reservations. When he returned to Dominica, he said, "I realised that there were priorities that should be taken seriously: education, health; but before that, I believe that there should be a strong council."

He wanted to have councillors who were responsible for a particular portfolio and also for an area of land in the Carib Territory. He was disappointed when the councillors refused, saying they were not being paid to carry out such responsibilities (they receive twenty Eastern Caribbean Dollars per month) and their predecessors had never undertaken such duties. For this reason and also because of a lack of finance, very few projects for improvements were put in motion. After Hurricane David in 1979, Hilary Frederick was assisted by an American, Arthur Einhorn, to travel to the United States again to seek aid for the Carib people in Washington, D.C. Einhorn was the man who had earlier made it possible for Hilary Frederick to study in the States.

The young Carib chief went to the OAS (Organisation of American States), where he met the secretary general; they spoke of development projects in areas like agriculture, fishing, health, and education. The Carib people received assistance from the OAS in respect to poultry, goats, and other livestock.

Hilary Frederick also visited the offices of "Save the Children" in New York where he met the vice-president; they discussed various possibilities for support and immediate assistance for the Territory, which had been devastated by Hurricane David and as a result, two months later, Mr. Allan Brown was sent to Dominica to help in the Carib Territory: he helped to lay a pipe bringing water from one of the springs down to the school at Salybia, he helped to

introduce a new improved kind of stove, made of sand and clay, which was much more economical in terms of fuel, and it was also arranged that funds were made available to the Carib Council for the purchase of essential furniture for their office.

However, the largest and most significant project that the Save the Children supported was the foundation of a development centre, which is now of great value to all the inhabitants of the Reserve; it is comprised of an administrative office and a library in one building, shaped in the style of a *mouina*, and outside there is a kitchen with a cement tank. The technique used for construction of the tank is a new and economical one, which provides a useful model for the Caribs. The kitchen is built of earthen bricks, with bamboo and cement on the sides. The whole project of building the development centre illustrates to the Caribs new and cheaper ways to construct their own properties. In November 1982, some Haitians were invited to come to the Reserve to teach the Caribs about the art of using banana fibre for various craft-work; they stayed for four months training the local people.

In September 1982, while he was attending a conference in Geneva, Switzerland, Hilary Frederick met Mr. Stephen Guskin, the Chairman of "Plenty," to whom he had already written; they discussed various aid schemes for the Carib Territory and in July 1983, four members of "Plenty" came to the Reserve with a windmill and solar panels to light up the school. To help the fishermen and the boat builders establish their cooperative, the "Plenty" representatives brought them woodworking tools, two outboard motors, sailcloth, and a large fishing net. At the school in Salybia, they built an extension, which consists of a science laboratory, a woodwork workshop, and a home economics classroom.

When he was in the United States, Hilary Frederick also went for assistance to the Office of "American Indian Affairs," and in 1980 the Caribs received a school bus to transport pupils to the high school. This was seen as a significant advance, since it was clear

that the provision of appropriate education had been of vital importance to the young chief himself and his emergence as a political leader of his people.

While Hilary Frederick was a senator in Mr. Oliver Seraphin's government, he had successfully petitioned for the provision of transport for members of the Carib Council. In practical terms, however, the chief and his councillors have only limited powers; the Dominican government has final sanction on all matters and if a new by-law is to be passed, it must always be with government approval. Since 1975 the Caribs have had a parliament representative. The present Carib chief, Irvince Auguiste, was elected in 1984 and reelected in 1989.

The main problem that the chief and his councillors encounter inside the Reserve is land disputes. The Caribs possess the land in common but not the production related to it, which is supposed to be inherited by the sons; each family has a piece of land to cultivate, but over the years, there are often problems over the actual limits of each plot. In the Carib Reserve Act No. 22 of 1978, the old Carib custom relating to who could stay in the Reserve has been lost; we have already seen that while a Carib man could marry a non-Carib woman, a Carib woman could only marry a non-Carib man if she was willing to leave the Reserve, and moreover, her children would not be considered to be Caribs. According to the 1978 Act, these old customs no longer hold sway; it sets down three conditions that are necessary for someone to be categorised as a Carib:

- to be born on the Reserve
- to have one parent who is a Carib
- to be resident in the Reserve for twelve years or more

The present party in office, the Freedom Party, considers that Carib people are Dominicans just like all the other inhabitants of the island, but many of the Caribs still want to preserve their identity and their unique Carib features. The Caribs feel that miscegenation

was necessary to avoid extinction but that it should stop now while there are still a good number of people with Carib features. Otherwise, in a few more years, the Caribs will disappear as a group and their villages will become the same as any other Dominican village.

The consequences of a loss of Carib uniqueness would affect the whole of Dominica as well as the Caribs themselves, since the island relies economically on tourism and the vast majority of tourists who come to Dominica want to see the last descendants of the original Caribs. Hopefully, through a process of education and increased awareness, all of the people of Dominica will soon realise the cultural significance of maintaining the Carib Reserve.

The income of the chief is equivalent to that received by an ordinary Member of Parliament in the Dominican system, which at present is 690 Eastern Caribbean Dollars per month. By Dominican standards, this is quite a reasonable income. From 1978 the Carib Council has received an annual grant for the purposes of administration and road maintenance. Nowadays it is EC\$21,000 per year. In addition, they receive EC\$1,800 as annual rent on some land, which they lease to "the Cable & Wireless Company."

Education

The Caribs are still among the least well-educated of all the people on the island. The first school was created by Father Challet in Salybia in 1902; it was made of *yataou* leaves, and Hesketh Bell described it in his report written in the same year:

When I visited the Carib settlement a short time ago, I found 78 children in the school that had just been established there . . . though the school had only been opened a few weeks, some of the little ones, who could not have been more than five years old, already knew their letters. This was more remarkable, as not one of them could speak a word of English.