
The Kalinago – The ‘Island Carib’

It was the Europeans who called these people the Caribs, for that is not what they called themselves. While Christopher Columbus was still on his first voyage he picked up the word, or something like it, from the Tainos of the Greater Antilles.

The earliest mention of the Caribs is that made by Columbus in his journal on 26 November 1492: ‘All the people that he has found up to today, he says, are very frightened of those of *caniba* or *canima*.’ Note that it is mentioned as a place where people live rather than the name of the people themselves. In other statements the Tainos may have been using the term to refer not to a specific ethnic group but to any hostile band who attacked their villages, particularly those who came from the small islands to the east of where they were in Hispaniola. Again on 13 January 1493, the journal notes: ‘The admiral also says that on the islands he passed they were greatly fearful of *Carib* or on some they call it *Caniba*, but on Española, *Carib*.’ This was modified in later Spanish writing to *canibal* and in other texts to *caribi* or *caribe*. Once the word hit the printing presses of Europe and became common parlance, the name ‘Carib’, like ‘Indian’ and ‘West Indies’, even if based on a mistake, was to remain for ever more.

One hundred and fifty years later in Dominica, the French priest Fr Raymond Breton who lived among the ‘Caribs’ recorded the people’s own name for themselves as *Calliponam* in the women’s speech, and *Callinago* in that of the men. Another ancient Arawakan language term for them was probably *kaniriphuna*, or *kallipina*, origin of the term *garifuna* which is what the ‘Black Caribs’ of Belize call themselves. Because the mainland immigrants who entered the Windward Islands in about 1400 were essentially a male-dominated band, who took brides and fathered a new group within the islands, it would be accurate to use their name in the men’s language: *Callinago*.

In Fr Breton’s day, the letter ‘k’ did not exist in the French language so the printers of his ‘Carib Dictionary’ used ‘c’ throughout. The word is however better represented phonetically as *Kalinago*.

But things were to get even more confusing. In the twentieth century, anthropologists needed to differentiate between the ‘Caribs’ on the islands

and their supposed ancestral people on the mainland. To do so they coined a new term: 'Island Carib' when referring to those of the Lesser Antilles and maintained 'Carib' when referring to those on mainland South America. To simplify and indeed to try to correct matters, I shall be referring to this distinct group of people, who emerged on the Windward Islands and Guadeloupe, by the name which they called themselves: the Kalinago.

The Kalinago control of the Windward Islands lasted from about 1400 to 1700, with the last of them holding on to Dominica and St Vincent for another twenty or thirty years before finally retreating to the most inaccessible parts of those islands in the face of English and French colonisation. In St Vincent they mixed with escaped African slaves and held out against the British until 1796, when some 5,000 were deported to the island of Ruatan off Honduras and moved to the area of what today is southern Belize. In Dominica they concentrated themselves on the isolated parts of the north-east coast where they were eventually granted 3,700 acres of land by the British in 1903. They were the last of the Amerindians to enter the region and they were the last to survive.

Our knowledge of the Kalinago is based almost entirely on the written reports of European observers. The Kalinago had arrived in the islands from South America less than a hundred years before the Spanish arrived from across the Atlantic. The first encounter of the two groups was on 4 November 1493 on Guadeloupe, the day after Columbus had sighted Dominica on his second voyage.

Unlike the Tainos, the Kalinago had arrived in the islands recently enough to have retained traditions of their mainland origin. They were accustomed to making trips back and forth between the mainland and the Windward Islands. They explained this to European missionaries and told them that they had conquered an ethnic group named Igneri or Eyeri. Their raids were aimed at bride capture. The capture of women of an enemy group was a feature of raiding and warfare among tribes who were traditionally in conflict with each other. Such inter-tribal raiding was common to several South American forest tribes. A well-known example would be the Yanomamo of Amazonia. According to theories of primitive marriage in all races, the earliest form of marriage was bride-capture, when shortage of females obliged early man to seek his mate in war.

By the time Columbus arrived, the Kalinago were raiding Taino villages on Puerto Rico to obtain additional wives. The admiral found over twenty Taino women when he visited Kalinago villages on Guadeloupe during his second voyage, and returned them to their homes on the Greater Antilles. This taking of captives by one Amerindian tribe from another was a method of avoiding inter-marriage among the small communities. The Kalinagos, like other tribes on the mainland, integrated their captives as

wives or, in the case of males, as *poitos* (sons-in-law) into their kinship network.

Taino and Igneri men were killed in these bride-capture raids and often a limb was severed from the body of the bravest warrior, both to strike fear among his people, and to take back home as a trophy and proof of victory. The Kalinago, like the Taino, also preserved the bones of their ancestors within their houses in the belief that the ancestral spirits were watching over them and protecting them.

When Columbus's men entered the Kalinago villages in Guadeloupe they reported 'we found great numbers of human bones and skulls hanging in the houses as vessels to hold things. Very few men appeared and the reason was as we learned from the women that ten canoes had gone to raid other islands.' From that day onwards the Kalinago and their descendants stood accused of being cannibals.

The vast majority of early chroniclers did not explore alternative interpretations of the circumstantial evidence of finding bones and limbs. They did not consider the alternative possibility – that the pieces might have been intended for use in rituals.

Some later visitors, however, such as John Scott in his *History of Grenada*, contended that if there was cannibalism at all it was a ritual. 'They rather eat out of Mallice, chewing only one Mouthful and spitting it out againe, and animating one another thereby to be fierce and cruell to their Enemies . . . and it hath been a great mistake in those that have reported the Southerne Indians eat one another as food.'

Columbus's verdict had been influenced by the Tainos who told him on his first voyage that those of 'Caniba' 'travel through all these islands and eat the people they can take.' From 'Caniba' a new European word was created: cannibal.

But no eyewitness account exists of cannibalism actually taking place among the Kalinago. Significantly, six men from Columbus's fleet were lost wandering in the jungles of Guadeloupe for four days but returned unharmed and uneaten. A detailed study on the subject done by American anthropologist Robert Myers concludes: 'Available data do not allow an absolute conclusion, but all the evidence is weak, circumstantial, and largely second-hand. If the Caribs were on trial for cannibalism, they would be acquitted.'

The subject of warfare and cannibalism has so dominated historical writing about the Kalinago that the positive aspects of their society has been largely overlooked. Yet on that first meeting, Dr Chanca, the surgeon of Columbus's fleet, admitted that he was impressed.

'The people seem to us more civilised than those elsewhere. All have straw houses, but these people build them much better, and have larger stocks of provisions, and show more signs of industry practised by both

men and women. They have much cotton, spun and ready for spinning, and much cotton cloth so well woven that it is no way inferior to the cloth of our own country.'

The Kalinago were, like the other Amazonoid tribes from South America, handsome, graceful people with a light brown complexion and long, straight black hair which they oiled, combed and decorated with ornamental bands and feathers. They wore no clothes but like the Igneri and Tainos sometimes tied a strip of narrow cotton like an apron to hang from their waists, usually on festive occasions. Each day they would bathe and rub each others' bodies with bright red 'roucou' or annatto and use white, black and ochre colours to draw patterns on their skins. Dr Chanca and others reported that they stained around their eyes and brows 'which I think They do for show. It makes them look more terrifying.' They also pierced their ears and lips in which to place ornaments of shell and bone. The *caracoli*, a crescent-shaped ornament of hammered gold or copper was a mark of distinction among the men. The women wore tightly woven cotton bands around their lower legs. 'One below the knee and one at the ankle. In this way they make their calves large and constrict the knee and ankle. They seem to regard this as attractive, and by this feature we distinguished the Caribs from the others,' noted Dr Chanca. The mothers continued the Igneri custom of flattening the foreheads of their infants while their skulls were soft. It was thought that this formation was more handsome and made the skull stronger.

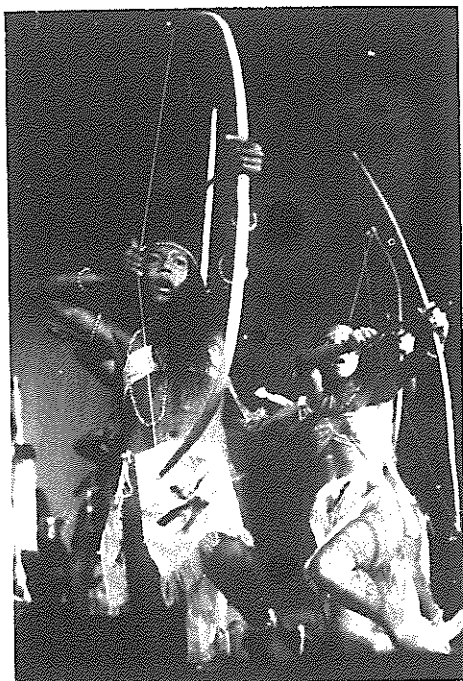
The Kalinago religion was a simple adaptation of the Igneri ancestor and nature worship through *zemis*. They believed in the evil spirit *mabouya* who they had to placate to avoid harm. The chief function of their shamans or *boyez* was to heal the sick with herbs and cast spells or *piiai*, a term still used in Dominican spiritualism. Kalinago youth had to undergo strict and painful initiation rites to test their resilience and bravery.

The invading Kalinagos appear to have imposed the masculine aspects of their ancestral culture on the domestic life of the preceding Igneri culture. The males of each village lived together in the large central men's house, from which they visited their wives in surrounding family huts. The Kalinago chief was headman of the district around his village. French visitors in the mid seventeenth century noted that Dominica was roughly divided into different zones of control and under chiefs such as Kalamiena of Itassi (Vielle Case) and Ukale of Sairi (Roseau). The chief might gain his position through right of birth, but more often he was chosen by his peers for his bravery. He led their raids and could be changed depending on his performance. Their judicial system was very simple, those who were wronged righted their wrongs by taking revenge.

They continued to practise the Igneri form of agriculture, raised the same crops and gathered wild fruit and vegetables. As the Kalinago came from

the rain forest areas of the Guianas they appear to have favoured the moist, mountainous, larger Windward Islands which had the kind of environment and forest resources they had utilised in their homeland. As in the Guianas, the men burnt the trees and prepared the land and the women dug the holes and planted.

Hunting with bow and arrow was a sport as well as a necessity. For this they used non-poisonous arrows made from the *roseau* reed and tipped with sharp wooden heads. For war they made arrow heads of sharp fish bone and smeared the tips with poison from the machineel tree. Sometimes they fixed blunt plugs on the arrows to stun birds wanted alive. They captured parrots and tamed them as pets. They ate agouti, iguana, birds and fish.



The Karifuna group, performing above, was formed in 1980 by young people in the Carib Territory to try to trace and recreate Carib cultural patterns.



The last stages of digging out a gommier tree trunk for a canoe. Stones, fire and water will then be used to broaden out the canoe before adding a lee-board or 'bordage.'

But more important to the Kalinago than hunting and agriculture was fishing and the sea. Here they excelled. They knew the location of islands by heart and had their own concept of the constellations of stars in the night sky which they used for navigating in the open sea. Today we still use the type of canoes in which the Kalinago crossed these waters hundreds of

years ago. Carved out of whole tree trunks they were of two kinds. The smaller, called *couliana* was at most twenty feet long and pointed at both ends. This type was only used for offshore fishing and short trips and could hold few people. The bigger craft was called *canoua*, the word we still use today, and the more significant of these were said to be up to 50 feet long and could carry 30 to 40 people. These vessels were dug out of the solid trunks of gommier trees (*Dacryodes excelsa*), using fire and stone gouges. They were stretched open by a combination of water and stones on the inside and fire on the outside, after which the hulls were kept in position with wooden ribs.

The complete equipment of the early Kalinago canoe included paddles shaped like narrow shovels, a long pole for navigating over reefs, rope made from *maho* bark, a stone anchor and a calabash for bailing out water. It was in the large canoes that the Caribs went to attack other islands and made long trading voyages and fishing and gathering trips. They also constructed rafts out of Bois Canon (*Cecropia peltata*) called *pwi pwi*, which are still popular today.

The Kalinago had a great variety of fishing techniques and their fishing grounds extended well into the Leeward Islands: to the reefs of Guadeloupe, Antigua and Barbuda for shellfish, lobster and conch; to Mariegalante for crabs. In the rivers of Dominica they knew how to poison the rocky pools with pounded leaves of *kunami* or *nivwage* and other plants which stunned the freshwater fish. Using bows and arrows they shot fish close to the surface. Using baskets they scooped up millions of tiny *titiwee* on their seasonal run up-river from the sea.

While the men were fishing and hunting the women planted, prepared food, spun thread, wove hammocks and made earthenware vessels for holding food and liquid. Baskets were woven from the dried outer bark of the *larouma* reed. Communal meals were eaten as the need arose, the men simply dropping their catch at the entrance of the house for the women to clean and prepare. The usually sober Kalinago got very drunk on *ouiku*, a manioc beer which was prepared by the women chewing and spitting out the manioc into large earthenware jars. Enzymes in their saliva began the process of fermentation and the *ouiku* was ready after a few days. This was consumed at festivals and pre-raiding feasts and on such occasions their principal amusement was dancing, telling mythical stories and recalling the injustices of their enemies and the righteousness of their revenge.

Language and names

The Kalinago or 'Island-Carib' language was originally assigned to the Cariban family of languages, but linguists have found that it, like Taino, is a member of the Arawakan language. The Taino, the Igneri and the

Kalinago languages therefore all originate from a branch of the type of Arawakan which was spoken on the mainland areas from where they came. Variations of these languages were different in different parts of the Greater and Lesser Antilles but they all came from the same source. To use an example in today's context: raw, basic Barbadian dialect is different from Jamaican dialect, but both of these dialects are descended from a branch of the English language which was introduced over 300 years ago. Yet a Bajan would not like to be classed as a Jamaican and vice versa.

In the case of the Kalinago, they had been too few in number and had not been in the islands for long enough to change the language and culture of the Igneri completely. They were immigrants into the Windward Islands, gradually assimilating themselves into the Igneri population. The Kalinago succeeded in changing the name of the Igneri to their own and in modifying certain aspects of their language and culture. The men used their own pidgin language among themselves and as a 'trading language' throughout the islands. The women continued to use their Igneri-Arawakan language and their descendants used a mixture of the two. But after initiation the males preserved their 'men's language' when they were together as a sign of adult Kalinago manhood. By the time the Europeans began to record the Kalinago language things had changed again as the language was further modified by Taino refugees who retreated into the Windward Islands, fleeing the horrors of the Spaniards in the Greater Antilles. The language which was recorded is called 'Island-Carib' by modern linguists.

This confusing language pattern may be the cause for the mix-up over the original name of Dominica. The day after Columbus named Dominica, his men reported that 'One of these Indians told us that . . . one of these islands, called Ceyre, . . . is the first we saw but did not visit . . .' What the Spaniards did not realise is that the Arawakan word for 'island' is *kairi*. In the Taino language it was *caya* or *cayo* and in Island-Carib it was *acaera*.

When Fr Raymond Breton lived among the Kalinago in the 1640s he found out that their name for Dominica was actually *Wai'toucoubouli*, meaning 'tall is her body'. The people who inhabited the island were called *Wai'toucoubouli*. The names they gave to their settlements, although changed a bit by French influence, are still in use today: Kalibishie, Koliho, Makusari, Mero, Kulibistri, Layou, Taro, Batali, Bataka, Bwetika, Sari-Sari and Ouanari are just a few. There were other place names which have since gone out of use. Vieille Case was Itassi, Portsmouth was Uyhao, Roseau was Sairi, La Plaine was Kulirou and Salisbury was Baoui. The original two languages became fused over the years and were eventually replaced among the descendants of the Kalinago by the mainly French-influenced Creole. But in terms of our names for plants, wildlife and places, modern Dominicans are still the largest users of Island-Carib words. One of the last more fluent speakers of the ancient language died in 1920, but luckily, some of

it and a number of old Kalinago legends have been preserved for us by Douglas Taylor, a British anthropologist who spent his lifetime studying the Kalinago/Island-Carib culture.

Tales and legends

For the early Kalinago the moon was a man with a dirty face. The story is that once a Kalinago girl was visited during the night by an unknown man and became pregnant. Her mother therefore found someone to keep watch



An old print showing a Carib flute dance.



A Carib with a pegall, known in Creole as a 'conta'. When the base of the basket is complete it will be used for carrying goods on the back.

