

The Black Caribs of Central America: A problem in Three-Way of Acculturation¹

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The Black Caribs of Central America comprise more or less fifty thousand individuals, of mixed African and American Indian descent, living on the Caribbean Coast of the republics of Honduras and Guatemala, and the colony of British Honduras.

This ethnic group originated in the Island of St. Vincent, one of the Lesser Antilles. The first known inhabitants of St. Vincent and other neighbor islands were supposedly called Ygneri, and were extinguished before European settlers came in (Du Tertre, 1667, II, pp. 369-70.) Archeological evidence, though scant and imperfectly analyzed, seems to indicate their culture was related to that of the Arawaks of South America. This may be due to the fact that the Arawaks occupied the islands, fleeing from their traditional enemies, the Caribs. Those, probably pushed by Tupi-Guarani groups, invaded the Antilles by their turn. All Arawak adult males were killed, and the women and children were kept as slaves. These events were contemporaneous with the arrival of Europeans upon the scene.

In the time, the Caribs absorbed many cultural traits from Arawak women. In the language, there came into being the curious phenomenon of dichotomy between feminine (Arawak) forms, and masculine (Carib) ones, which persists even today.

French and English colonizers came to the Antilles during the XIIth century, and divide the islands between them. In St. Vincent and Dominica, they lived side by side, though not always peacefully. Fruitless attempts were made at converting the natives to Christianity, and making slaves out of them. The experience with African slaves in other parts of the New World had been so successful they felt encouraged to try it. Slave ships started calling the ports of the new colonies.

In 1661 and 1675 several Spanish slave ships were wrecked off the coast of St. Vincent, and the Negroes made for the hills and jungles of the center of the island. They were soon joined by runaway slaves from all the islands. At first they were kept in dominance by the Caribs, but soon revolted against their rule, and became free and independent. They had, however, adopted many Indian customs, including the peculiar manner of deforming the head of the infants².

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² Bryan Edwards, quoting Sir William Young, the first British governor of St. Vincente, informs that our people were originally Mocoos, a nation from the Bight of Benin (Bryan Edwards, 1807, pp. 420-3). Mr. Douglas Taylor, in a letter, identified tentatively these Mocoos as the Efik of Southern Nigeria.



By the close of the century, there were two groups in St. Vincent: the “Red” or “Yellow” Caribs, and the Black Caribs, always at war with each other and with the English and French planters, continuously forming and breaking precarious alliances. In 1719 the “Red” Caribs called the French to their aid and regular troops were sent to Martinique. But the Negroes resisted successfully, and the French, soon discouraged, returned to Martinique. The “Red” Caribs were then attacked by the Black Caribs. Those who were not killed passed into the Black group, or escaped to other islands, or even back to the South American continent.

During the wars between France and England, the French made allies wherever possible, of their one-time enemies, and through such alliance maintained a firm grasp on the Antilles. The Black Caribs, under such an agreement, became increasingly powerful and prosperous. In 1773 they signed a treaty with the British government, and lived in peace for twenty years. They were able then to produce sugar and fruits in their own estates, and, being skillful boatmen, took their merchandise over the rough surf and the rocks and sandbars to the ships anchored off the shore. Du Valle, a brother to the supreme chief, is reported having possessed nine African slaves to work his plantation. (Brian Edwards, II, 1807, pp. 420).

The French Revolution put an end to this golden period. In 1793 Victor Hughes came to the Antilles who was a personal friend of Robespierre. He must have been a man of unusual talents, for, with the help of almost no French troops, he organized popular armies in the islands and waged war on the British. The Black Caribs were eager to join in the fight on the side of their old friends. A fleet was sent from England under the command of Sir Ralph Abercrombie, and the Antilles, one by one, was brought once again under British rule. The situation in St. Vincent, though, was considered delicate, for the English landowners were too few and too weak to be able to dominate the Black Caribs without military help. The decision was taken to deport them *en masse*. This was done in 1797, and they were taken to the island of Roatan in the Bay of Honduras.

England being at war with Spain, Ramon Anguiano, governor of Honduras, imagined the Spanish colony was being invaded. He sent Don Jose Rossi y Ruby with numerous troops to defend the island. The Black Caribs did not oppose resistance, and soon became very friendly with the Spaniards. They were invited to come ashore to the town of Trujillo. From Trujillo they spread all over the Caribbean coast.

From then on the history of the Black Caribs is part of the intricate and complex panorama of Central Americana history. The details of it are not essential to the purpose of this study. In the numerous wars and revolutions in which they took part, they seem to have deserted by fortune, always defeated and constantly on the run. It is obvious that they could not have the opportunity to develop their commerce and acquire wealth, as in St. Vincent in former days. Being born traders, and seafaring people, they took to smuggling, and became very proficient in it.

Even though their culture has a hybrid origin, the degree of unity it achieved is very impressive. It is inexact to talk of syncretism in relation to it; here the acculturative processes produced a true synthesis.

Let us first of all take the language. The Black Caribs speak the Carib-Arawak language of the Island Caribs, with numerous words taken from French and Spanish, and some from English. Traces of an African vocabulary are so tenuous they could be neglected without vitiating the true of the general picture. According to Taylor, however, an African influence is to be looked for to some extent in the phonology; in the syntax, particularly in the way of saying things, such as are to be found in the whole Caribbean area and in all Creole dialects; and in the introduction of grammatical gender into a language which previously had none³. It is striking, in the first instance, that those people, who, as far as phenotypic appearance is concerned, are undistinguishable from other New World Negro populations, should speak an American Indian language.

3 Douglas Taylor, letter dated 18th October, 1947.

Material culture and technology are also almost pure Indian. The principles food-stuffs of the Black Caribs are the cazabe or manioc, and different varieties of bananas and plantains. The cazabe is planted and taken care of by women, who also harvest it, grate it, and prepare the cazabe bread. After peeling and grating, the cazabe is put into the basketry work squeezer, known to them as ruguma (snake), which, under the name of matapi, tipiti, and other, is to be found over large areas of the South American continent. Fish is almost the sole source of proteins. In the cuisine, however, we must note the extensive use of coconut oil, and the preparation of certain dishes, as typical African traits. The agricultural tools in use nowadays are, of course, European; so is the gridiron on which the cassava bread is baked, and the hooks and some other fishing implements.

Religion presents the most complete fusion of Indian, African and European elements. The Black Caribs have adopted the Catholic faith, imposed on them by the European invaders, without altogether renouncing their aboriginal beliefs. But, in their conception of the world, besides God, which is called Bungiu (from the French ‘bon Dieu’) and his phalanxes of angels and saints, there are other equally powerful beings. As the first are worshipped through the intermediary of the white priest, so the latter must have the buyies (medicinemendiviners) to attend to the needs of their cult.

The buyies have, as supernatural assistants, the hiúruha, a term under which are classed some spirits of the dead (generally not of one’s own family), but mainly air, sea, and bush spirits. The hiúruha are protectors of the people at large, but never manifest themselves to laymen. It is easy to track back the hiúruha to the Yurukan of the Mainland, which are to be met everywhere, and not only Carib and Arawak groups; for instance, the Mayan god Huracan (“heart-of-wind”). (Roth, 1912, p. 165).

The main part of the religious system of, however, the gubida, or family dead, cult. This is clearly an African retention ancestor worship, as far as could be ascertained being either completely unknown to American Indian groups, or, where known, rather unimportant.

Though hiúruha and gubida are associated in the chief ceremonies of the ritual, the main concern of every devotee are his own family dead. The gubida are supposed to take the same interest in their families as when they were alive. Now being powerful spirits, they are held to be able to protect their living relations against dangers of all kind, and lend to their descendant’s supernatural help for their earthly enterprises. A man should never neglect his religious duties towards his ancestors (which also include masses said by the priest), lest their wrath should be aroused and their protection over the family withdrawn, leaving him, as well as his wife and children, exposed to all forms of spiritual and physical perils. In the ritual itself, African and American Indian retentions are found completely merged; for instance, side by side with spirit possession, which follows dancing to the sound of drums, we find the use of tobacco smoke for a healing and mystical purposes. The most interesting feature is that worship of African gods was not retained; even their names are unknown. The ritual language of religion is Carib-Arawak, and some archaic terms of those languages familiar only to buyies and their close followers, are even included in their rituals.

The saints and angels of the Catholic church, under the supreme rule of Bungiu, the gubida and hiúruha, are regarded as benevolent protectors. The less pleasant aspect of the worldview comprises various spirits called by the general term of áhari ubau (nightmares of the earth) or anureme uabau (masters of the earth). The cadejo and the timbo, supernatural animals of the order of werewolves, found all over Central America, are clearly European. In other cases, the question of provenience is very much obscured. The agayuma, a river siren, is probably the product of triple cultural convergence; and likewise, the belief in ghosts, here named úfiñeu, and mafia, which Caribs translate by the Spanish word “diablo”, though they are of an impish rather than truly diabolical nature. The buru (formerly buruha from the Spanish “bruja”, witch), a vampire that flies by night in the guise of a bat or an owl, is another instance of three-way convergence. The fusion between Indian and Negro elements gave the ügüriu, appearing generally under the form of a lizard, or, more rarely, as a crab. The ügüriu is a family curse, transmitted by the feminine line.

This malicious spirit must be propitiated with appropriate food offerings and ceremonies, lest it may “enter the head” of women making them insane. It always kills the first-born child of the woman it haunts, and its poisonous breath or licking causes other members of the household to be afflicted with malignant fevers or skin diseases.

Mild skin diseases, like rashes, especially in children, can be caused by the úmeu, whose conception also falls under the category of Indian-Negro acculturation. Úmeus are little creatures no more than two feet high, possessing a human outward appearance, who are said to ride large fish such as the meru, or roam by the fringe of the surf in groups of four. When a large fish is brought into the house, if the proper precautions are neglected, an úmeu may come with it- a striking cultural explanation for allergies, which are hardly better understood among the Black Caribs than in our own culture...The silk-cotton tree is held as sacred both in Africa and America, being the abode of a spirit. This spirit is called peingalíwa or tongalíwa by the Black Caribs. Since the peingalíwa is the supernatural being who is more frequently sought by those wish to establish a pact with him, it is obvious that those who “had firsthand information” were not eager to impart it. Of other supernatural beings, twenty to thirty independent versions which corroborate each other in the highest degree, were recorded; in the present case they were but few and at variance with each other. An old woman stated that once, on her way to Trujillo, after midnight, she was stopped by a tall man with shining eyes, dressed as general. He was very deferential to her, and after inquiring on the whereabouts of a prominent citizen of the town, recompensed her liberally. She is sure it was the peingalíwa on his way to dun a debtor...The account of a cattle herder’s son may also be cited. This man’s father had confessed to him to have once had a pact with an evil spirit, who appeared as a little black man, dressed in a loose hanging garment of green color and a green cap. Other accounts, though differing in certain points, follow this general pattern.

An example of predominantly American Indian retention is found in the stories concerning the sucia, which can be traced back to similar Amazonian legends. The sucia is a feminine demon who assumes the form of a loved or desired woman, a man’s sweetheart or mistress, and leads him astray in the deep jungle. When they are far enough away, she suddenly reveals herself to him in her true appearance and, holding her shriveled breasts in her hands, shout: “Come to me! I am your mother!” At this the man loses his mind and dies of starvation in the forest; or, if he is still able to find his way back, will be a passive, staring idiot until his death.

The list of Black Carib supernatural entities is by no means exhausted, though others do not show identifiable connections. Their great number should not be interpreted as meaning that these people live in terror of the supernatural. It is true that the whole world is conceived as swarming with hostile, cunning beings, who only wait for a momentary slip to pray upon one. But the righteous man, who has consciously discharged his duties toward the Catholic church, his ancestors, and other protective powers, has nothing to fear.

As concerns social organization, an interesting independent family form among Caribs and Africans made for the present Black Carib type. Pre-Colombian Island Caribs had a polygynous family organization, stressing matriliney with preferential cross-cousin marriage. Women were economically independent, to a large extent, for they were the crop raisers, and, except for “felling the garden”, all agricultural work was done by them. They lived in their own huts; the husband used to live for a lunar month in the hut of each wife in succession. He had the obligation of providing the wife with whom he was living with fish, while she would contribute garden produce, and prepare the food for the husband. (Du Tertre, 1667, II, pp. 378-79) Identical institutions prevail in many parts of West Africa, except for the fact that there a husband visits each wife for a period of a week.

Among the Black Caribs, today, vestiges of preferential cross-cousin marriage are to be found only in the language. In spite of the tremendous campaign the Catholic church has been carrying on for centuries, they did not renounce polygamy. As of old, a man has a legal wife (from the Catholic point of view), but he may build a house and “fell gardens” to many more women, who became his damas. It is very rare for a young man to marry his bride at once. The normal thing for young people is become endamado first.

If the relationship thus established proves to be satisfactory to both partners, money may be saved for marriage ceremony and the celebrations which will mark it. The endamado relationship is but little institutionalized. Men obey only the dictates of their fancies in spending days away from their “legal” homes, with one or other of their damas.

Black Caribs are well known in Central America for their love of dancing and rejoicing. On the occasion of wakes, relatives and friends of the deceased go to this house, where they partake of food and hiyú (cassava beer), the more intimate friends being also given a drink or two of rum. People assembled under the cover of sails attached to the roofs of two neighboring houses listen to the stories of some renowned story-teller, never missing the opportunity of making a bawdy comment, or joining heartily in a song. No entertainer in the world can wish for a more responsive and better audience. At wakes, children play games of skill, and there are card tables for gamblers. Young people form circles, inside of which are the drummers and the dancers, who move in rhythm to the drum beats and singing and hand clapping of those who stand around them. All this is believed to delight the dead, and to send him happy and contented on his journey to the ghost realm. If the dead was an adult, the family will hold a novenario (a daily rosary) for nine days, at the end of which another party is held. These who are only slightly familiar with New World cultures will easily recognize the mingling of Catholic and African elements.

Christmas celebrations are colorful and elaborate. Old Iberian autos and pastorelas (mystery plays) are performed in many homes. Groups of wáriní (masked dancers), richly attired go from house to house, dancing for small gifts of money and drinks. Other similar groups are koropatya, wanaragawa, and piamanádi, whose performers go through a traditional ballet with a short plot, involving a persecution, death and resurrection of a central character, with many intervening incidents.

Easter is the occasion of the old play of Christians and Moor, known locally as juego de tiras, dear to the hearts of the Spanish and Portuguese peasants, and maipoli (Maypole), also of the definitive European origin.

This sketch cannot, of course, convey the richness of Black Carib culture. We can but indicate to what degree the usual picture of piece-meal borrowing, generally presented by acculturative situations is not here to be found. We are told Ashanti weavers hold European materials in high value, not because of their patterns, but only for the strength and quality of the thread in them. Those threads are taken apart, and reworked in the native handlooms, according to their own standards of craftsmanship. This simile perhaps reveals best how the culture of the Black Caribs of Central America has achieved the unity it is found today to manifest.

* The orthography of Garifuna words used in this article has been updated in accord with current norms.

Reference

Edwards, Bryan. *The History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. 5th edition, 5 vols. Londres: 1809-1819.