

# Aboriginal and Peasant Cultures of the Caribbean

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## INTRODUCTION

The linkage of aboriginal and peasant cultures in a review paper suggests that there is thought to be a close relationship between the two topics. In a most fundamental manner, the two are quite unlike: aboriginal cultures are thought of as wholes with various degrees of internal logic and substance, while peasant cultures are recognized as partials (Marshall 1985), having their character shaped by interaction with a larger society or in contrast to another part of the larger society. On the other hand, it is generally thought that peasant cultures of the Caribbean are derivative and integrative, being local and current inheritances and constructs by exotic peoples of aboriginal cultures and forged from the colonial and recent historical experiences (Crahan and Knight 1979). The burden of this paper is to reflect on what has been written since the last Benchmark publication in 1980 on both the aboriginal populations and the peasantries of the West Indies.

I shall treat the Caribbean Region as the Antillean world. The Caribbean was selected, I suspect, as a region of geographical integrity for the purposes of this session because of the rimland concept introduced by the geographer Augelli (1962) which was itself derived from anthropologists Steward and Faron's (1959) treatment of the circum-Caribbean culture region. It includes the islands of the Greater and Lesser Antilles as well as the black dominated coast of Costa Rica, the Miskito Coast of Nicaragua, the Caribbean front of Honduras and the Garifuna dominated lower coast of Belize. However, I shall focus on the island world leaving the isthmian world to those covering Yucatan and Central America, unless a work dealing with those places spills over into a part of the islands. The Guianas will not be covered except incidentally as I have run across such works in my readings.

I found that it was impossible to treat these two topics without reference to the work of anthropologists, sociologists and, especially, archaeologists who have worked so closely with geographers either as collaborators or as informal discussants during the field season. The Caribbean is a place where the relevant academic societies are multi-disciplinary and symposia virtually always have representatives from more than one discipline. It would be hard to think of Brierley's recent work without Rubinstein, Momsen's work without Besson, Pulsipher's work without Berleant-Schiller or Goodwin, or my own work without Portecop and Petitjean-Roget. So, I have included in the bibliography a number of works by these folk.

In these last ten years the studies by geographers have continued to be largely devoted to a subject or topic investigated on an island or a small group of islands, almost always from the same colonial background (Richardson 1983; Pulsipher 1986; Gomes 1985; Gullick 1985; Layng

1983; Sanders 1987; Kimber 1988). Few investigators have attempted a broad treatment of the Antilles as a whole, to provide a regional synthesis. The major exception is Watts' fine contribution to the Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography, *The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture and Environmental Change Since 1492*.

In addition, geographers are still more involved in the content of cultures rather than their structures. In a way, the Caribbeanists have been ignored or by passed by the intellectually deepening and greater sophistication of questions addressed that characterizes the work of scholars in other parts of Latin America. While we have moved from classification to typologies, there needs to be a greater concern with conceptualization and with the workings of process. There is some indication that the picture is changing (Conway 1986; Richardson 1984).

Richardson' book (1983) on Caribbean migrants built on the migration literature and addresses a process that links the Caribbean by an activity field created by the movement of the less wealthy and non-elites of different islands. Brierley, with his demonstration of an increase in magnitude and frequency of problems experienced as well as perceived by small farmers, suggests a dynamic, a movement toward involution leading to "self-exploitation" in terms of Geertz (1963) and Chayano (1966). His data reinforce Mintz's (1985) argument about the projected futures of peasantries having extremely low levels of return. Momsen and Monk's (pers. comm.) examination of **[end p. 153]** the intra-familial and intra-household unit and how gender roles are changing in the transformed world created by outmigration and the rapid expansion of the service industries is probing at the workings of the dynamic cultural transformation going on in the Caribbean that is affecting the peasant and the town dweller as well (Momsen 1988; Monk 1981, 1986). Both increases in levels of living and in greater mobility and flexibility in the spatial bonding of individuals' lives is changing the meanings associated with different kinds of work and how gender-related that work is.

The rest of my paper will be divided into three parts. The first will address the works on aboriginal cultures, the second on the peasantries and the studies made of their cultures, and the third will cover where we might go in the 1990s.

## **ABORIGINAL CULTURES**

Since 1980, the accepted time depth of human beings in the island has increased and the story of the peopling of the different islands is recognized to be a more complicated story than the one repeated by the historic Arawak and Carib to the early explorers, priests, and adventurers. New underwater sites have been located in St. Lucia and Martinique and the question of changes in sea level and the number of not yet identified sites becomes even more challenging. Local amateurs continue to be active in this study, but they have been joined by a large number of well trained and sophisticated archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists and historical geographers who have clarified prehistory and cultural change through time (Allaire 1985; Boomert 1984; Keegan 1987; Rouse 1989; Watts 1986). The origins of the prehistoric people lie in Middle America and South America. Some of the ancestors of the Guanahatebeys appear to have arrived from Middle America about 5,000 B.C. These are identified as a Casimiroid group utilizing points, knives and scrapers made from macroblades that were struck off prismatic flint

cores. MacNeish (1982, 32-42) carries this tradition back to Belize at the base of the Yucatan Peninsula. His early date is 7500 B.C., so Rouse (1989, 121) suggests that the invasion of Lithic age people was from the Yucatan into Cuba and Hispaniola and probably stopped with the latter since this industry is not found elsewhere. A later group arrived from South America about 2000 years later with the earlier settlers pushing into Cuba where they mixed with the earlier inhabitants and together became ancestral to the Guanahatebeys.

The ancestors of the Tainos invaded the islands from South America, perhaps reoccupying islands abandoned by the earlier migrants. All the Taino of the islands made a ceramic ware of the local Ostionoid type, which can be traced back to the middle and lower Orinoco. The different island groups are referred to as Western sub-Taino, Classic Taino, and Eastern sub-Taino. Different pottery styles indicate a sequence of occupation with the advanced waves being located respectively farther along the stepping stones of the islands. Since pottery by itself could be traded or introduced, no migration need be invoked. However, since these were a sea-going people it is just as reasonable to have these indigenous developments associated with contacts from the south. This pottery entered the islands about the same time as the first evidence of agriculture and of zemiism (indicated by small three pointed-objects of shell, coral, stone or pottery). Some stones are not so well interpreted by the observer as three-pointed, and illustrations show that some are of the less classic shape but which are nonetheless authenticated zemis (Fell 1989). About 600 A.D. the Ostionoid peoples resumed the advance in two directions, along the southern coast of Hispaniola into Jamaica and through the northern valleys of the island onto the eastern tip of Cuba. Between 800 and 1200 A.D. they occupied central Cuba and the Bahamas where Columbus found them. The people in the Mona Passage area, back from the frontiers, were developing a new form of pottery, elaborating the worship of zemis carved into animal and human figures, and they began building ceremonial plazas and ball courts. Those interested in epigraphy have deciphered the marks on the zemis as letters and some of that work has been published (Fell 1989). An *in situ* development, as insisted upon by Rouse (1989), meant advancing from the Ceramic into the Formative, as defined by public monuments and hierarchical chiefdoms -- the classic Tainos. Not to be discounted, however, is the possible contributions of trafficking southerners who may have come in small bands, married into the local populations, and who carried cultural traits from South America; in fact, a more probable history to my mind (Davis and Goodwin 1990; Kimber 1988).

The ancestral Taino had pushed back the ancestral Guanahatebeys into relict positions. The ancestors of the Island-Caribs were earlier thought to have begun migrations into the Lesser Antilles about AD 1000 to 1400. Today the linguistic evidence is interpreted to mean that they entered the islands late and in small fighting bands (ritual warfare) that conquered the inhabitants and then were assimilated into it (Allaire 1985; Rouse 1989).

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I have talked about the populations described in terms of material culture. Another way to describe them is biologically in terms of race and linguistically into speech communities. Newman in the 1950s proposed that the Guanahatebeys belonged to the Isthmid race and that the Tainos and the Island Caribs belonged to the Amazonid race. These are still hypotheses, but

physical anthropologists should investigate because biological information could help sort out the confusion from the ethnic and speech communities.

The languages coincide with the ethnic groupings. The Guanahatabey language is related to the Chibchan family (Granberry 1986, 53-55). The Taino are an Arawak language. The Island Carib were thought to belong to the Cariban family. Taylor and Hoff (1980) now say that the invasions were by Carib speakers, but the conquerors quickly adopted the Taino language. The famous men's language described by Breton in the seventeenth century turns out to be a pidgin language belonging to the Cariban family.

The ethnic groups are described in good accounts from the period of contact with the Europeans. For many years the Guanahatabeys were known as the Ciboneys. The latter are a Taino group. The Taino were called the Arawak but strictly speaking these were limited to the Orinoco Delta in their northward migrations. The contact Carib were indeed descended from Carib folk but had been separated by warfare and isolation so that they were culturally and biologically more Taino.

The presumed ecological status of the Taino as being more involved in agricultural intensification than the Island Carib has replaced the idea that the Carib pushed out superior cultivators and that they had begun environmental deterioration (Kirch 1980). This change in interpretation is supported by some archaeological evidence, but careful excavations with multidisciplinary teams are necessary. Work in Puerto Rico and Hispaniola looks promising (Rodriguez 1985; Rouse 1986). Rodriguez (1986) reports that most of the newly recovered sites are disproportionately positioned on the good soils. These soil series consists of 30 percent of all soil types but are found in 75 percent of the sites. Little work has been done on the archaeological sites from an agro-ecological position. This is where geographers could be very useful to the multidisciplinary teams that need to be constituted if we are to become sophisticated in our understandings of the meanings of pre-history in the Caribbean.

The migrants from South and Central America added to the plant and animal components of the biosphere as well as changed the natural habitats and created new habitats wherever they settled. The role of the Amerindians in bringing plants from South America has been well documented by geographers (Byrne 1980; Kimber 1988, building on earlier works). New work now permits archaeologists to state more firmly that a number of animals suspected of being natives are, in fact, introductions to the islands. The presence in the record of bones of captive domestic and tamed animals throughout the Caribbean, where there is not a history of natural occurrence in the fossil record on the same islands, suggests humanly assisted migration (Morgan and Woods 1986; Steadman et al. 1984; Wing 1990). The dog was brought in, so were guinea pigs, opossum, and the agouti (Wing et al. 1968). Some animals and birds are thought to have been traded from one island to another so as to expand their range in the islands. Among them are the flightless rail and the macaw (Wing 1990).

Wing (1990) now thinks that the first colonists in the islands relied on land species for about a third of their total catch of animals. "Through subsequent adaptation to a greater dependence upon fishing, this reliance on land animals was diminished to slightly less than 20 percent of the

total catch," a position that reinforces a long held belief that the Island Carib introduced a greater orientation to the sea than that of the early Taino (Kimber 1988). European impact studies continue. One thing needs to be continually emphasized when we are speaking for Latin America as a whole: the Indians of the Caribbean were effectively wiped out. Some Indian blood may be present in the creole population, but it is negligible. It is now very important for people born on the islands to think of themselves as inheritors of the Indian heritage, including some of the genes. This destruction of the Indian populations on most of the islands was aided by the fact that Indians abandoned some islands and fled to nearby islands to escape from slave raids.

The impact of Europeans on these indigenous cultures was disastrous. The population was removed and the populations drastically reduced. Biologically and physically the Amerindians were effectively wiped out by Old World diseases, slavery and warfare. This was reinforced by the collapse of their economies and their social fabric. The early chronicles mention the prevalence of suicide. Gonzalez (1990) suggests that the Carib of the smaller islands reacted to the European buccaneers and privateers by building on a preexisting model of warfare that instilled an idea of fierceness in men, emphasized the taking of captives for sacrifice, and relied on terror striking the enemy rather than massive killings. The stylized warfare was supported by the social and political organization that drove [end p. 155] the ecological relationships. The numbers dropped from 10 million to 10 to 15,000 by the time the northwest Europeans arrive to settle in the Lesser Antilles (Watts 1987).

The only Amerindian populations today in the Caribbean are the much racially mixed and acculturated Dominican Carib and the Black and Yellow Caribs of St. Vincent and the descendants of the St. Vincent Black Carib now called the Garifuna living on the Western Caribbean lowlands. The racial memory is strong, however, and the visitor and research worker alike are told that the speaker is descended from the Carib or the Arawak. This harking back to a pre-Columbian past is part of the creolisation process. Arawak and Carib ancestors give higher status than slave ancestry (Layng 1983), but it may be mainly a defense against the larger Afro-creole stereotypes of the Carib as social misfits, criminals and less intelligent than the creoles (Gullick 1985).

## **CARIBBEAN PEASANT CULTURES**

The seminal Caribbean thinker W. A. Lewis was very much on target when he said the term "peasant covers a variety of tenures." The conceptually idealized peasant is "perhaps a man who owns land enough to occupy his full attention but not too much for him to cultivate alone, or with the help of his family and the major portion of his cultivation was for his own account." The debate for the Caribbean has been conducted largely by anthropologists and sociologists (Cross and Marks 1979; Mintz 1985; Sebastien 1980; Wolf 1955, 1966).

Marshall (1968 quoted in Sebastien 1980) uses three periods to illustrate the "stages of growth" of Caribbean peasantry:

- 1) 1838-50 or 1860 depending on the particular island, establishment, rapid acquisition of land holdings and increase in numbers.

2) 1850-1900, consolidation, expansion of the numbers of peasants and a shift from subsistence and regional marketing to export crop cultivation.

3) 1900-1960 to 1980, saturation, consolidation and eventual decline in numbers. This sense of historical genesis of the peasantries of the Caribbean is supported by the structural changes noted by several workers.

The size and degree of importance of the sugar plantation economy, the population demographics and the time of original settlement had much to do with the creation of peasantries according to Sebastien (1990). According to his interpretation, Barbados, St. Kitts and Antigua were settled early, had significant sugar cane economies, had high populations early and did not develop significant peasantries, while the high islands of Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia and Dominica were less suitable for sugar cane, had low total populations, had isolated mountain valleys and developed peasantries. Martinique had well developed sugar cane and cacao as well as coffee estates and may have developed peasantries from pre-emancipation maroon communities, but the evidence points to post-emancipation colonization of the interior hills and valleys (Kimber 1988). Trouillot (1988) recognizes a problem felt if not entirely articulated by many Caribbean scholars: the idea that "peasants" are a category for classifying groups of people. More and more the thinking is away from categories to typologies. He suggests that there have been four approaches to the peasantry issue:

1) a peasantry fundamentally linked to a unit of production-consumption (the auto-consumption of Innes 1987), the family farm that is the only axis of a different economic structure (Chayanov 1966);

2) a cross cultural typification derived from the creating of composite sketches of the peasantry (Shanin 1979);

3) a part culture tied to urban markets (Kroeber 1948; Wallerstein 1974, 1980);

4) an original, distinctive cultural tradition in which the approach is to move away from the analysis of content to an analysis of structure together with the historical economies and socio-political relationships such structures include (Wolf 1955, 1966).

Trouillot (1988, 2-3) ascribes to the last position and asks, at what point or level of the socio-economic structure can we conceptualize peasantries? He suggests that the investigator must move from the definition of peasant as "being" to an examination of "the process or processes that we can momentarily. . . discover the mechanisms of their 'becoming'." He further states that the "commonalities are not to be found in a common **[end p. 156]** peasant essence, shared by individuals of different times and places. Rather they speak from a labor process that can be conceptualized. Since that labor process appears in markedly different socio-historical settings, an understanding of particular peoples actually engaged in that process always requires an analysis of these settings. Since he says this work process also appears to be antithetical to the laws of capital accumulation, an understanding of the people currently engaged in the process also requires a formal explanation of the ways in which their production is integrated in the

capitalist world economy" (also see Wallerstein 1974, 1980). Trouillot's linkage of the breakdown of peasantry groups to the spread of more fundamental Protestant sects is an echo of Tawney (1941). Since such broad levels of generalization are aesthetically counter to the empirical local study which is characteristic of so much of Caribbean geographic studies, it may be the explanation as to why many have not joined the debate on peasantries. On the other hand, some geographers (Henshall 1984; F. Innis 1982, 1987; Momsen 1986, 1987; Richardson 1984; Brierley 1985b, 1988) have been in the debate but have moved to the use of the term "small farmers" which has almost completely replaced "peasant" in the Caribbean governmental and geographical literature (Barker 1989a; CARDI 1980). Momsen began her work in the 1960s when she prepared an unpublished thesis on "Some aspects of peasant agriculture in Barbados." Her work has always had a strong historical component but more recently she has gradually moved to a more structural interpretation of the causes of the system but continues to be strongly based upon empirically derived data and directed largely to content analysis and description. Frank Innis has published work that focused largely on the importance of the small plot farm to the auto-consumption solution to the chronic food shortages and to the content of the agricultural plots, as did D.Q. Innis, who became a strong proponent of small scale polyculture as the most sustainable agricultural system.

Theo Hills, whose interests in small plot farming goes back many years, has been recently talking about the "food forest" and its ecological implications. The terminology is increasingly attractive given the present concern with the environmental degradation (Hills 1988). The work of D.Q. Innis, Kimber and Fredrich done in the 1960s and 1970s addressed the content of the field plot rather than having any concern with peasantries as such. But they contributed to the consideration of the human ecologies of the peoples of the Caribbean. Richardson's (1983) book explicitly looks at how the process from slavery to freedom in the British Caribbean can be looked at from an ecological position. This treatment of the adaptations made by former slaves to their respective physical environments at emancipation is explicit in considering ecological processes and thus is in the tradition of human-land studies initiated at the University of California when the Office of Naval Research was funding Berkeley geographers.

These ecological considerations led to consideration by the Caribbean geographers of modernization and development processes. Spence (1989) looked at the initiatives under the guise of modernization on increased agricultural productivity. He points up the importance of perceptions and the visceral responses of the "traditional small-scale farmers" to the factors of change. The newer terminology is in use.

Instead of the more classical two-directional movements from Sebastien's pure or middle peasantry toward peasant farmers or toward peasant proletarians, the Caribbean may be moving to a post-peasantry society, especially in the more recent world of tourism (de Albuquerque 1989; Stinner et al. 1982), migration (Conway 1989) and changing gender roles (Monk 1981, 1986). Competition for land by non-agricultural transnational corporations tends to create scarcities of land (McBain 1987), Sachak 1987) as does the division of land among siblings after the death of parents (Besson 1987).

It is a fact that there has been much land abandonment and creation of alternative livelihood

support systems other than agriculture (1988; Brierley 1981). There now exists in the Caribbean ways the rural person can make an urban wage by combining work options that had not existed earlier. Tourism has had a powerful impact on all islands, making options for wage labor more varied (Momsen 1985; Stinner et al. 1952; de Albuquerque 1988). The increased availability of transport has made it possible for people to live on the land and yet work in the capital. Conway's (1983) work on the step-wise migration of people to the city shows that rural-urban traffic may in fact be impeded by the development of suburbs.

The whole issue of sustainable development has had a life outside of geography and has not really begun to influence many who work in the Caribbean, but there are some notable exceptions. The theme of sustainable development comes out of the relatively bad record of AID efforts to improve levels of living and efforts to avoid [end p. 157] environmental degradation.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Beginning at the farm level or household level, I see an increased interest in studying intra-household and intra-familial relationships and I anticipate that this research will be conducted in connection with issues turned up in gender research.

There is an increased interest on the part of interdisciplinary workers to concentrate on strategies enabling people to function productively in a modern world with special attention being given to value systems that are studied as an out growth of good ethnoecology. There will be an increase in concern with local, indigenous decision making as opposed to centralized planning from either the island socialist governments or from externally funded AID projects, as well as careful consideration of alternatives for rural occupation.

I see a change away from the older conceptualizations developed from anthropologists' definitions of peasantry (Wolf and Mintz) based on functional strategies of the adaptive human ecology of the islands (Richardson 1984) to the conceptualizations of economic historians (Wallerstein 1974, 1980; Trouillot 1988). There will be an active dialogue among sociologists, economic historians and anthropologists about the various roles and new characteristics of small-scale cultivators. I expect geographers to become more active in that dialogue while keeping a firm grasp on individual places as they become more comfortable with World Systems Theory.

Since many peasant households for over a century and a half have had one member employed at a distance from the locus of peasant activity in other islands, Panama, or the *metropole*, and communications, even the receipt of money, with and from these members, created a behavioral world larger than the *quartier*, parish or island (Conway 1989) the operating space of the peasantry will have to be defined as having other dimensions than the worked lands and the regional market. Circulation, migration with the intention to return, must be brought into the definitions of peasantries in the Caribbean.

Concerns for the recognizably deteriorating environment will lead to more innovative ecosystem

analyses involving not only historical genesis but evolutionary thinking. Considerations of carrying capacity of small island environments force investigators to look at the intensification of traditional agriculture, small farming systems that are less destructive than large-scale estate or plantation agriculture, except in areas topographically and edaphically suited to mechanized agriculture. Again I return to a subject referred to earlier, the question of abandoned lands. We have the conundrum of land as a scarce commodity, yet more land is in spontaneous vegetation from lack of cultivation today than during the late nineteenth century credit crises. The whole issue of land rights, role of land as defining personhood, and of land as the definition of power will need to be addressed by geographers as well as by anthropologists and sociologists.

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