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First clash: the Spaniard and the Indian
on the Caribbean Islands (1492-1520)

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Introduction

The discovery and colonization of the Western Hemisphere by the Europeans is one of the most significant events in the history of Mankind. Land and resources were opened to a vibrant Renaissance Europe, and set the stage for the development of new nations, with roots both in the New and the Old World.

The Spanish nation led the way in this process and left the greatest influence on these lands. It was in the islands of the Caribbean Sea that the nucleus of the Spanish Empire was formed. It was here that the obsession with gold began. Here the first tragic confrontation between Europeans and American Indians took place and here also the first concern about human rights found insistent expression. From here expeditions were launched that explored and conquered Mexico, Peru, Florida and many other lands. The events on these first Spanish colonies had great and lasting effects on the colonization and type of institutions of Spanish America.

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact of the arrival of the Spaniards upon the native populations of the Greater Antilles; Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Jamaica and show those practices of the Spanish colonists that later shaped the occupation of other parts of the New World.

The world that Christopher Columbus reached on October 12, 1492 was vastly different from the one he had left a few weeks

earlier. After his visit an irreversible process was started, a process that will influence the course of events not only in Europe and America, but also in the rest of the world ever since.

The Discovery

The first voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 was intended to find a new route to the lands of the Orient. The Catholic Sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabella, wanted Spain to enter the profitable trade in spices, silks and gold between Europe and China, and also to propagate the Christian Faith. Columbus was convinced that China, Japan and India were just over the horizon.

After traveling for thirty-three days land was sighted at a distance. In the morning the three-ship Spanish fleet took possession of a small island of the Bahamas group, naming it San Salvador. On this island, called Guanahani by the Indians, the first contact between Spaniard and Indian took place. The natives traded cotton, weapons, food and pet-parrots for small trinkets of glass and tin.

The Indians seem to have believed that their visitors were strange beings from the sky. The beards, arms, ceremonies and technology of the strangers combined to fill them with awe. Columbus took captive several of the natives, to serve as guides and future interpreters.

The Spanish fleet moved on to discover Cuba, Hispaniola (Haiti) and other small islands. In Hispaniola and Cuba the first samples of gold were discovered, as ornaments of the Indians. The peaceful and simple Arawak natives were puzzled but amiable toward the Spaniards at every place they touched.

Columbus found that the northern islands of the West Indies were populated, with minor exceptions, by one kind of people and culture. They occupied the Greater Antilles, which are Cuba, Haiti (Hispaniola), Boriquen (Puerto Rico), and Jamaica; and also the Bahamas (or Lucayas) Islands.

These people belonged to the Arawak family, an ethno-cultural group of Indians that originate in northern South America. Their society was highly stratified. At the top were the caciques, hereditary rulers; they varied in power relative to each other. Below these were the nitainos, or nobles, then the commoners, and finally the ^{self}-like naborias.

They were primarily agriculturalist, and brought with them from South America the plants of their cultivation. Their main food staples were a bread made of corn meal and the cakes called cassava, made of the root of the sweet and bitter yucca. They also had other variety of root crops (batata, ages, yautia) and several kinds of fruits like pineapples, guanabanas, mameyes, guayaba (guava) and mangoes.

The Arawak or Taino also were skilled fishermen, both at sea and in lakes and rivers. They also hunted several kinds of small mammals that lived in the islands, called hutias, and many species of birds and other game. They had small, mute dogs that served as pets but were also eaten.

The Arawaks of Haiti, Boriquen and eastern Cuba had a relatively advanced culture that produced notable sculptures of idols (cemis) and ceremonial plazas (bateys) in which they

practiced a form of ball-game in religious or secular occasions. They had developed a lively trade in gold, copper, and stone ornaments, as well as cotton and feather articles, with the fierce Caribs of the Lesser Antilles. The Caribs obtained most of these articles in South America, and traded them up the chain of islands to the Taino lands. Recently some proof of trade with the Maya of Yucatan had surfaced and, combined with the presence among the Island Arawaks of some Mexican cultural traits like the ball-game, certainly point to a strong and vibrant culture.

The Arawaks were a peaceful people, resorting to war only to repel the raids of the Caribs, who practiced cannibalism. These Indians, also from South America, had followed the migratory path of the Arawaks from the coast of Venezuela into the Lesser Antilles. They had destroyed or assimilated the Arawak population of these places and, by the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, they had managed to establish their presence on the easternmost part of Puerto Rico.

The size of the populations on the Greater Antilles is a matter of great debate. The early Spanish accounts mention a population for Haiti (Hispaniola) of more than a million inhabitants. Some scholars had proposed a size of over 3 million (and a total of 8 million for the major islands combined), while others maintain that there were never more than a hundred thousand natives. Since the rate of death among the Indians was extraordinarily high from the moment of the

Spanish conquest, this is an important issue to resolve in the context of this work.

For the purpose of this paper, I will accept that the population of the Arawak islands in 1493 was, for Hispaniola, 500,000; for Puerto Rico, 150,000; for Cuba, 200,000; for Jamaica, 100,000; and for the Bahamas, 50,000. I think that these numbers are confirmed by the relative rate of extinction of the native populations between 1494 and 1520.

Columbus was eager to return to Spain with the news of discovery. He built a fortress in northern Hispaniola from the planks of his wrecked flagship, the Santa Maria, and left forty men to continue trading gold with the Indians. The Admiral left for Europe in early 1493 with samples of gold, plants, animals and several Indians as proof of his achievement, and also with plans for the permanent colonization of the island.

Settlement of the Islands (1493-1512)

In Spain Columbus was given command of a large fleet with many enthusiastic would-be settlers. Upon arriving ~~to~~ ^{at} Hispaniola, Columbus found his small fortress, La Navidad, in ruins and the men dead. This was the first direct confrontation between the natives and the Spaniards.

What had happened at Navidad was about what should have been expected. The men left behind preyed upon the Indians until they could not endure the excesses. The local Tainos blamed the attack on a cacique (or cheiftain) of the interior called Caonabo, who later will lead the native's resistance against the Europeans.

Nevertheless, the Indians remained very friendly toward the Spaniards and for awhile no further conflict took place.

Columbus founded the town of Isabella in northern Hispaniola as a base for further exploration and settlement. From here groups of Spanish settlers moved to the gold fields of Cibao, to the south of the island. By this time, early 1494, the good relations with the Indians also began to break down. The Indians satisfied their frugal wants with small labor of planting, hunting and fishing, but the Spaniards who squatted on them required more and more produce and labor. They also took Indian women by force. The natives, and especially the caciques, took to hiding out and soon began to avenge themselves on stray Spaniards.

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The Tainos of Hispaniola did not have a unified government, but were rather divided into small chiefdoms (cacicazgos). Some of the caciques started to plan how to rid themselves of the invaders. Caonabo, who had destroyed Columbus fort of La Navidad, became the main leader of the natives by consent of the other caciques. The cacique Guarionex of Magua, who was the most powerful ruler in the island, recognized the leadership of Caonabo, who also had the support of his brother Behechio (who ruled the western half of the island) and Hatuey, cacique of Higüey, on the easternmost part.

The Spaniards were aware of the growing native unrest, and tried to prevent any revolt by tricking and capturing Caonabo. Although their plans for coordinated actions were destroyed with the loss of Caonabo, the Indians rose in late 1494 destroying a fort and killing a number of Spaniards near Isabella.

The inevitable Spanish response ^{led to the} defeated and captured ^{of} numerous Indians of which about five hundred were sent to Castile as slaves. The pattern of slave raids in Hispaniola had begun. A party of soldiers under Admiral Columbus moved toward the interior, subjugating most of the center of the island and capturing the cacique Guarionex. Columbus then thought of a simple way to assure the profitable conduct of his government. The Indians were to pay tribute and their chiefs were to collect it. The tribute, of course, would be in gold.

By late 1496, most of Hispaniola had been subdued. The Spanish practice of enslavement, diseases, and the effects of war and dislocation had started to decimate the Indians. The final blow to the native population was given in 1502 with the establishment of the encomienda system.

Simply stated, all the natives were given into the charge of individual Spaniards or assigned to the Crown, some for personal service but most to forced labor in the fields or mines. They were supposed to work only under proper care and limitations, and at just wages, and their rights as subjects to the Crown must be respected. These prescriptions meant nothing to the encomenderos, who knew no check on their subjection of the Indians. Some, like the cacique Hatuey and his people, fled to Cuba, who was still unoccupied by the Spaniards; others escaped to the mountains. Most were hopelessly trapped, to be used as labor force by the Spanish settlers.

By 1503-04 the last Indian resistance was destroyed by the new Spanish governor of Hispaniola, Nicolas de Ovando. In the west, the cacicazgo of Anacaona, widow of Caonabo was brutally devastated, with towns burned, Anacaona and many other chieftains slain and the population enslaved. At the same time, the southeastern peninsula of Higüey was overrun by Juan de Esquivel and Juan Ponce de Leon. Esquivel later participated in the conquest of Jamaica, and Ponce de Leon occupied Puerto Rico before moving on his ill-fated expedition to Florida.

Under Ovando's administration, the exploration of the other major islands took place, starting with Puerto Rico in 1508-09. Ponce de Leon led a party from Hispaniola that traded with the Indians and gathered some gold. Agueybana, chief cacique of Boriquen (as the local Tainos called the island) had some knowledge of the activities of the Spaniards in Hispaniola from tales of refugees from Higüey and reports sent by the cacique Hatuey, who was related to Agueybana. He intended to maintain friendly relations with Ponce de Leon and allow him to mine for gold. Also, the Tainos of Puerto Rico held the belief that the Spaniards were immortal, so they refrained from any kind of conflict.

Nevertheless, the excesses of the Spanish colonists began to irritate the Indians. The repartimiento of encomiendas of Indians to the Spaniards provided the spark for the rebellion. From 1511-12, the Tainos under Agueybana rose against the invaders, burning the town of San German, killing Spanish gold miners and threatening Caparra, seat of Ponce de Leon's government. The Tainos were aided by the Caribs from the Virgin Islands, the two Indian groups united against the common enemy. The rebellion faded away after Agueybana's death in battle and the Spaniards started to receive reinforcements from Hispaniola. Many of the surviving Indians fled to the mountains or moved to the Carib islands, from where constant raids were mounted against Spanish settlements in Puerto Rico up into the 1560's.

Jamaica suffered a similar fate in 1509, when Juan de Esquivel occupied the island. The native Arawaks offered no resistance, and were rapidly given in encomiendas to the colonists. As the island held little gold, the Spaniards and their Indian laborers produced mainly food crops (cassava, corn) for shipment to other Spanish colonies; as well as cotton, that the Indians transformed into clothing and hamacas.

In Jamaica the native population was exterminated much faster than in the other islands, mainly due to the harsh rule of Esquivel, his lieutenant Panfilo de Narvaez, and his successor Francisco de Garay. By 1520 the Indians of Jamaica were extinct and the island remained a quiet back-water of the Spanish Empire.

In 1511 the colonization of Cuba was started by Diego Velazquez, who was determined to capture Hatuey and his band of refugees from Hispaniola. The cacique was captured and executed by Velazquez, and a terrible war against the Indians of eastern Cuba (who sheltered Hatuey) was ~~initiated~~^{instigated}. Panfilo de Narvaez and his followers from Jamaica sailed to Cuba to share in the conquest. The two groups of Spaniards quickly overran the island, spreading terror and fear among the Indians.

By 1515 the Cuban Indians were working under the ~~encomienda~~^{encl} system in the extraction of gold. The Spanish villages were placed where there were the most natives, so they might be better utilized and controlled by the colonists.

As the gold deposits were worked out, ranching became the most important economic activity of Cuba. The Indian population suffered catastrophic losses. Many died of overwork and disease, or were shipped to the gold fields of Hispaniola. A few managed to hide-out in the Sierra Maestra mountains and in Las Guasimas manigua (swamp-land).

Another target for the Spanish adventurers were the Lucaya or Bahama Islands. This chain of small islands north of Cuba became a source of slaves for the gold-fields of Hispaniola, as the natives there were rapidly disappearing. Slave raiders depopulated the Bahamas in less than ten years.

By 1520, the culture and much of the social organization of the Arawak Indians in the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas had been destroyed by the Spaniards. Their social structure was disintegrating under the encomienda system, their land and fields were taken over by the newcomers or turned into forest due to lack of cultivation. Many Indians fled or took their lives as a way to escape the harsh treatment of their Spanish masters.

Colonial Society and the Indian (1520-1560)

As to how the Indians adapted to the new set of conditions imposed by their European conquerors, we can put together an accurate picture from colonial records.

Although greatly diminished, the Indian population of Hispaniola managed to survive as a distinct group until late in the 16th century. They adopted the Catholic religion and Spanish dress, and learnt the Castilian Language. Eventually they blended into the general population mostly through inter-racial marriages with Spaniards or with the growing number of black Africans being introduced as slaves. The ultimate phasing out of the encomienda system facilitated the incorporation of the remaining Indians into the mainstream society of the colony. This also remains true for the Arawaks of Puerto Rico and, to some extent, those in Cuba.

One dramatic episode of this late phase on the fate of the natives was the career of the cacique Enriquillo.

As a youth, Enriquillo had been brought up in the Franciscan monastery of Verapaz, in the south-western part of Hispaniola. He was a devout Christian, spoke Spanish very well, and could read and write. When of age, he returned to his people in the province of Baoruco, where he was married by the Church to a girl of noble Taino family. With his Indians he served a certain Spaniard, who one day raped his wife. When Enriquillo protested to this Spaniard, he was given a beating; next, the chief complained to a magistrate in the Spanish town,

and was thrown in jail. After his release he betook himself and his grievances to the Audiencia (or court of justice), but the authorities merely sent him back to the same official who had mistreated him; and his master showered him with threats and further punishment.

Enriquillo dissimulated for awhile, then fled to the mountains with a few followers. This made him a rebel, and the Spaniard came with some soldiers to bring him back. There was a skirmish in which two Spaniards were killed and the rest routed. The Audiencia now sent about eighty soldiers to subjugate the Indian, but these too were driven off, with some dead and wounded.

As the news of these exploits spread throughout Hispaniola, many Indians escaped to join Enriquillo, until his forces numbered some three-hundred. He instructed his men to kill no Spaniards save in self-defense, but always to take their arms and release them. Thus he built a supply of weapons that made him a formidable foe. Above all, his great mobility exhausted the many Spanish expeditions sent against him. For close to ten years Enriquillo managed to hold to his mountain realm.

Finally, the government decided to conclude the matter. Dissatisfied with the state of affairs in Hispaniola, an expedition was organized in Spain against Enriquillo. It was commanded by Francisco de Barrionuevo, who realized that a negotiated peace would be better than a prolonged conflict with the natives.

In the summer of 1533, Barrionuevo and Enriquillo concluded a peace. He gave the chieftain a provision from the Crown, a full pardon, and the title of "don." Enriquillo agreed to come down from his mountains and settle down in his former lands.

As Enriquillo himself stated, his goal was not to drive the Spaniards from his ancient lands, but to have his grievances redressed and his rights as a loyal servant of the Crown respected. His first attempts to achieve justice utilizing the Spanish judicial system gave proof of this. By this date (1520's to 1530's) the Indians now had become wholly dependent on the Spanish colonial society for their survival, and felt that they deserved (especially the more educated caciques) to have the same rights and privileges as subjects of the King of Spain that the Spaniards have.

Undoubtedly most of the surviving Indians had ^{given} gave up any hope of expelling the Spaniards from their islands. At best they wanted to have a less hard life and that the rights granted to them by the Crown and the Council of Indies be respected. Reformers like Father Bartolome de las Casas were proposing measures to save the Indians from further abuse and stop their disappearance. Certainly caciques like Enriquillo decided to obtain a better position with the Spaniards by working within the colonial framework of government. Sometimes they even favored their Spanish masters over their own people.

An Indian chieftainess named Loisa by the Spaniards, was converted to Christianity and helped in the occupation of northeast Puerto Rico by Ponce de Leon. She was later killed during one of the Carib raids on Spanish outpost. As many Arawaks from Boriquen had joined the Caribs, this attack can be interpreted as retaliation against a "colaborator."

From 1520 onwards, the Spanish settlements in the Greater Antilles entered a period of decadence. The decimation of the native population, the growing scarcity of gold in mines, and the news of the discovery of the rich lands of New Spain (Mexico) and Peru prompted an exodus from the islands to the Mainland. This proved to be mixed blessing for the Indians left in the islands. First, the shifting of the main Spanish efforts into the new lands meant that the royal officials in the Islands were less hard-pressed by the King to provide rents and profits now that gold and silver were flowing from Central and South America. As the gold deposits in Hispaniola, Cuba and Puerto Rico gave out other, less labor-intensive economic activities became more important. Finally, the chance of winning riches quickly overseas lured away the most unruly and greedy of the Spanish settlers. Those that remained were more concerned with tilling their land and, in general, to take better care of their Indian laborers so their long-range needs for workers were satisfied.

On the other hand, some Spanish mine owners, realizing that the native population was disappearing rapidly, pressed

their workers even harder to obtain the greatest profit possible before running out of Indians. Also the high price of Negro slaves, more apt to hard work and resistant to European diseases, meant that Indian workers were kept laboring to provide the money needed to acquire the black field hands.

At this point it is pertinent to show the extent of the Indian depopulation in the Islands. As the records are more complete for Hispaniola, it will be used as an example of the general trend among the islanders.

Starting from the agreed number of 500,000 Indians as the population of Hispaniola in 1493, we find that the earliest Spanish figures, used to determine the size of a particular encomienda, state the number of natives as sixty thousand (1509) and in 1510 as forty thousand. These figures more likely refer only to those Indians of working age.

The repartimiento of 1514 enumerated 22,726, excluding children and the aged. Slaves were personal property, not subject to repartimiento and therefore were not included. Legally, the Indians who had been brought in from the Bahamas and the other Arawak islands were not slaves but naborias (the old Taino term for serf-like workers). The new repartimiento distinguished indios de servicio from naborias. The former were identified by their cacique and hence may have been survivors of the local Indian communities under the formula that assigned a particular cacique and his people to a Spanish settler. If we look at sex and age distribution given for the

indios de servicio, we find that the number of males and females of working age were in fair balance, the percentage of children is almost as low as that of the aged. For example, out of 803 Indians in the royal haciendas at Santo Domingo, there were 270 men, or 33%; 306 women, or 38%; 104 elderly, for 12%; and only 123 children, or 15%. In none of these, or anywhere, was there on the average one child to a family. The island people were clearly marked for early extinction.

If we use these figures, we find that the population of Hispaniola had dropped from half a million to about 26,000 (working men and women plus the respective percentage of elderly and children) between 1493 and 1514. This would mean that more than 450,000 Indians died, minus those few that fled or were hiding in the mountains in little more than twenty years.

Different reasons were given for the dying off of the natives and probably all of them were true. The nature of the colonial system was undoubtedly ^{the} responsible for a great share of this. It began with the obsession of Columbus with gold and the tribute the caciques were required to collect. It ^{continued} ~~developed as~~ ^{under} the repartimiento by which the Indians were subject to a merciless exploitation for the overriding end of producing the gold, ~~which the Crown demanded.~~

Epidemics also contributed, ~~to this.~~ Outbreaks of small pox, tuberculosis, typhoid fever and other diseases were rampant among the Indians, who lacked immunity and resistance.

The inadequate living quarters provided by their Spanish masters were highly suited to continuing infection of the native population, living on an ^{un}proper diet, depressed by the loss of its own ways of life.

The Indians showed themselves to be psychologically unable to absorb the general culture of their new masters. This inability suddenly to make the leap from a simple culture to the complex European civilization of the Spaniards produced, among some Spanish conquerors, doubts as to whether the Indians were truly human. Others, to be sure, had no such doubts. Nevertheless, the inability remained, except perhaps in a few individual cases, and its working was disastrous to the population of the islands.

Conclusion

The scope of this paper was to describe how the Indians of the Greater Antilles responded to the coming of the Spanish explorers and settlers during the early years of the European expansion into the New World. The general features of the native Arawak culture were presented, as well as the attitudes of the Spaniards toward the Indians and how the resulting clash between them precipitated the destruction of the Indian way of life.

The breakdown of the native social structure took several directions. The most important caciques were eliminated; lesser ones were reduced to the status of overseers or they became naborias, doing common tasks. The leisure in which they had enjoyed their dances, sings and other communal diversions was lost. Their community life disappeared among the hard work of the gold mines and fields. A well adjusted and structured native society had become a ^ofarmless work force for a foreign people, its customary habits and enjoyment lost. Their will to live and to reproduce was thus weakened. The Spanish observers were well aware that the natives died easily, and that they died of other causes than overwork and disease.

Only a few Indian leaders, like Enriquillo in Hispaniola or Loisa in Puerto Rico, managed to achieve some sort of accommodation with the Spanish colonial system. The combination of an eroding authority base and greedy Spanish settlers doomed even the most docile and cooperative Indian

communities to an early extinction. The influence of the Christian missionaries also contributed to alienate the Arawaks from their old culture, thus eventually forcing them to become members of the colonial society. This in turn led the way for the native race to disappear through interracial marriages and eventually form a new ethnic group, the Criollos, from the fusion of the Indian, Spanish and black African peoples.

The Spanish experience on the Greater Antilles was reflected during the conquest and subjugation of the lands of Mexico and Peru. Men like Hernan Cortes, conqueror of the Aztecs; Nuno de Guzman, Francisco Pizarro, destroyer of the Inca Empire; and many other Conquistadores had fought or lived on their first Spanish colonies in the New World. They tried to preserve the Indian population and social organization on the lands conquered, even after they implemented the encomienda system, so the natives could be better prepared to satisfy the Spaniard's demands for gold and also be able to survive and function. This attitude at least spared these Indians of some of the most evil aspects of the encomienda and made slavery of the natives, as a source of labor, less common on the Spanish colonies of Tierra Firme.

The chain of events started by Columbus in 1492 resulted in the destruction of both the simple culture of the Arawaks and the splendid civilizations of Aztecs and Incas. The rule of the Spanish Empire on these lands was at times cruel, inhuman or stupid, but also exhibited a strong sense of justice

and sometimes benevolence toward the Indians. The Spaniards behaved as good or bad as any other European state would have done in the same position.

The legacy of the Arawak Indians on the Greater Antilles is still strong. Many native words, plants, animals, objects and place-names remain. Indian leaders who resisted the Spaniards, like Hatuey in Cuba, Caonabo and Guarionex in the modern Dominican Republic; and Agueybana in Puerto Rico are remembered as national heroes. Also, many Indian racial traits are evident on the islands population, ^{especially} specially on central Puerto Rico and southeast Cuba.

The Taino culture and way of life may be gone, but the memory of the gentle, peace-loving Indians of Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica and Boriquen is still alive on the modern inhabitants of their former islands.

Well written - good organization

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