

# The Indigenous Heritage Of The Caribbean And Its Contribution To A Caribbean Identity

Text from the Untold Origins Exhibition held at the Cuming Museum, October 2004 to February 2005.

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## ***'Mabrika Mabrika- welcome-***

*It has been very important to be able to look at the objects in the Cuming Museum. It makes me realise how much we can regain from what we have lost of our culture by studying these objects.'*

The Honourable Charles Williams, Carib Chief of the Carib Territory, Commonwealth of Dominica, on a visit to the Cuming Museum, October 6 2004. He is holding a ceremonial baton or club, used by chiefs as a badge of office on ceremonial occasions. From the Schomburgk collection.



## **Introduction**

The Caribbean has always seen people on the move - from the settlement of people from the South American mainland thousands of years ago, the forced settlement of enslaved people from Africa, to the 'Island hopping' and immigration abroad in search of work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Within the Untold Origins exhibition we explored what happens when people and cultures move and come into contact with each other. What do people preserve from their original culture to maintain their sense of identity? How does contact with a new culture change how they view themselves?

The histories and stories of the people who populated the Caribbean prior to the arrival of Europeans 500 years ago seemed hidden. Until recently the received history of the Caribbean as taught in schools repeated the inaccurate story of Carib cannibals eating their way up the island chain, terrorising the more civilised Arawak communities. The indigenous people had been represented as being exterminated, with tiny populations of survivors on a few islands.

The indigenous cultures did experience a catastrophic collapse and the populations on some islands were nearly wiped out altogether. But at the same time as official Colonial documents declared the native peoples as extinct, they were finding ways to survive on the margins of society. We wanted to explore their survival in more depth and to discover whether there are any echoes of indigenous culture surviving in Southwark's Caribbean culture today.

# the schomburgk collection

## The Schomburgk Collection

Many of the objects from Schomburgk's two expeditions survive as part of the Cuming collection and in other museum collections. The Schomburgk material is an important record of South American tropical lowland life at a time when the culture of groups in the interior of Guiana was only just being influenced by contact with Europeans.

The Schomburgk collection objects from the Guianas exhibited in the Untold Origin displays from the were chosen to illustrate a number of key aspects of South American tropical lowland culture, daily life and beliefs.

The objects can also demonstrate the link with the culture, ideology, symbolism, rituals, and political organisation that existed in the Caribbean prior to European contact and into the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## Schomburgk's Expedition To Guiana

The explorer Robert Schomburgk collected objects during an expedition to British Guiana from 1834 to 1839. It was sponsored by the Royal Geographical Society. He surveyed the upper Guiana River basin and collected botanical specimens and other objects.

## The Guiana Exhibition

When he returned to England Schomburgk exhibited his collection of artefacts at the Cosmorama, Regent Street, London in 1840. He also brought with him three men who had worked closely with him as guides during the expedition and who he regarded as friends. Schomburgk's detailed comments on the objects in the catalogue are refreshingly free of the arrogance typical of the time.

The collection was sold at auction and Richard Cuming purchased around 50 objects.

# history of migration from south america

## The Archaeology Of The Caribbean

Archaeologists studying the pottery of the Guianas and the Caribbean have various theories about which groups of people from the South American mainland moved into the Caribbean and when. However the commonly held view that the primitive and cannibal 'Caribs' gradually displaced the peaceful 'Arawaks' is now known to be a misleading oversimplification of a very complicated situation.

## The Migrations

The people who first settled in the Caribbean around 6000BC, probably from Central America, lived in temporary settlements and made stone tools. By 500BC there were people settling from the South American mainland who practiced settled agriculture and made pottery. They are known by their style of pottery, called 'Saladoid'. It is believed that they were the ancestors of the Taíno people.

From 500AD there was further migration into parts of the Islands not previously settled by the Saladoid people and their culture began to change and develop. Other groups of people continued to move in successive waves from Orinoco Delta on the mainland from 200/250BC -1450AD. How these groups interacted with one another is still being studied and debated.

## Trade Between The Mainland And Caribbean

There is evidence from archaeological finds of pottery and carved artefacts that there was regular trade and movement between the islands and the mainland. The culture of the two areas was very closely linked. There is also evidence of the use of a common trade language that originated with Carib speaking groups from the mainland.

## Adaptation To A New Environment

The mainland tropical forest way of life developed over thousands of years and was shaped by the local plants and animals. When they migrated to the Caribbean indigenous people retained many of their traditions but they also needed to adapt to their new island environment. The large animals they had hunted for food in the forests were not found on the islands, and instead they became experts at fishing from the sea.

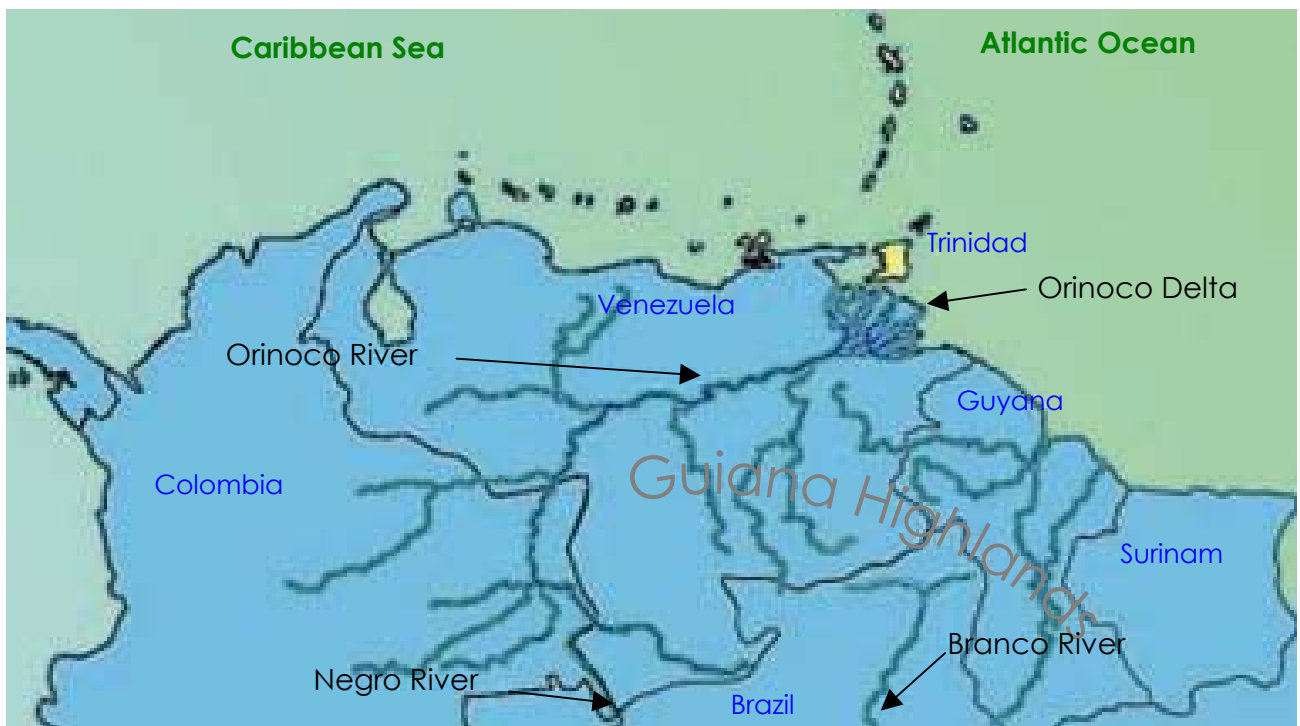
They had to accommodate new animals found on the islands into their mythology. The Island boa constrictor took on the role of the anaconda, which features as such a central figure in the myths of the South American tropical lowlands.

# the shared culture

## The Cultures Of The Mainland And The Caribbean

There were related but different ethnic groups in both the mainland and on the islands, just as there are today among surviving Amerindian groups in the South American tropical lowlands. These groups shared a sophisticated culture and had considerable interaction with each other. The study of today's existing mainland societies by ethnographers has helped in the understanding of the pre Columbian cultures of the Taíno (Arawak) and Island Caribs.

Many traditions and cultural practices were held in common. These included religious customs and beliefs, agricultural practices, patterns of social organisation and ceremonies. They also included the construction of thatched buildings, cultivation of manioc as a staple food, crafts such as hammock weaving, basketry, use of ritual objects such as stools, use of dugout canoes, use of tobacco and other hallucinogenic substances.



## The South American Mainland

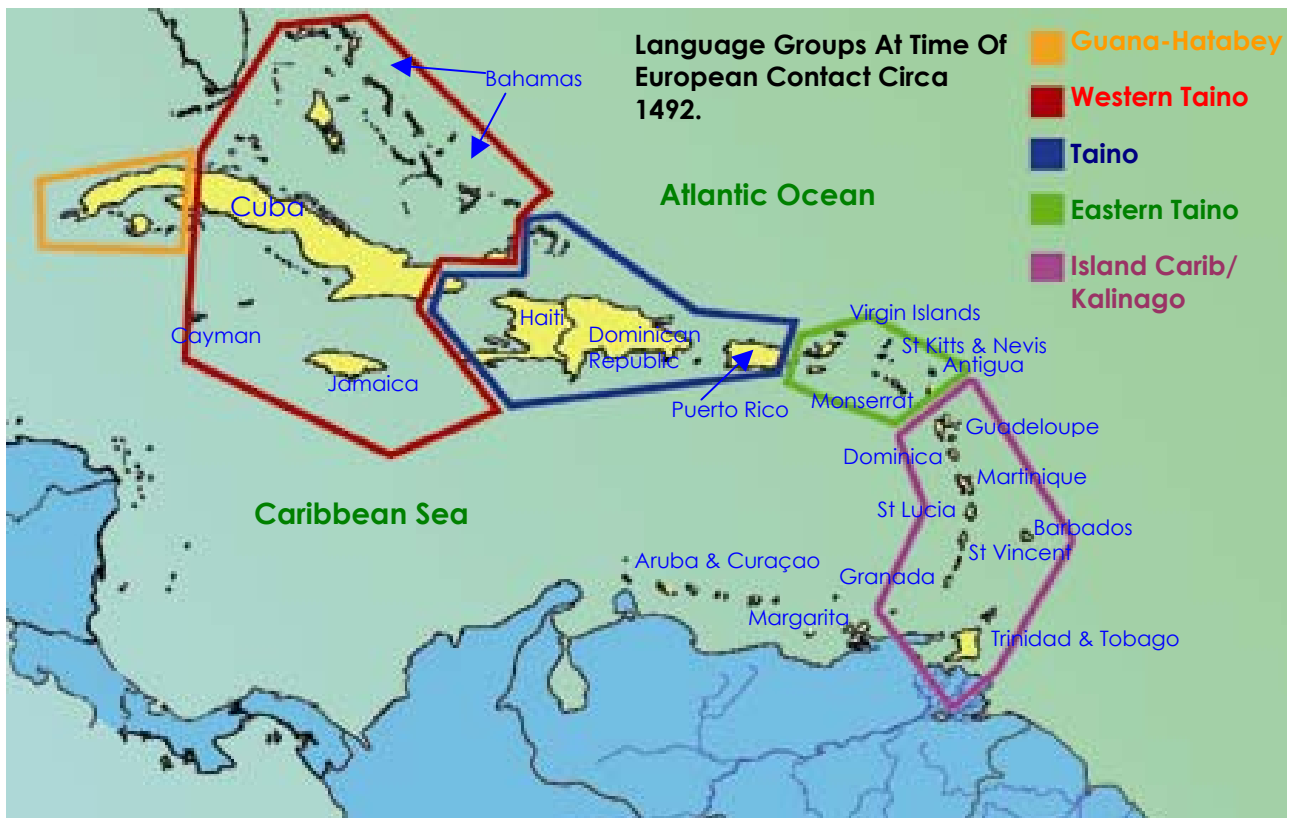
The tropical lowland river system of the Orinoco and its tributaries include the area which today constitutes British Guyana, Surinam and French Guyana and adjacent areas of Brazil and Venezuela. Tribes speaking the two main languages, Arawak (Lokono), Cariban and other smaller language groups, populated this area.

There were established trade networks with people in the Caribbean and with the larger Amazonian river basin area and the two areas shared a common culture. The two main river systems, the Orinoco and Amazon, connect together via the Negro River, making it possible to navigate and trade between the two areas.

## The Island Caribs

The people now called the Island Caribs lived in the Lesser Antilles and were also Arawakan speaking. There is much debate between archaeologists, linguists and ethnographers about who they were, and exactly when they arrived in the islands of the Lesser Antilles. They are thought to be closely related to the Taíno while being influenced culturally and linguistically by contact with the South American mainland. Columbus called them 'Caribs'. In sixteenth century records they are identified as "Calliponam" for women or "Calinago" for men. Today they use the names Kalinago and Garifuna.

Their way of life reflected the environment of their small, heavily forested islands. Settlements were smaller and less permanent than on the Greater Antilles. Like the Taíno they were expert navigators and seafarers, trading and raiding throughout the Caribbean in dugout canoes. They valued bravery in warfare and were in continual conflict with their neighbours in the Greater Antilles and Guiana mainland.



## The Taíno Of The Greater Antilles

When Europeans first arrived in the Caribbean they found the islands of the Greater Antilles (which include Dominican Republic, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba) populated by an Arawakan-speaking people now called the Taíno. These islands were densely populated and their culture was the most highly developed in the Caribbean. There were large, permanent villages, and a complex system of government by hierarchies of chiefs. They traded with and adopted cultural practices from Central American civilisations such as the ritual ball game.

# women's role in indigenous culture

Women had power due to their important role in food production. Unfortunately European male commentators tended to interpret women's role of working in the fields as slaves rather than that of powerful providers. Island Carib women were even powerful enough to plan raids and older women had a central ritual role in encouraging men to go to war.

Taíno women had control over the production and distribution of high status objects such as stools, headdress and clothes used by chiefs.

The roles of men and women were segregated but seen as complementary and expressing the balance in nature. They co-operated in preparing tools for agriculture and food preparation. The separation between Carib men and women was reflected in their different languages (this was also the case for other indigenous societies in the Americas).

## The Season Of The Frog Woman

All over the Caribbean images of frogs appear, carved on rocks, and on decorated pottery. The frog also appears as the green stone amulets used as jewellery and a form of exchange. These represented women's fertility and power in South American tropical lowland culture.

The highly prized green stone used for the amulets originated in the Guiana Highlands and they were traded along the Guiana and Amazonian river systems and right across the Caribbean Islands. They were highly valued and were presented as status gifts, exchanged between communities on special occasions. The amulets were also believed to help women have children.

The image of the frog symbolised the rainy season. Frogs appear when it rains and they produce many eggs. They are a symbol of women's fertility.

Halfway through the time of the Frog Woman, as the season began to turn, it became the time of the wrathful spirit Huracán. This powerful spirit could destroy all in his path. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of December a festival was held to mark the end of the time of the Frog Woman and the passing of Huracán.

## Women's Role In Preserving And Transmitting Culture

The Spanish who colonised the islands of the Greater Antilles were mostly men. So marriages between the local Taíno women and Spanish men were common. In the home the indigenous women would bring their children up with the songs, stories, foods, words and belief systems from their own culture, preserving the elements of indigenous culture that still exist today. The areas of society organised by Taíno men were more visible and tended to be more easily suppressed.

# the impact of european contact, conquest and colonisation

## Columbus

The voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 was the first chronicled journey to the Caribbean by a European. The short time he spent visiting the Caribbean resulted in a series of misunderstandings that had lasting consequences for the people of the Caribbean. It was also the beginning of the tragic process of destruction of the indigenous people and their culture that was to continue for nearly five hundred years.

## The 'Great Dying'

When the Spanish arrived in the Caribbean area in the late 1400s an estimated population of around 1 million people lived on Jamaica and 40,000 people lived on Trinidad. Contact with Europeans resulted in catastrophe for the peoples of South America and the Caribbean. Measles, influenza, small pox and later malaria and yellow fever introduced from Africa swept across the Antilles and deep into the tropical lowlands. Indigenous people had no immunity to these diseases. In some areas around 80 - 90% of the population died. Whole towns and villages were wiped out. The dead were left unburied whilst survivors fled. Social and political networks collapsed.

## The Effect Of Colonisation And Slavery

After the epidemics the populations of the Greater and Lesser Antilles were faced with aggressive European colonisation. The stories of the "peaceful Arawak" giving up without a struggle and the "fierce Caribs" resisting to the bitter end are now thought to be an over simplification of what really happened.

The Spanish set up a system of control called *encomienda* on the islands they colonised. The Taíno were forced to work on colonial plantations or in the gold mines. They were required to pay tax to the Spanish crown in the form of food or gold. The disruption to the Taíno economy resulted in starvation and many died from the brutality of the Spanish.



# resistance and survival

## The Impact Of The European Presence

The political and trading balance of the whole region was altered by the Spanish presence, especially when the other Islands began to be raided for slaves. Large numbers of indigenous people from Central, South and North America were affected, and taken as slaves to the Caribbean islands to replace the Taíno.

During the 1600s and 1700s various European countries fought each other to gain control of the islands. Indigenous people were caught up in these conflicts. To begin, with the people of the mainland and Lesser Antilles were happy to trade water, food and other supplies to passing ships. Groups that were quick to exploit the trade opportunities with the Europeans began to acquire greater power in their area. Europeans exploited existing conflicts by supplying arms and employing some groups as mercenaries.

## The Myth Of Carib Cannibalism

On his first voyage Columbus was told of a fierce people living elsewhere in the Caribbean who were called "Caribs". The Spanish began using the term for any group who didn't co-operate with them. In the following centuries the term "Carib" was applied to people who resisted European control. Their alleged cannibalism was used to justify their enslavement and extermination.

The Island Caribs, as with other groups throughout South and Central America, practised rituals that preserved or consumed the remains of ancestors and enemies. This was believed to transfer possession of the qualities of the dead person. There is no proof that the Island Caribs treated human flesh as a source of food.

## The Indigenous People Resist

The Taíno of the Greater Antilles resisted Spanish colonisation by either fighting back or fleeing to less accessible areas. European attempts to settle the Lesser Antilles were met with hostile resistance by the Island Caribs. The Island Caribs also organised themselves with other Carib groups from the Guianas to mount raids on European settlements. Because of their continued resistance the Europeans saw the Island Caribs as the main obstacle to the successful colonisation of the Caribbean.

## How The Indigenous People Survived

In the Greater Antilles the surviving Taíno remained on the fringes of society or lived deep in the countryside, unrecognised. Indigenous people found creative ways to adapt and adjust to survive in the struggle against European domination. They learned to conceal their ethnic and cultural identity. They dressed in European clothes, worshipped as Christian converts and spoke the local Creole so that they wouldn't stand out among the ethnically mixed Creole population. Recent study of official Spanish documents shows that greater numbers of people survived than was previously thought.

In the Lesser Antilles the Caribs continued to resist the Europeans up to the late 1700's. When the British took control of Dominica in 1763 the remaining Caribs retreated to the inaccessible West Side of the Island. They also lived on the fringes of Creole society, appearing only to sell their crafts and produce and then disappearing back into the forest. All over the Caribbean surviving indigenous communities and individuals learned to conceal their ethnic and cultural identity in order to survive.

## Intermarriage With Europeans And Africans

A recent study of mitochondrial DNA in Puerto Rico found that 61% of the population has indigenous Amerindian ancestry from a female ancestor. Intermarriage between Europeans, Africans and indigenous peoples took place from the beginning of contact and occurred throughout the Islands. The result is that most people in the Caribbean share a mixed legacy that includes indigenous Amerindian ancestors. Some people can be considered to look more 'Indian' than others but in such a mixed population physical features do not always clearly represent genetic inheritance.

## The Garifuna Or Black Caribs Of St Vincent

On St Vincent the descendants of a group of Africans, allegedly from a slave ship wrecked off the island, became part of the Island Carib community in the early 1500s and were called the "Black Caribs". They and the other groups of Island Caribs on St Vincent became involved in a bitter war between the French and English for control of the island. In 1796 the English transported the surviving Caribs to Central America. Today the descendants of the Black Caribs live along the coast of Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. They are called the "Garifuna" and speak an Arawakan language inherited from their Island Carib ancestors.

## How The Culture Survived

Interaction of Africans and Europeans with indigenous people took place over hundreds of years. Secret contact took place at the start of colonisation between slaves and indigenous people. Escaped slaves were given refuge in sacred places such as caves. Fugitive Africans and indigenous people developed their own communities in the countryside. To survive they relied on their indigenous heritage, which represented many generations of knowledge about the Caribbean environment.

# the indigenous craft tradition

## Importance of craft in indigenous culture

The indigenous people of the Caribbean in the pre-Columbian period believed that the spirits they worshipped were represented on and embodied in their craft products. They believed that the skills and design elements used were passed down from ancient spirit beings. Strict rules were followed when learning craft skills. Even today the measure of the beauty of an object is the care and attention to detail demonstrated by the maker and complexity is highly valued. Good craftsmen and women are recognised and respected in the community by their ability to produce consistently superior work.

Traditional crafts practised by indigenous people in the Caribbean today are directly descended from arts that originated on the South American mainland. Many techniques, decorations and patterns and the words and names used have been retained from pre-Colombian times. Today traditional craft is also a valuable way of expressing and preserving traditional culture. Through the sharing of craft skills older people pass on beliefs and identity to the next generation. Traditional crafts such as basketry, calabash work and woodcarving are an important source of income.

## Survival of traditional craft

The craft traditions that survived European colonisation did so because of their usefulness to the colonial economy. Specialist crafts such as basketry were required to provide articles necessary for the processes of the plantation system. Traditional canoes continue to be made for fishing, trading and smuggling throughout the colonial period.

## Importance of craft today

Today traditional crafts are in demand in the local economy and bring in valuable foreign currency through tourism. Their craft enables indigenous artisans to live sustainable and independent lives. There is a commitment to sustaining the natural environment, as the source of the raw materials for craft products.

# indigenous contributions to caribbean culture today

Different cultural traditions - indigenous, African and European, were mixed together to form today's Caribbean culture. There is evidence of the survival of indigenous culture in many areas- the knowledge of the use of medicinal herbs, food and cooking, in crafts such as basketry and in the construction of canoes and ways of fishing. Indigenous culture also exists in more subtle ways, such as through traditional stories and superstitions and in relations with the natural world.

Indigenous language survives in various forms – in plant, food and animal names, agricultural terms and practices. In all parts of the Caribbean place names are a readily recognisable source of indigenous words.

The world also owes many important food crops to the indigenous people- manioc, maize, cocoa, pineapple and other fruits and vegetables.

## Beliefs And Values

Indigenous spiritual beliefs and ancestral values still exist in Caribbean culture. Taíno concepts of family relations and hospitality customs exist in the Dominican Republic and Cuba. In Guadeloupe, the way living spaces are arranged into private and public and the orientation of the house to the sea, are connected with indigenous practices. Many farmers use indigenous spiritual practices of agriculture such as avoiding certain days and using the lunar cycle to plant.

Island Caribs' gardens were placed at a distance from the home and were protected private spaces. In Dominica the practice of locating the garden in the hills behind the house still exists today. The way Caribbean gardens are mixed, with tree crops, root crops, spices and peppers all together, shows a link with indigenous practices. People in rural Cuba, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic still live in traditional houses called bohios, a Taíno name.

Many Creole stories have indigenous origins, including supernatural beings such as the Ciguapa or Lajables, a beautiful woman beast with long hair and inverted or cow's feet.

# the continuity of caribbean indigenous people

## Symbols Of Resistance

Indigenous people also play an important role as representations of unity and symbols of resistance from domination because they were the first to fight against colonialism. Political parties in the Greater Antilles use indigenous symbols as a way of establishing common ground. Indigenous imagery is often found in a romanticised form - Taíno chiefs feature as national heroes and appear on stamps, coins, phone cards, sculptures, and murals on buildings. Indigenous images appear on commercial products and are used by businesses and advertising.

## The Indigenous Revival

Today indigenous people of the Caribbean are rediscovering their history, reasserting their right to recognition and endeavouring to revive their culture. This is taking place among the Kalinago of Dominica, the Bethechilokono of St Lucia, the Kalina of Arima in Trinidad, indigenous groups in Guyana, the Taíno of Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic and the Garifuni of Honduras, Belize and Guatemala. By sharing their culture and language with each other they are putting together a more intact cultural identity.

Many in the forefront of this movement have mixed ancestry. They have chosen to see themselves and frame their identity in terms of their indigenous heritage. Eventually it will become easier for more in the Caribbean to recognise and celebrate their indigenous ancestry in the same way as they do today with the contribution of the African culture to the Caribbean identity.

What is true in this statement by Edouard Glissant may also become true with regard to the recognition of the indigenous contribution: *'Today the (French) Caribbean individual does not deny the African part of himself. He does not have, in reaction, to go to the extreme of celebrating it exclusively. He must recognise it...(in so doing) he has become Caribbean.'*

## The Role Of The Internet

The Internet has become a key means of sharing information and linking indigenous communities. Web sites that promote greater cultural awareness and identity and the recognition of the need to re-evaluate history are being maintained by indigenous groups who live outside of their home countries, such as the Puerto Rican Taíno community in the United States.

## The Carib Territory In Dominica

The West coast of the island of Dominica is home to approximately 3,400 people of Kalinago or Island Carib decent. The Kalinago called the island Wai'tukubuli- 'How tall is her body'. The Carib people had survived since 1700 by living on the inaccessible Atlantic Coast. In 1903 they were granted their own Reserve of 3700 acres and the office of Carib Chief was recognised. The land is held in common and the Carib Council at the Dominican Parliament represents the Caribs.

Most Caribs are farmers and fishermen. Conditions in the global economy have affected the banana industry, making it necessary to search for other means of making a living. Traditional crafts are an important supply of extra income. The improvement of tourist facilities is seen as a key priority.

Carib culture has been eroded by the loss of the language and the encroachment of commercial global culture. The establishment of a secondary school and more teaching of Carib history in schools are seen as priorities.

There is a movement to revive Carib culture headed by groups and artists such as Karifuna and Jacob Frederick. Caribs in Dominica are part of the wider movement of indigenous people in the Caribbean to reassert their cultural identity. They have maintained links with the Kalina community in Arima, Trinidad and today are part of the Caribbean Organisation of Indigenous Peoples (COIP), which exchanges information and organises projects between other indigenous groups in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the world.

# the gli-gli carib canoe project

## Reviving An Ancient Tradition

The great canoes encountered by Europeans in the Caribbean have their direct descendents in the fishing canoes on the Island of Dominica today. In 1997 a 12 metre Carib canoe, the Gli-Gli, sailed on a symbolic journey along the Caribbean island chain to Venezuela and Guyana. Carib Chief Hillary Frederick described the voyage as “the first in 500 years”.

## The Project Concept

The Gli-Gli was the joint idea of two artists in 1994, Aragorn Dick-Read from Tortola, and Carib artist and activist Jacob Frederick. The aims of the project were to show that long sea voyages in the same type of canoes were regularly carried out before and during colonial times. It was also an opportunity to link surviving indigenous communities with those in Dominica and to research cultural practices and language still in existence.

## Construction and voyage

The canoe was built from a giant Gommier tree located in the rainforest on the Carib Territory. It took three weeks for the tree to be felled and carved. The team included master canoe builders Etien Charles, Hyacinth Stoute and Prince Hamlet. Forty men were needed to haul the canoe to the village of Salybia where the canoe was opened out and the ribs, sides and mast built. The canoe was painted with traditional Taíno designs and was named after the sparrow hawk, a symbol of bravery.

The 1997 voyage took the Gli-Gli, accompanied by the schooner ‘Carmela’ to visit Carib and Arawak communities on the islands and mainland. Celebrations were held to mark the Gli-Gli’s arrival. The voyage also included visiting communities on the Orinoco delta and up the Barima and Pomeroon rivers.

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Other photographs of Dominica by Bryn Hyacinth.

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## **For more information see the following web sites:**

[www.centrelink.org/](http://www.centrelink.org/), [www.kacike.org/](http://www.kacike.org/)

The Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink provides a comprehensive bibliography and links to many other relevant web pages. It also provides full text for historical documents that are out of copyright.

For an introduction to the history and culture of the indigenous people of the Caribbean we can recommend the book '**The Indigenous People of the Caribbean**', edited by Samuel Wilson.

**This information formed part of the Untold Origins Exhibition of October 2004 – February 2005 held at the Cuming Museum.**

**Text written by Bryn Hyacinth.**

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