

\$3.00

DAYBREAK

WINTER 1989

American Indian World Views

VOL 3 NO 1

INSIDE...

- Eskimo Art
- Indians of Nicaragua
- Caribs of Dominica



WILL INDIAN NATIONS SURVIVE?

DAYBREAK REPORT



Photo courtesy, Plenty Canada

WITH THE CARIBS IN DOMINICA

by Jose Barreiro

From a circling airplane, Dominica is an island of green mountains in the clear blue lake of the Caribbean. On land, you climb in a four-wheel drive up steep hills surrounded by verdant fields of coconuts, bananas, orange and tangerine trees, goats, pigs, and vegetable gardens. Dominica, a kind of paradise, has a tropical rainforest with no poisonous animals and central valleys full of rivers (360) and deep bush, waterfalls and many small plantations.

You will find Dominica on the map by following the extended finger of Florida along the back of Cuba (the Cayman), Hispaniola (Santo Domingo/Haiti), and south to the little turtle islands of the lesser Antilles. Dominica is one of those small islands (16 by 29 miles), northeast of Barbados and Granada, between the islands of Guadalupe and Martinique.

On the northeast corner of Dominica, facing the Atlantic Ocean, there is a community of Carib Indians. The Caribs, who have a reservation approximately 5 by 7 miles, are descendants of the original Orinoco River tribes, Arawaks and Caribs, that met Christopher Columbus. The vast majority of Dominica's 80,000 people are African-Americans, descendants of slaves imported to work British plantations over three centuries. They run an independent government, with a parliamentary system.

Not many people even know that there are Carib Indians left in the world, but last December, a group of eight elder women and two elder men in the Carib Community gathered in a circle of chairs to greet visitors and dialogue with some of their young men councilors. Some two to three thousand Indians live on the reservation, where many of the men are fishermen/farmers and the women weave beautiful baskets and fire various types of pottery.

The current Carib chief, Irvine Augulste, is a young man with a single long braid of hair running down his back. He pointed out the group of elders had a

strong representation of women. "See, and they say we Caribs belittle and abuse our women."

The Caribs, who in Dominica now speak Patois (a mixed French, African and Indian language), are among the most maligned of native peoples in the history books. As the elders sat in the shade after their meal, ready to hear the young men, Chief Augulste commented how Spanish, Dutch and English all "called us cannibals," he said. "They say we conquer the land and steal the women."

He translated to Patois for the women, who laughed and shook their heads. One said, smiling widely. "No, we are good. We don't eat people." Everyone laughed.

The group of elders had come out at the council's request to meet with Canadian guests about possible development projects. As customary, the chief and councilors thanked the elders for coming to help them, as young men, decide difficult issues.

The night before, in a free-ranging discussion, the Carib community leaders had brought up several important issues to guest Larry McDermott, director of a non-governmental organization that funds model projects for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

The Carib community is in a state of flux, the councilors told McDermott. Many new changes are coming into their reservation these days, some good and some bad. They are a poor but traditional community that for many years has been at the margin of the Dominican national economy, but which is now modernizing more and more rapidly.

They continue many traditions among their people, the councilors said, including their fishing arts (Caribs are master makers of dugout canoes), songs and dance, food gardens, herbology and the family-based small homestead lifestyle. (Like all Dominicans, the Caribs devote their farms largely to bananas, in which trade the country has enjoyed a privileged tariff relationship with England.) The Councilors also discussed with McDermott the building of a wavebreaker, as their boat launching places all face the rough Atlantic. Boats are easily smashed against corals and rocks and fishermen are injured in the absence of a wavebreaker.

They also stressed that their Carib tradition is suffering and many of their young people are growing up with little Indian identity. Although they still have elders who know the true Carib history and much of the culture, the Carib history taught in the schools is full of stereotypes and that hurts their children. Chief

continued on next page

Auguste emphasized the lack of adequate technical and professional training for the community's generation of young adults, specially in the health and nutrition fields.

Sitting outside after lunch, the elder women immediately agreed with the councillors' concerns. In particular, they wanted the fishermen helped with their windbreaker. Some of the women had lost husbands and sons at sea and knew the dangers of their coast. One spoke for awhile about the tree they use to make the dugouts, called the gourmier tree, versatile in its uses, and about the need to help plant more of them, "for use by future generations of Carib fishermen." The resin from this very respected tree is burned as incense to the spirits by the old people.

The chief then introduced the big problem that he wanted the elders to discuss. This was that the reservation has virtually no community marketplace and there is a lack of economic infrastructure. The Caribs, and the elders complain about this, for they have to go to other towns to shop and do business. The women all nodded, agreeing that something more was needed.

But now, said the chief, some of the wealthier banana farmers in the community want to open shops but cannot get bank loans to expand. As the reservation is a common jurisdiction of Indian land, it cannot be seized and banks won't accept it as collateral for business loans. Some businessmen were now pushing to "allot" the reservation into individually-owned parcels. Napoleon, one of the councillors and a master canoe builder, seconded the chief in the question. He was for economic development, but wondered how the elders felt about breaking up the common reservation land base.

Suddenly the women all spoke at once, shaking heads and saying, "no, no, no." The chief made a face of surprise and nodded to the group, while the women then conferred among themselves. One of the older men who talked too much was shushed and one elder woman spoke: "No, that cannot be done. We tell this to you councillors and to the chief. In this I must remind you of how our grandparents spoke. They said this land is all we have left and we should not split it up."

"If we split, we'll be all over," said another woman.

Chief Auguste, of course, agreed with his elders. Later, in the day, when another councillor suggested the start of a reservation credit union, everyone agreed that might be a good idea to go that way.

No Wish to Celebrate Columbus

Your experience in Dominica a reduced sense of scale that makes you think small in the physical but gains the wide-open imagination of the ocean itself. This Black-majority island nation, smaller in both population and size and with fewer mineral resources than several North American Indian reservations, is a full-fledged member of the family of nations, with its own seat at the United Nations.

For the Caribs, however, there is also a sense of independence and self-identity, Chief Auguste emphasized, during a walk up a hill to Napoleon's house in the middle afternoon. But in framing a question to him I used the term "Indian nation," assumed by so many Indian peoples nowadays, and the chief winced. I wondered if that terminology, accepted in the United States and Canada, was troublesome for them.

"Unfortunately we can not express ourselves as a people too much," he said, "for fear of being misunderstood by the population at large. The word 'nation,' it implies too much independence." The chief reminded me that even in this smallest of countries, the American Indian presence is tiny in numbers, though it is getting a higher profile.

"We try to cooperate with the Dominica government and we are Dominicans, but we are also Caribs, a people and we want to be in charge of our own future," he said. "But even here, in a small island, you'd be surprised how bad communications can get."

Two years before a hard issue had come up. Faced with a sudden increase in new, non-Carib Black residents to the reservation lands, the councillors and the Chief had found evidence of drug dealing and peace-disrupting scenes. They challenged the right of residence of some of the newcomers and tried to evict them.

"The media got a hold of it. They made it seem like an apartheid type thing. Indians against Black people. I was saying no, it isn't that way, but it is difficult to explain. How we define our community members, it requires patience to understand."

Maybe half of the Carib families in Dominica have mixed bloodlines with African people, Auguste said, so the problem is not over looks or skin color. "I tried to tell the radio stations that the problem was not racism, but they always reported the same garbled Indian against Black message."

Several violent incidents, including machete fights, led Chief Auguste to call off the confrontation. "We don't need a war. We need a way to get along. But they were wrong," he said. "It wasn't racist on our part. It was about the kind of people coming in."

At the Carib Culture Building we entered a small library where Chief Auguste

showed three shelves of books. He pulled out a history book and opened it to a Columbus-era chapter. His finger pointed to a description of Carib Indians that uses the words "fierce" and "cannibals." The chief smiled. "See. No communication then either."

About the accusation that his people were cannibals, Chief Auguste said, "it is a very wicked lie." He said he hoped the Carib people would get a chance to tell more people about their real culture and history at the 1992 Quincentenary of the first Columbus voyage. Not that they cared to "celebrate" Columbus, he said, but to reanalyze what happened.

"This cannibal lie," he said. "It goes back to the Spaniards, to the English. Columbus came to the new world looking for gold...he met the people inhabiting these islands and tried to enslave them. And the Carib people had enjoyed centuries of freedom, making their cassava bread and catching fish. Naturally they would retaliate against anyone trying to enslave them."

The Chief allowed that in war, within their ancient warrior tradition, a slain enemy might be cut and parts of him might be eaten, a practice documented to warrior/soldiers in many wars. What didn't happen (but is depicted in early European paintings of Caribs) was the use of human meat as a staple, Chief Auguste said. He smiled, "we have too many good things to eat."

He continued: "Then, when they first brought in Black slaves, the English told them we Caribs ate Black people, so that the 'maroons' would not seek to join us when they ran away, and would fight us when they did. Like that they kept our two peoples divided a long time."

In one island, St. Vincent, in order to control their slaves, the British plantation owners went as far as to import poisonous snakes into the more remote swamps. As a result, it is today the only Caribbean island with that dangerous non-Indigenous nuisance.

Movement to Preserve Culture

The Caribs have a drama/dance troupe called Karifuna, which is the name of their language. In the large community building next to the library, Prosper Paris, a young man with flowing black hair who is also a councillor, leads the group. With fourteen actual members, the group has been together for ten years and has "graduated" dozens of community youngsters.

"Most of our music and dance, it was almost gone, just as our Carib language is now mostly gone," Prosper said, with an eye on the stage, where dance steps were being rehearsed. "We started the culture group first to bring back our identity as Indian people. We still fish, make dugout canoe, we can live off of nature — but we still are losing our identity."

Garnett, a Karifuna founder, stopped by. He said his biggest concern now is to videotape the elders who know skills. "Just since my childhood, many things you used to see are now gone. Old people die and nobody learns their skills. I want to do something about that."

Garnett and Prosper, surrounded by the other members, told about their Karifuna tours of Europe and North America. They saw that work as attempts to cultivate international friendships for their Carib people and for Dominica in general. "We have a right to fight for our Indian culture. We have the right to recover even the things we have lost. Even our language. In our region and all over the Americas, we should seek each other as Indian peoples, just like the Jewish people do, or the Irish or the Italians or the Galicians or the Arabs."

They point out that there are several other Carib communities where the traditional Indian culture is more alive — in Belize, in British Guiana and the Sandy Bay Carib community of nearby St. Vincent island. Carib delegates from the various communities have visited each other in recent years and have formed a Caribbean Organization of Indigenous Peoples, with headquarters in Belize. They plan to seek out all Caribbean Indian communities and recognize each other.

Among the aboriginal Caribbeans, only the Caribs and several small communities of Arawak-descendants living along the Rio Toa in eastern Cuba, can be said to have survived the American holocaust. The only other ethnically defined populations in the islands are Guajiro, country people of mixed culture and mixed racial backgrounds who are found both in Cuba and Santo Domingo. In the Cuban provinces of Camaguey and Guantanamo, to this day, the term "Guajiro" connotes an ethnicity and is associated with a "country-folk" lifestyle. According to Yale literature professor Dr. Jose Juan Arrom, the word "guajiro" means "one of us" in Taino. It was applied by the old Indians to the culture of the new mestizo generation. Curiously, a more full-blooded people of Arawak origins, the Guajiro of Colombia's peninsular coast, exhibit cultural traits similar to the island Guajiros.

"I think it would be very good to get to know all the Indian groups," Prosper said. Garnett, now joined by Chief Auguste, then sent a greetings to the Indian people of Ontario, whose reservations he toured with a Karifuna group in 1982. "I went to the Six Nations reserve and went to a social dance," Garnett said.

"I want to say to the North American Indians that I've appreciated learning about your history and culture," Chief Auguste said, when asked for a message. "I appreciate your being able to keep up whatever struggle, to make sure it never dies. Keep on pressing on because I don't think you're going to be defeated at

Continued on page 26

EARTH DANCE

Indian Design T-Shirts



Celebrate Native American Pride

- * Navajo Designs
- * Mission Eagles
- * San Ildefonso
- * Chilkat Bear

100% Quality Cotton T-Shirts,
Sweat Shirts and Oversize Shirts
with Distinctive Tribal designs

Write for Catalog and Prices

EARTH DANCE
P.O. Box 1921
Paradise, CA
95967

DAYBREAK AD SPACE



is a low cost, highly effective marketing vehicle. The only one of its kind coming out of the Indian country.

\$300 quarterly allows you to pitch to 200,000 responsive readers a year; socially conscious customers who want to use Indian made products and services.

Write to: DAYBREAK PO Box 315,
Williamsville, NY 14231-0315

'Caribs' from page 25

this stage. We are not isolated anymore. As for us, we have the other half of what you have, so go forward and we will follow in your footsteps. I am sure they understand that we share all the struggle that continues."

Facing the Ocean and Sharks

On top of a hill looking out on the Atlantic, Napoleon, a mature man of forty, had four boats in the making. Napoleon is a well-built Carib fisherman with a steady gait who runs a crew of apprentice dugout makers. The dugout canoes of the Caribs are made today almost exactly as they were made at the time of Columbus. The Carib fishermen go out to sea in them, sailing among the Windward Islands and facing storms and large ocean predators, including the Great White shark, to do their trading and catch their fish.

"I learned from my father," Napoleon said. "Four is a lot of boats to do at once. With my father, he may not make boat for three, four years. Then one day, he'd say, 'I make boat this year.' Then he'd go out in the bush and take the uncles and me with him. He would select a good tree of the Gourmier. There are rules to follow in that. Then he would cut it and we would all drag it out, up and down, out of the bush."

Napoleon explained the fine art of making oceangoing dugout canoes out of Gourmier trees, how they are carved by hatchet (he may cheat nowadays with a chainsaw). The carved out trunk will tend to fold in and must be kept open by filling its cavity with large rocks and water. After four to five months, the tree trunk "opens out" for a few days - and only a few days. It is at this precise moment that the canoe is "fired" to set. At any of these steps, improper treatment will cause the tree to splinter and shatter, ruining the work.

Two old Carib men stopped by to see the boats. One told the story of the "riot of 1930." That fight broke out when Dominica officials attempted to "tax" items brought home by Carib pilots from nearby Marie Galante Island. The old man had been shot in the arm. "We fought hard that time," he said. "We are tough sailors."

The other told stories of going out to sea, travelling from island to island. "It takes a big man to go out to sea like that," he said. "Our men still do that. In the old days, we were even bigger men. Tough. Our people were tough. We took anything on, fished for all kinds of fish. We took on the weather. Canoe tip over, we right it, bail it out, keep going. We meet big shark, we take him on. No problem." He laughed. "That big shark, the White, he is really smart and he has a lot of teeth. Rows of them. He will grab your boat and shake it, try to dump you out. Yes sir, God Save the Queen, our Indian men have big hearts."

Reading on Carib history, one encounters "The Memoirs of Pere Labat, 1693-1705." Pere Labat, a French priest who sailed the Caribbean for the church and had occasion to meet Dominica's Caribs 200 years after Columbus, recorded a most interesting encounter between a young Carib and a 20-foot great hammerhead shark.

The priest wrote in his memoirs that...after a hammerhead shark had bitten off an Indian child's leg, when he was bathing in the harbour, a Carib volunteered to kill the fish...The Carib armed himself with two well-sharpened bayonets, and after raising his courage by drinking a couple of glasses of rum, he dived into the sea.

The hammerhead, which had now gotten a taste of human flesh, attacked the Indian as soon as it saw him. The Carib allowed it to approach without doing anything until the moment he thought it was on the point of making his rush. But at the instant it charged, he dived underneath it and stabbed it in the belly with both bayonets...This scene was enacted 7 or 8 times, and at the end of half an hour the hammerhead turned belly up and died.

"After the Carib came ashore, some people went out in a canoe and tied a rope to the shark's tail, which was then towed to the beach. It proved to be a monster twenty feet long, and its girth was as large as that of a horse. The child's leg was found whole in its stomach."

Napoleon remembered once a Great White followed him almost all the way home but he had good luck; although it bumped his dugout a couple of times, the shark did not attack.

On a hill overlooking the rock beach where the Carib fishermen launch their boats is a small Catholic church. Inside the church, at the altar, is a full Carib gourmier boat, polished in offering to the deity.

The Master Snake

Late afternoon, Napoleon took a couple of us to the "escalier Tete Chien," or snake's staircase at an ancient place called Sineku, where there is a lava rock extension in the form of a snake that juts out into the deep ocean. You climb down onto the top of the rock on a trail through rich woods that turns into large, egg-shaped boulders and then to the top of the snake stairs. According to his old people, Napoleon told us, it was here that the Master Snake came out of the ocean and onto the land. "The old people would come and smoke a pipe, a little white pipe here. Then they would sleep and the master snake would come out to answer their questions in dreams," he said.

"When the Caribs disappear, the old people said," Napoleon told us. "The Master Snake has vowed to return to the underbelly of the ocean. And the world will end."

NEW VOICES FROM

Maurice Kenny
Bruce King
Carol Snow
Debra E. Stalk
Tom Huff
Alex Jacobs
Ray Fadden
Stephen Fadden



David Back
Salli Benedict
Peter Blue Cloud
Francis Boots
Beth Brant
Pam Colorado
Katsi Cook
Melanic M. Ellis
John Mohawk

THE LONGHOUSE

An Anthology of Contemporary Iroquois Writing

For the last two decades and more, the voices of Iroquois writers have been heard. In internationally circulated Native magazines such as AKWESASNE NOTES, DAYBREAK, AKWEKON, and TURTLE QUARTERLY, in hundreds of literary magazines and dozens of individually authored books, Iroquois people have spoken out in poetry, fiction, and essays. Until now, however, no wide-ranging collection of work representing the diversity of contemporary writing from the Iroquois has been available. NEW VOICES FROM THE LONGHOUSE remedies that situation. With twenty-nine contributors, including contributing editors Maurice Kenny and Alex Jacobs, it presents everything from ecological essays and humorous non-fiction, to lyric poetry and finely-crafted short stories. Its more than 300 pages include well-known writers such as Peter Blue Cloud and Roberta Hill Whiteman and others appearing in print for almost the first time. It is a book which anyone interested in Native American literature and life should own.

To Order: Send \$12.95 (prepaid orders send postage free) to:

The Greenfield Review Press
2 Middle Grove Road Greenfield Center, N.Y. 12833