

Aboriginal Peoples: Their Struggle with Cultural Identity in the CARICOM Region

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Abstract

Although there are over 75,000 aboriginal peoples in the CARICOM countries of Dominica, St. Vincent, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Belize, the dominant society in these countries has little regard for their cultural identity. This study shows that notwithstanding such non-validation, the aboriginal peoples have used various methods in the past and present to assert their identity. Furthermore, the UN and other agencies have since the late 1980's adopted a new regime that recognizes the cultural distinction of aboriginal peoples worldwide. The paper argues that CARICOM countries need to follow this lead thereby bringing into fruition the spirit of cultural pluralism long upheld in the social sciences in the region.

Introduction

Probably the greatest contribution of M.G. Smith's concept of pluralism is to spotlight the tension to reconcile cultural differences within the confines of small, open societies in the Caribbean. In a beginning study (1955) and especially in his seminal 1974 volume he combined segmentation social and cultural interrelations, and state policy to form the basis of pluralist theory. Neither Smith nor other students of pluralism, such as Depres (1967), factored in the region's aboriginal peoples within their surveys. This study deliberately reverses the trend by highlighting exclusively the little known aboriginal peoples of the English-speaking Caribbean. It starts and ends with them, however, as parts within the larger mosaic of Caribbean peoples. Its main thrust is to understand their cultural identity; to initiate its reconstruction over time and space; and to argue strongly against the current trend to undervalue it. It uses information from primary sources gathered in conducting surveys among aboriginal peoples in Dominica, St. Vincent, Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, and Belize.¹ It includes the results of relatively new studies together with information about the global movement for the recognition of aboriginal peoples.

The uprisings of native peoples throughout the Americas highlighted in the media by the Mohawks in Quebec in 1990 and the Maya in Chiapas since January 1994, to mention only a few, have led to a great deal of literature on the larger issue of their identity. Topics include the essential ingredients of identification (Fields 1994: 237-248), the context of projecting identity (Benjamin and Tiessen 1994: 252-261), and the increasing articulation by native peoples in the struggle (Warren 1994: 81-86) and (Stavenhagen 1994: 77-80). While the events and the literature point toward stressful and confrontational situations, it is not the case in the Caribbean.

The struggle in the region is relatively tame and far removed from that dialectical level. Briefly it centres on the argument that they exist and did not all become exterminated, and that they deserve a new regime within their states in keeping with the dictates of the United Nations. This study widens discussion from the use of conflict on aboriginal issues. It does so by emphasizing the roots of cultural identity, its performance by incumbents, and a crucial role of the new world order in delineating its equitable execution. The common welfare of the civil society dictates that the discussion of cultural identity be continuous. Such dialogue fits within the context of the UN declared Decade of Indigenous Peoples 1995 - 2004.

Problematic of Cultural Identity

The principal problem within the cultural identity of the region's aboriginal peoples does not come from themselves, but from the dominant society which has not addressed how to define them and non-validates their cultural traits.

1. Re-definition of their designation

The commonly used term “indigenous” does not fit them. Its dictionary meaning is originating naturally in a region (Oxford 1991: 602); and the one region in the world where the social and cultural extremities of adaptation defy its basically plant and animal connotation is the Caribbean. Peoples from all over the world have come, adapted to the region, and become native to it. Using indigenous only to refer to the living Arawaks, Maya, and others would, therefore, deny to several others their rootedness while not sufficiently addressing the distinction that the Arawaks and others truly deserve. For this reason I prefer to use “aboriginal” making Columbus' landfall a time marker. Aboriginal peoples² are those who can trace biological and cultural origins in this region to the Pre-Columbian era. It includes the modern day descendants of Arawaks, Caribs, and Maya. My reference to Columbus underlines his cataclysmic overthrow of the world order on this side of the Atlantic. Finally, in referring to the same group spread over an area, I use the term “nation” as against “tribe”, the latter being an anthropological term with its own specific meaning not applicable in this discussion.

Conservatively there are about 75, 000 persons who are aboriginal in the countries of Dominica, St. Vincent, Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, and Belize. The largest number is in Guyana where there are nine nations represented, but proportionate to the national population, Belize has the most (18 percent) subdivided among four nations, see Table 1. For a description of the peoples see Forte (1989), Gregoire and Kanem (1989: 52-55), Palacio (1989: 49-51), Wilk and Chapin (1990), and the West Indian Commission (1992).³

Table 1: Approximate Numbers of Aboriginal Peoples

Country	Year	Population	Aboriginal Peoples	Settlement Patterns	Numbers
Belize	1980	146,000	Garifuna	85% urban	12,000

				15% rural	
			Maya Mopan	10 villages	10,000
			Maya Kekchi	26 villages	4,000
Dominica	1981	73,795	Caribs	rural	3,000
Guyana	1986	756,000	Caribs, Warau		
			Arawak	rural	20,000
			Akawaio, Arekuna	rural	
			Patamona	rural	
			Macusi, Wapishiana	rural	
			WaiWai	rural	21,000
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	1990	113,000	Caribs	rural	6,000
Trinidad & Tobago	1990	1,234,000	Caribs	urban	400
TOTAL					76,400

One of Columbus' cardinal errors was to impute into peoples he was seeing for the first time certain attributes—names, values, religions, use of material objects, and so on. Furthermore, he used rumours from one nation about another to substantiate his biases (Hulme 1993: 189-220). Thus, he exaggerated the Taino account of Carib cannibalism catapulting it into a major classification system separating two peoples—Caribs and Arawaks—that shared a great deal in common. The need to repeat this statement about Columbus' mistake is that our perspectives on the identity of the region's aboriginal peoples are still bathed in his original sin. Of course, we dissociate ourselves with much of what he regarded facts and has since been repudiated. But like him, many still believe that Caribs are identifiable wherever they are and that so also are the Arawaks and Maya. Such convictions should remain premises for further research by anthropologists who use a battery of methods in archaeology, linguistics, ethnohistory, and ethnology. Starting with the trait as the irreducible unit of cultural identity they have acquired much scientific information to place humankind in parts of the region thousands of years before Christ (Rouse 1992).

More significantly for our purposes they have placed cultures in the region within two macro-traditions—the Amazon Forest Tradition and the Mesoamerican. These designations are comparable to the use of the terms European and West African to refer to groups who have shared given traits within set areas for centuries. The Amazon Forest Tradition includes peoples in Guyana and the islands, while the Mesoamerican the Maya in Belize.

Diagnostics of the Amazon Forest Tradition are the cultivation of root crops, especially bitter manioc and its processing, effective river and seacraft, and the use of the hammock (Lothrop 1977: 417-429 and Steward 1948). The Amazon basin itself covers the larger portion of northern South America, but the portion that is specific to this study includes Venezuela, the Guianas, and the West Indies. Rouse (1992) has further clarified the scope of the Amazon Forest Tradition by identifying its subdivisions among the Taino in the Greater Antilles. Diagnostics for the Mesoamerican Tradition are the cultivation of corn, agricultural village life with social hierarchies, large scale public ceremonies, and highly accomplished artisans (Willey 1966). The subregion of interest to us is the area of Belize extending north to the southern Yucatan and West to the eastern portion of the Guatemalan province of El Peten.

Even as we work within the security of two traditions located in two large geographical areas, there are the inevitable surprises that remind us that people do form their own discrete culture that distinguishes them as they migrate from one cultural tradition to another. The Garifuna are a good case in point. They belong to the Amazon Forest Tradition but now are found in the Mesoamerican area of Belize after the British forcefully removed them from the Lesser Antilles island of St. Vincent in 1796 (Gonzalez 1988). Ironically, they have retained far more traits than their relatives who remained in the Eastern Caribbean. The Garifuna demonstrate that it is possible to cultivate identity while being away from the homeland and living as the subjects of one's former enemy.

The Garifuna case brings forward the usefulness of regionality within our current study. The approximately 200,000 Garifuna are spread from Belize south along the Caribbean coast of Central America to Nicaragua, However, we are focusing on less than 13,000 located only in Belize. Similarly, nations in Guyana extend to Venezuela or Brazil, although we focus on those in Guyana. The onus is on the researcher to select for analysis people within the subregion of a larger region. His/her conclusions may not be applicable for the same nation found outside his/her subregion. The corollary of this is that Maya, Caribs, and Arawaks are not homogenous groups with predictable cultural patterns; it is an hypothesis to be proven by research. This major error committed by the early conquistadors should not be repeated.

This discussion has brought us closer to understand the cultural identity of the CARICOM's aboriginal peoples. We know who they are and their cultural affiliations. Two concepts are forthcoming from the latter that will receive more attention further below in reconstructing cultural identity. They are regionality and affinity.

2. The Atrophy of Cultural Traits and the Non-validation of Aboriginal Peoples.

The atrophy of cultural traits and the non-validation of aboriginal peoples have both cause and effect relations to each other. They are the cumulative impact of myths and practices that have negatively stereotyped the same people over the past half millennium. The resulting depreciation of cultural traits leading to their complete loss is particularly regrettable, for it drives into irretrievable deficit the balance sheet of

human diversity. It occurs at a time when the traditional knowledge of aboriginal peoples is most needed to better understand biological diversity and other mysteries pivotal to humankind's collective survival.

A profile of cultural retention in the region shows the highest in Belize among the Mopan and Kekchi and probably the Wai Wai in Guyana. The vast majority of their counterparts throughout the region do not speak the language; are ignorant of the chants, prayers, and other religious rituals; may eat the food because it is the only thing available; and stay in the community only for brief periods of time. In such slippage is there a point where self-identification can no longer take place? It has reached this point among several persons in the coastal nations of Guyana as well as the Mestizo⁴ and Garifuna of Belize. In the case of the Caribs of Dominica and St. Vincent it had taken place several decades ago. On the other hand, the ideology of identity is undergoing such a strong renaissance that some of the aboriginal peoples are changing its definition to suit the changes in the larger social context. The case of the Garifuna further below elucidates this point. In short, even with the loss of conventional traits, consciousness can still be maintained and even reinforced.

Indeed, it is the larger society that sets the pace for the atrophy of cultural traits. Ordinarily there is a process of natural wastage whereby some traits will weaken over time as others take their place. But ignoring the traits of aboriginal peoples to the extent of precipitating their loss is the practice in all the CARICOM countries.⁵ It is distinctive for non-action in the following areas:

1. No legal framework identifying the separate identity of aboriginal peoples and providing a structure for the special attention they deserve.
2. No special allowance for the retention of their culture, such as language training in school.
3. No efforts to have them exercise autonomy by being fully responsible for local government.
4. No exclusive land allocations. The land reservations—where they exist—are inadequate and deny full ownership rights.
5. No recognition of their special historical contribution, notwithstanding being the victims of genocide and selective exclusion.

The above are indicators of the non-recognition of aboriginal peoples built into the independence constitutions of CARICOM countries.⁶ To provide the basic rights of citizenship to all, the states at the time of independence extended the full rights and obligations of citizenship to all aboriginal peoples. There has been no awareness of the fact, however, that before they could take advantage of citizenship they would have to receive special provisions to enable them to reach the level field accessible to others. It is these provisions that need to be addressed

conclusively. Later we shall see that the United Nations has taken on this task and outlined frameworks for the adaptation of ameliorative measures by member states. By and large the CARICOM countries have ignored them.

In the penultimate months of colonialism, aboriginal peoples in Guyana demanded from the Colonial Office that they receive special recognition after independence. At similar periods, aboriginal peoples made the same demands in other countries (personal communication Palacio/Pierre). It was an effort to retain aspects of the distinction that British colonial policy had incorporated for decades. The hallmark was the Trusteeship⁷ promoted by missionaries and eventually reaching Parliament which set up a commission in 1836

“...to formulate measures to secure Justice, Protection, Civilization, and Christianization for the native peoples in British settlements. These became the four pillars of cultural imperialism—the key slogans of humanitarianism.” (Menezes 1977: 13).

Trusteeship was basically a method of assuaging the white man's conscience, coming as it did after forcefully dispossessing the natives of their humanity and their land. During this episode the British signed treaties with them as one sovereign nation with another, albeit under the duress of subjugation. The best examples are the treaties the British signed with the Black Caribs (*i.e.*, Garifuna) of St. Vincent (see Kirby and Martin 1972).⁸ Instead of treaties and as symbolic compensation, the British extended some privileges in local government and access to land reservations in Belize (Rolland 1988: 89-115) and Dominica (HMSO 1902). It was the vestiges of the two levels of distinction—as signatories of treaties and recipients of other privileges—that the native peoples wanted to revisit as the British were preparing to hand over the reins of power to local political leaders, none of whom were aboriginal.

While the political leaders in the new states avoided the British practice of being conciliatory to aboriginal peoples, they went overboard with assimilating them among all citizens. The fact is that an intermediate ground is necessary which grants them all rights as citizens, as well as the rights of non-assimilation (*i.e.* maintaining a separate identity), if they so wish. In no CARICOM country has public discussion of such an option been encouraged; the very suggestion would be alien and possibly regarded on the verge of treason by most government leaders. In the meantime the *de facto* non-recognition and non-validation of aboriginal peoples continue to reduce them to inferior social status. And the lower the status, the less the incentive to retain cultural identity. The flight toward a downward spiral is seen especially among the youth who see fewer reasons to self-identify in each succeeding generation.

The Undone Task of Reconstructing Cultural Identity

The work of re-defining cultural identity and reverting non-validation starts with the people reconstructing their own past. Unfortunately, this is a task yet to be done by the aboriginal peoples of the CARICOM. Within the vacuum this paper places a brief summary of historical information from western sources on that little known period of a century and a half after initial European settlement. During this period, the Antilles fell out of limelight as Europeans vied for the riches of the mainland. For the remaining Caribs, Maya, and Arawaks, it was the golden period of their initial revival after the holocaust of diseases, wars, and gross inhumanity they had experienced a few decades earlier. Even then it was too late for the Taino in the Greater Antilles, almost all of whom had already been exterminated within 30 years of the first landfall (Sauer 1966). The remarkable silence in western sources on this critical episode is, therefore, most regrettable in robbing posterity of the information how populations revive themselves having been on the brink of extermination. My thematic narrative starts with Trinidad and continues with Guyana, Belize, and finally the Lesser Antilles islands of St. Vincent and Dominica.

The Spaniards started their first settlement of Trinidad in 1530 under Antonio de Sedeño (Whitehead 1988: 11), There is little subsequent information, with the exception of Sir Walter Raleigh's abortive takeover in 1595. There followed a period of Spanish "neglect" for the rest of the sixteenth century and "mismanagement" throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (the words in quotation marks are from Ashdown 1979: 75). They were indecisive even about establishing missions, unlike their general practice on the mainland. The first serious effort came as late as 1749 when Aragonese Capuchin friars came *via* Venezuela (Elie 1990:1). Earlier in 1699 the Caribs had revolted killing four priests and the Spanish governor at the massacre of San Francisco de los Arenales. From this site and two other settlements the friars eventually resettled the Indians at the nearby *encomienda*⁹ community of Arima between 1785 and 1786. Afterwards there have been no recorded revolts. By the end of the eighteenth century the Trinidad Caribs had been brought fully under Spanish control. It is important to note that among countries in this study, Trinidad and Tobago is the only one that experienced the classic cycle of Spanish subjugation through conquest, pacification, and settlement leading to almost complete hispanization of the native population. This pattern, which was the norm throughout the mainland, was not repeated in the other CARICOM countries, reflecting their marginality to the Spaniards, as well as the determined resistance of the natives.

The pattern in Guyana was similar for the early neglect by the Spaniards, but differed considerably for the complete lack of any type of Spanish settlement. After the initial forays by Spaniards in the Gulf of Paria in the early sixteenth century (Whitehead 1988: 1), it was the Dutch who forged colonization initially for trading by 1616 and eventually for plantation production and large settlement in 1647 (Menezes 1972: 3). Giving the Dutch competition were the French and the British for the next century

and a half with the British finally taking over in 1803. Because the non-Iberians were less concerned in missionization, there was less emphasis on the total capitulation of the natives. Instead there were forms of alliances promoted with them using their various strengths as guides, traders, and plantation security. From early during the colonial period the natives entered into negotiated agreements that allowed them certain amount of autonomy under Dutch suzerainty (Menezes 1977 and Whitehead 1988: 151-161).

In the case of the northeastern coast of Central America where Belize fits we start to see the concerted effort of the Indians to resist and overthrow the Spaniards. The conquest of this area came from two sides—through Bacalar in southern Yucatan between 1531 and 1545, and from Tayasal in eastern Peten in 1525 (Jones 1983: 64-91). In the wake of several rebellions by the Maya throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Spaniards neglected the area of Belize for any settlement apart from sporadic missionary visits. The Maya took advantage of the infrequency of the visits and intensified their pressure against the missionaries, an effort greatly facilitated by the virtual abandonment of the area by the missionaries after 1632. These successes were part of the larger effort by the powerful Itza Maya, headquartered in eastern Peten, to re-establish their previous hegemony over parts of Belize. The final defeat of the Itza and their allies in 1697 (Farriss 1984) marked the end of any counteroffensive coming from the Maya in the area of Belize.

While the Belize Maya had the advantage of neglect from the Spaniards, the Caribs and their homeland the Lesser Antilles were fully in the eye of the storm coming at first from the Spaniards and later the French, British, and Dutch. Apart from early Spanish slaving expeditions, the Spaniards had little interest among the Caribs by 1530. It was left to the British and French to subdue their fierce resistance to surrender their islands. The superior firepower of the Europeans superseded, and island after island fell into their control, starting with St. Kitts in the north in 1623 and ending in the south at Grenada in 1650 (Ashdown 1978:12). These victories, however, were not conclusive. Throughout the 1600's the Caribs took the offensive inflicting serious damage on plantations in several islands through their guerrilla attacks. Dominica and St. Vincent were their two military strongholds, logistically placed in the northern and southern portions of the archipelago. As recognition and to endear themselves to the Caribs, for their own separate reasons the British and French in treaties between 1659 and 1742 declared these two islands “neutral territory”, *i.e.* the reserves of the Caribs. The final and definitive overthrow of the Caribs took place in 1796 when the British exiled the implacable Garifuna (Black Caribs) from St. Vincent to the coast of Honduras in Central America. It came almost 310 years after the first landfall and over 170 years after the first British and French colonial settlement on the Lesser Antilles. The duration of Carib resistance was truly impressive.

The resistance of the natives made it easier for other European colonizers to dislodge whatever waning interest the Spaniards might have had in the sixteenth century CARICOM territories. But there is still minimal analysis of the significance of their victories for themselves and their identity. Within the spirit of identifying themes that could be subsequently followed up in detail, I suggest two. They are hybridization and regionality.

Hybridization

Without doubt, the perduration of native resistance came from their intimate knowledge of the region and in mastering complex transportation and communication systems. The transportation system included building large boats fit for long-distance trading and raiding, and maintaining navigational techniques. They scurried from island to island bringing messages of intelligence, and within islands used conch shells and other means of projecting sound over long distances. They knew the micro-ecology of each island, especially its resources that were easily accessible, whether on sea or land. Such information extended to the logistical value of each part of the island for military purposes—its vulnerable and impregnable portions. Furthermore, their domain extended to the South American mainland where their fellow Caribs lived. In the early seventeenth century, Caribs from Grenada visiting friends in Venezuela brought along French missionaries (Whitehead 1988: 95).

Knowing the region also meant selectively networking with its other inhabitants—one's traditional allies and foes—which many times started within subsections of each nation. This traditional system, of course, was thwarted by Columbus' arrival. Survival then called for wide-ranging acceptance of others within a process of hybridization that was very much needed at the cultural and biological levels. The extensive movement of peoples within the region and beyond should truly put to rest any beliefs of genetic purity of any sort. Examples include the gathering of various Maya nations under Itza tutelage in the area of Belize and a similar gathering of hundreds of Taino refugees among the Caribs to escape Spanish atrocities (Rouse 1992: 21).

The limits of the intermarriage depended on who were available and in what numbers. Inevitably Europeans and Africans were drawn into the gene pool. In many cases the surrounding native population acculturated the mixed offspring and the results redounded greatly to their cause. One famous example includes Carib Warner, son of the governor of St. Kitts Thomas Warner by a Carib woman (Hulme and Whitehead 1992: 89-106). He grew up in Dominica and became a leader in war for the Caribs. Besides, there are the Garifuna (Black Caribs) who demonstrated their unequivocal commitment by their vigorous defense of St. Vincent, the island bequeathed to them through their Carib ancestry.

Within the world aboriginal movement, hybridization remains so far a non-issue probably because it is threatening to the assumptions of unique and irrevocable identity underlying the ideology of the movement. Given the wide ranging

interconnections ever present among them historically and particularly now with their increasing population growth, hybridization will inevitably demand more attention as a topic of serious inquiry. It may well be a main contribution of the CARICOM region to the intellectual foundation of the world aboriginal movement. The same could be said about the significance of regionality.

Written and Oral Tradition

Throughout the ages people have bequeathed to posterity written and oral records which purvey the lyrical dimension of cultural identity. The ancestors of the aboriginal peoples of the CARICOM were no different. These records, however, have not received the level of scholarly attention paid to the history written by Europeans. As a result, we are the less exposed to the richness that accompanies the tradition of native self-expression—the content of information, the modalities of delivery, rhythm, nuances, etc., I make brief references to three types of records—1) written, 2) oral material that was written shortly after Contact, and 3) the non-written oral.

The non-Western media and forms of writing in the region are usually the subject matter of archaeology. Hence they are not of immediate significance to this discussion but should be mentioned in passing. They include petroglyphics and hieroglyphs. The former are normally associated with cultures in Guyana and the islands, and the latter with the Maya, the highest level of civilization achieved in the region. Scholars are only at the beginning stage of learning the wealth of information that the writers placed on these records. Even then the little forthcoming has added immeasurably to our comprehension of social organization.¹⁰

A similar challenge confronts scholars working on documents of the Ancient Maya that survived the deliberate destruction of the Spaniards centuries after they had been written. Written on organic material such as bark, these records are very fragile and demand skills in deciphering the glyphs, a task that is far from complete. For the Maya, they are the Dresden, Madrid, and Paris Codices, so named because they were first found in these cities after crossing the Atlantic.

The dedication to keep alive Maya traditions by writing and repeating them as chants during ceremonies disturbed the Spaniards as seen from the following quotation from Cogolludo's *Historic de Yucatan* first published in 1688,

“They had very harmful legends of the creation of the world, and some (after they knew how) had them written down, kept them and read them in their gatherings, although they had been baptized Christians. Dr. Aguilar says in his Informe that he had one of these books of legends which he took from a choir-master of the chapel, by the name of Cuytun, of the town of Zucop, from which he (the choir-master) fled, and he could never reach him in order to learn the origin of their Genesis.” (Recinos 1950: 13)

The apocalyptic events surrounding the Contact heightened the urge among the surviving Maya scholars to put to writing what they had learned through generations.

Having learned to read and write in Spanish, many took the opportunity to put to writing in their own language what they had learned using Spanish alphabets. There are dozens of such documents known, but three are most outstanding and have withstood the test that they are not apocryphal. They are the *Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, *Memorial Cakchiquel*, and the *Popul Vuh* (Recinos 1950: 3-15).

The *Popul Vuh* ranks highly in the New World. The renown Mayanist Sylvanus Morley described it,

“The Popul Vuh or Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiche Maya, as it has been happily subtitled, is, beyond any shadow of a doubt, the most distinguished example of native American literature that has survived the passing centuries.” (Recinos 1950: ix).

The content is the epic journey of the Quiche from the north overcoming fierce enemies and natural disasters toward their final destination in central Guatemala. Obviously one of a long line of savants, the unknown author wrote after 1559 from a photographic memory accustomed to handling masses of detail. The manuscript remained hidden for 150 years until Fr. Ximenez found it in the central Guatemalan highlands and translated it from the Maya (Recinos 1950).

Unlike the Maya, the Taino and Caribs did not leave behind extensively written texts. There is, however, a historical novel that is worth mentioning for attempting to project a realistic effort by the Taino to reconstruct history shortly after Contact.

The author, Jose Barreiro, is himself a Taino descendant who has done extensive study on the aboriginal peoples of the Caribbean. The novel entitled *The Indian Chronicles* was the result of research he carried out in archives in Spain and the Hispanophone Caribbean. In using the diary format Barreiro was able to give the immediacy of unfolding events while maintaining as a main theme the reconstruction of Taino culture before and after Contact. The narrative covers the relations between the Spaniards and the Taino. However, details about daily life, are also included, which he embellishes with references to the deeds of heroes, the use of *areitos* (traditional poetic verses done at ceremonies as chants and dances), and origin myths. Jose Barreiro deserves credit for filling, at least in a fictional literary form, a vacuum that had long existed in the early cultural history of the Taino.

Barreiro's use of folklore forces the question, What is currently available in the folklore of the region's aboriginal peoples that could inform about their past, cosmology, and belief systems about after life? No doubt there is a great deal but the question itself has not yet been dealt with to any extent. The most extensive work is done by Gullick on the Caribs of St. Vincent. In his 1985 volume his main concern is to show the link between myths and cultural identity. He refers to folklore popular at various stages in Carib history. His conclusion is that the Caribs have shifted their definition of identity to coincide with changes within the island society. They do retain as main theme that they have been wrongly treated by European history. Gullick's line of inquiry needs to

be considerably broadened to look at myths from the aboriginal peoples throughout the region.

People Acting Out Their Identity

The negation of much that is positive in the history of their ancestors has become a premise for the collective effort of the region's aboriginal peoples to act out their identity. Closely related is the premise that they are mere survivors of thousands who were exterminated and that their own identity is doomed to oblivion.

With these two strike-outs aboriginal peoples begin the daily task of projecting their cultural identity. To make matters worse, for most it is low quality subsistence barely removed from eking out the daily bread. In Belize it may mean earning less than \$1000 Bze. (\$500 US) a year from the sale of rice to the government Marketing Board or patiently expecting donations of cash and food from relatives abroad, which come only intermittently, if any at all. In Guyana it may be very low wages for long and hazardous work at mines or sawmills in the interior or not being able to harvest crops because of drought or too much rain. Structural adjustment practices in both countries have wreaked havoc from cutbacks in services that beforehand had only been marginal. Malaria and other infectious diseases are endemic among them in high proportions. It is not surprising that recent studies in Belize place the three aboriginal nations—Kekchi, Mopan, and Garifuna—at the lowest standard of living in the country (Lewis 1994),

Notwithstanding their hardships, aboriginal peoples do self-identify. Indeed, the basic rule of thumb for identification is that you are what you say you are within the limitations of ascribed characteristics that include phenotypes, language, place of origin (i.e. territoriality) and descent. While traditionally success in increasing numbers had come, not only from natural population increase, but also enculturating others (see Gonzalez 1988: 51-55), the opposite is more prevalent now when some refuse to self-identify, despite possessing some diagnostic physical features.

The social pressures against self-identification are generating responses from aboriginal peoples that need closer examination. Among the Garifuna in Belize language, among other diagnostics, has been a traditional marker. But with the mass migration from villages, some of these markers no longer apply. In a recent study completed by the author in Belize City among immigrants from one of the villages, the informants revealed that they value descent and territoriality as two crucial markers, even more than language. In other words, that one's parent is Garifuna makes one a Garifuna and especially if one or one's parent was born in a Garifuna village.

While among the Garifuna cultural criteria retain significance, among some Caribs of Dominica and St. Vincent it is basically physical criteria. They associate identity with skin colour and quality of hair—all having to do with “looking Indian”. This has brought animosity between persons who have Indian blood but may be of darker skin (Owen 1980: 264-274). Given the wide degree of intermixtures of races within the

Caribbean, selecting physical features as markers for aboriginal identity is unfortunate and ultimately self-defeating. Of more advantage in the long run is the re-learning of cultural traits, although such opportunities at the formal level hardly exist.

So far we have reviewed two of the minimal criteria for identity—surviving daily life within the context of increasing hardships and the use of ascribed characteristics. Attention now turns to activities that the aboriginal peoples perform through ceremonies, voluntary organizations, and income generation.

Formally state-acknowledged ceremonies for aboriginal peoples take place in Belize and Trinidad and Tobago. In Belize it is November 19th, Garifuna Settlement Day, and in Trinidad the feast day of Santa Rosa in early August. Other ceremonies are localized. They commemorate village patron saints among the Maya and ancestral rites among the Garifuna. During the festivities several persons from as far away as the United States converge to assert their community and kinship solidarity.

Voluntary organizations may be involved in organizing ceremonies as well as other events such as football and cricket matches. Within recent times they have adapted a more developmental and culturally conscious agenda as can be seen from the names of the following organizations: in Dominica the Carib Liberation Organization, the Carib Peoples Organization, and the Waitukubuli (Carib name for Dominica) Karifuna Development Committee; in St. Vincent the Carib Development Organization and the Community Council for the Development of Caribs; in Belize the Carib Development Society, the National Garifuna Council, the Toledo Maya Cultural Council, and the Kekchi Council; and in Guyana the Guyana Organization of Indigenous Peoples and the Amerindian Peoples Association.

During the 1980's the groups took a more deliberate bias toward cultural revitalization and economic development. They received some assistance from international development agencies, which has helped to bolster them, notwithstanding the lack of support from the government in some countries. The record of achievement is probably best seen in the Carib Territory of Dominica. Projects completed through the U.S. Save the Children Federation include demonstration farm, piped water, training in business accounting, and building the Waitukubuli Karifuna Development Centre. With the assistance of Development Alternatives also in Dominica there was a cultural preservation project featuring oral history, short video, and collection of documents.

The greatest challenge for aboriginal peoples is to link their culture with development in projects that are self-sustaining and sufficiently income generating. Traditional knowledge of the ecology, healing practices, and belief systems is an asset that is quickly disappearing with the passing on of elders and large scale intrusion from multinational firms to exploit the physical environment in Belize and Guyana. Besides, there is a growing number of small-scale owner-operated eco-tourism resorts particularly suited for isolated communities. Embryonic examples are currently taking place in Belize and Guyana. Within these relatively new commercial activities, the

prior experience of persons in Guyana and Dominica in making and selling handicrafts will certainly be helpful.

In summarizing this discussion on acting out identity, it is plain that the region's aboriginal peoples are conscious of their identity even though for daily survival they have more than their fair share of overwhelming difficulties. There is a tradition of collective action through voluntary organizations to address community problems. Certainly at the informal level they have been more than successful in passing their identity from one generation to another. While only a few communities have been fortunate enough to receive piped water and electricity, there is the need to build on them towards economic production for development. Here the resources needed to build big and small enterprises are sadly missing.

Parameters in Executing Cultural Identity

The interest and enthusiasm that aboriginal peoples have toward their identity resonate, not so much at the state level, but within the international and regional fora. The United Nations, World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP), the Caribbean Organization of Indigenous Peoples (COIP) are cases in point.

The global momentum toward the welfare of aboriginal peoples started in anticipation of the quincentenary of Columbus' landfall. There was convergence of interest among several persons and organizations to forestall the planned jubilation in Mediterranean countries, notably Spain, and to promote instead a re-examination of the plight of aboriginal peoples. The plan was to ascertain that their conditions toward the next quincentenary would improve immeasurably over what they had been. The Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities of the United Nations Economic and Social Council became a main driving force to push the new worldview through the cumbersome labyrinth of the United Nations. It invoked the Working Group on Indigenous Populations that has met for over a decade to hammer out the details of a draft Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. By 1995 the draft itself has been nearing the stage of completion, after which it will be submitted to the General Assembly for approval.¹¹

As the year 1992 approached, so did the spate of activities increase. In 1989 the ILO adopted Convention 169 Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries. It may at first sound surprising that it was the ILO that first passed such a comprehensive statement on aboriginal peoples' welfare. However, it arises from its underlining focus on the overall well-being of all persons whether associated within the narrow sense of labour or not. Before 169 it had passed a previous convention on aboriginal peoples that was less comprehensive. All member countries were urged to ratify 169 and to adopt its specifications in their laws and policies.¹² **Unfortunately only one CARICOM country has done so. [check current status]**

Having opened the door through the ILO, the practice of including line items on aboriginal peoples has been adapted in several United Nations declarations. It was the

case in the International Convention on Biological Diversity and Agenda 21 both passed at the 1993 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio. Both underline the unequivocal linkage that exists between the very survival of aboriginal peoples with the non-destruction of their ecology. As gatekeepers for this rapidly diminishing natural resource they should be allowed rights of ownership and use in their traditional practices. In the wake of the Rio Summit, a conference on the environment of small island states took place in Barbados in 1993. What Rio brought home for countries with large expanses of rainforest adjoining communities of aboriginal peoples like Belize and Guyana, the Barbados meeting did for aboriginal peoples living in St. Vincent, Dominica, and Trinidad and Tobago.

In declaring years and decades the United Nations has broadened its focus on aboriginal peoples. It set aside 1993 as the International Year of Indigenous Peoples. The period 1995-2004 is the Decade of Indigenous Peoples to continue the emphasis already set in 1993. Furthermore its agencies, WHO/PAHO, UNESCO, UNICEF, FAO, and UNDP have joined the pattern to integrate aboriginal peoples into their programmes.

The cumulative impact of the United Nations initiative has been to generate a veritable tidal wave of interest reaching all parts of the globe. Among those joining the bandwagon have been the multilateral lending agencies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, environmental groups throughout the North including Australia and New Zealand, church organizations, private voluntary organizations, universities, student groups, etc. The flood of newsletters, conferences, manuals, and on-the-spot-assessments has been overwhelming. A little known topic a few years ago, aboriginal peoples have become highly exposed. That this has barely filtered into the CARICOM region is more a reflection of what our governments, churches, NGOs, and mass media select as appropriate from what is available at the world level.

Aboriginal peoples have not been mere bystanders in the globalization process. They have participated actively in the UN Working Group amending parts of the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples as they see fit. Especially vocal there and at other international fora have been representations from Canada and the United States. Meanwhile their counterparts in Central and South America have been putting more energy toward mobilizing at the local, national, and regional levels. From throughout the hemisphere as well as from Samiland, Australia, and New Zealand members gather at the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP). Based in Ottawa, it has performed a largely unsung but effective role in helping to galvanize the momentum through the United Nations and otherwise. Lobbying here, catching the ear of an important technocrat there, and endlessly holding high the welfare of its constituents, the President and members of Executive Council of the WCIP have done much behind-the-scenes work indispensable to generate the benevolent changes that have taken place for aboriginal peoples.

At its 1994 General Assembly in Guatemala the WCIP amended its constitution to include the Caribbean as one of its ten geographical divisions with membership on its main decision making body, the Executive Council. This special honour came from a recognition of the ground breaking work that the Caribbean Organization of Indigenous Peoples (COIP) had generated. Started in 1987, the COIP consisted of a secretariat where representatives of all the aboriginal peoples of CARICOM sit. Taking its cue from the global movement with a special focus on the Caribbean, the COIP achieved a great deal by carrying out extensive networking throughout the region and beyond and executing specific activities.

Some achievements that have had a lasting impact on the recognition of cultural identity are as follows. In its 1990 General Assembly the WCIP accepted a request from the COIP for membership of itself and its affiliate organizations. This meant that the region's aboriginal peoples for the first time had direct representation among their counterparts throughout the globe. In the same year the CARICOM Secretariat acknowledged COIP as the voice of the region's aboriginal peoples. Subsequently, a place has been reserved for it within the Regional Cultural Committee, the CARICOM Secretariat arm on decision making affecting culture in the region. In this capacity the COIP was a main participant in drafting a culture policy for CARICOM. Besides, COIP was invited to join the Caribbean Network for Integrated Rural Development (CNIRD) and the Caribbean Policy Development Centre (CPDC), two of the region's foremost umbrella organizations of NGOs. Finally, the COIP was able to channel training for representatives of member organizations at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College as part of an integrated programme of exchange with aboriginal peoples in Canada. Other main achievements are outlined in Appendix 1.¹³

While the above demonstrates a high level of moral acceptance, the support extended to actual financial grants and inkind assistance. The COIP secretariat received grants from CUSO, OXFAM Canada, the InterAmerican Foundation, among other sources. Much needed inkind support came from the University of the West Indies, the Amerindian Research Unit of the University of Guyana, member organizations in the five countries, and several persons too numerous to mention.

Receiving official recognition from CARICOM and participating in the Regional Cultural Committee has been the most significant input of the COIF into the working of the state machinery of member countries. Over time the COIP may be able to influence states to integrate ILO 169 and UNCED Agenda 21 into their policy, thereby joining the rest of the world into what is quickly becoming the conventional method to react to the rights of aboriginal peoples. The resistance of the state governments makes this a tall order. Furthermore, the non-abidance at the state level has had an impact on the civil society in these countries. The church, NGOs, and labour unions feel little pressure to change their traditional stance *viz a viz* aboriginal peoples in the lack of moral leadership forthcoming from the state.

The urgency for action cannot be overemphasized. For many it is literally a matter of life and death. We have already seen that on the whole the current social conditions of aboriginal peoples are unacceptable. The assumption behind the new global movement is that by extending control over their welfare to the aboriginal people themselves they will do a better job. Such thinking, incidentally, underlay the world fight against colonialism; and to a large extent the aboriginal peoples are analogous to being the colonized in the newly decolonized states of the region. Finally, they are increasingly promoting cultural identity as a pre-condition for their development. To some it is a non-negotiable demand and the question, therefore, is how it is to be integrated within the government's economic development plan.

Over and beyond internal issues, there are others that are forcing the need for change by the states. One is that aboriginal peoples are playing increasingly significant functions in interregional transactions. Belize has signed the Mundo Maya accord with its neighbouring countries to promote tourism centred on the Maya—both the archaeological and the living. Guyana ratified in 1980 the Treaty for Amazonian Cooperation along with Brazil, Venezuela, and Suriname. In their new role as trans-border emissaries among these countries knowledgeable about a relatively new and promising commodity, namely tourism, aboriginal peoples have greater leverage to demand much better treatment.

Finally, the powerful international environmental lobby can demand from regional states that they abide by Agenda 21 if they are to sell certain exports that may endanger biological diversity and the long term welfare of aboriginal peoples. These situations point to a rapidly changing dynamic in the world order where the aboriginal peoples are thrust into an unenviable negotiation capability.

Conclusion

In recognizing M.G. Smith's pioneering work on cultural pluralism in the introduction, I was drawing attention to his focus on cultural identity as basis for the analysis of social interaction. To a large extent it foreshadowed the flourishing of pluralism, which has provided the ultimate justification for the validation of aboriginal peoples. He did so at a time when others were dismissing them as a waning ethnic minority undeserving of much attention (see, for example, Lowenthal 1972). As this paper has argued, such a perspective which remains the norm within the region, does not do justice to people who have survived 500 years and may do so for the next millennium. The wealth of Caribbean society is in cultivating the various strands within its cultural mosaic.

One of the contributions of this paper is to point directions into which the study of pluralism could go. There is a need to understand the problematic of cultural identity; how to use anthropological methods—through archaeology, ethnohistory, and linguistics—in reconstructing it; how the incumbents act it out; and the larger environment for its rehabilitation. All of these point to the potential content of pluralist

studies, most of which narrowly looks at sociocultural interactions within a framework of national policy.

This comprehensive approach is useful for others who share a cultural identity that has been mauled by the colonial process. Immediate examples include maroons both in Suriname and Jamaica and other African descendants who guard large segments of their past culture. But the usefulness goes further afield to the increasing interest on the retention and retrieving of culture.

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¹ I acknowledge the financial support of the West Indian Commission and the work of my colleague Laureen Pierre in conducting a study of the aboriginal peoples in CARICOM countries in 1992. The section Our Original Peoples in the West Indian Commission Report (WIC 1992: 383-400) is a summary of the original draft report.

² Finding appropriate terms has been problematic, especially in view of the rising consciousness of aboriginal peoples about themselves. Other preferred terms are first peoples and first nations. I also use natives and Indian not in any pejorative sense. United Nations documents use indigenous but its definition coincides with my use of aboriginal, ILO 169 has the following as one of its definitions in Article 1 (b) ...peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the

country belongs, at the time of *conquest or colonization* or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions. (The emphasis is mine).

- ³ Cultural consciousness and its practice are indispensable for self-identification. Thus, there are several persons in all parts of the region who claim aboriginal ancestry but do nothing to put it into effect. The ancestry may not be only Carib, Arawak, or Maya; it may be Miskito in Belize or Seminole in the Bahamas. Finally, there are those to whom ancestry has been falsely attributed; an example is the maroons of Jamaica. The noted student of maroons Mavis Campbell (1988) has denied that they have any biological and cultural connections with the Arawaks.
- ⁴ The Mestizo are the descendants of the Yucatec Hispanics and Maya. Among most the Maya phenotypes predominate, but culturally they have lost most of their Yucatec Maya traits, especially within the past thirty years.
- ⁵ Periodically governments make symbolic gestures of recognition as the declaration of Joseph Chatoyer as the national hero of St. Vincent and declaring the community of Arima as the representatives of the aboriginal peoples of Trinidad and Tobago.
- ⁶ Among the countries with aboriginal peoples Trinidad and Tobago was the first to become independent on August 31, 1962.
- ⁷ The underpinning for Trusteeship was the concern in Britain to prevent the extermination of native peoples throughout the empire. The philosophical basis originated in the protection of the "noble savage", an image popularized by Rousseau, who was inspired by accounts of the lifeways of seventeenth century Caribs (Hulme and Whitehead 1992:4).
- ⁸ The Dutch signed treaties with Guiana Indians as far back as 1672 (Menezes 1972:46). These agreements were basic to the spirit of Dutch alliance with the natives that the Dutch bequeathed to the British when they took over British Guiana in 1803.
- ⁹ *Encomiendas* were a system of forced labour whereby entire villages were assigned to Spaniards under the direction of their chiefs; they worked for six to eight months, then returned to their homes and tended their crops (Rouse 1992: 178).
- ¹⁰ Recent advances in deciphering the epigraphy on Maya stelae have revealed much information on the activities of rulers and their dynasties (Stuart and Stuart 1993).
- ¹¹ Note added for republication of this paper: The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was passed by the General Assembly in 2007. This original paper had extensive notes on the draft at that time, 1995. They have been eliminated in favour of an Internet URL <>.
- ¹² Note added for republication of this paper: In 2013 the ILO Conventiono 169 is also available <>, eliminating the need for publication of extensive notes on its contents.
- ¹³ The Achievements of The COIP Secretariat 1989- 1992 include:
- Operating a secretariat in Belize 1989-1992 and being responsible to secure its own funding.
 - Publishing a quarterly newsletter circulated extensively regionally and internationally.
 - Having the first and only operational conference of COIP in November, 1989.
 - Having COIP and its affiliate organizations become members of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples.
 - Helping to plan the participation of aboriginal peoples in CARIFESTA V 1992.
 - Projecting a strong regional and international voice of the region's aboriginal peoples.
 - Heading the first regional study of the region's aboriginal peoples with assistance of the West Indian Commission.

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- Being members of the umbrella organizations CPDC and CNIRD and providing active participation.
 - Making contact with the CARICOM Secretariat and subsequently participating actively in the Regional Cultural Committee.
 - Meeting with Cultural Survival, organizations of Canadian aboriginal peoples, etc. to outline collaborative projects.
 - Acting as conduit for scholarships at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College for the region's aboriginal peoples.
 - Organizing a comprehensive handover to Chief Auguste of file and remaining operational grant funds in 1992.