ISLAND CARIB TRADITIONS ABOUT THEIR ARRIVAL IN THE LESSER ANTILLES

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In considering seventeenth century Island Carib traditions about their provenance and arrival in the Lesser Antilles, it is interesting that Rochefort, a contemporary observer, maintained that the Caribs' views on the subject were so varied 'that the most prudent of people conceive that there cannot any judgement be grounded there upon' (Rochefort 1658). He himself suggested that Florida was their original home. Leaving his dubious attachment to Florida aside I want to consider the Carib traditions of this period to discover if they have any reliable evidence to offer. In so doing I will not only be exploring what these tales have to tell us about Carib history but also what they have to divulge about Carib culture and myths. The tales I am going to analyze include versions from Dominica, Guadeloupe and St. Vincent.

The Dominican Carib tradition maintains that the Island Caribs had been living in South America with the Galibies but left the mainland to fight the Arawaks who were then living in the islands. They destroyed the males and took the females as wives—oom—slaves. This, they said, explained the existence of male and female languages. The commander-in-chief of the Caribs, who was small, ate and drank little, and was reserved with women, but brave, then divided the islands amongst his followers. The leader who received Dominica was carried on the shoulders of a special class of Carib whose descendants lived at the foot of the Soufrièère (Rochefort 1658).

According to the Caribs in Guadeloupe, Kalinago, the Caribs' first father, displeased with the inhabitants of the mainland, embarked with his family and after a long journey stopped at Dominica where his children gave him a poisoned drink. He died and changed into a frightening fish (Akayomann, Atraio'man or Atzaioman). Under a chief with a small body but big in courage and who ate little and drank less, his descendants captured the island from the Igneries (a type of Arawak). At the same time they also exterminated the males and kept the women and girls to bear their children (DuPuis 1652).

According to Lucien de Rosny who has written a most exhaustive analysis of these traditions, Benzoni gave another version of this tale, which is alas not specified as coming from any particular island. The only differences between his version and the one from Guadeloupe are that Kalinago came from Urava and halted at 'Matutino,' which he claimed to be the Carib name of Martinique. This version of de Rosny's tale does not appear in either Benzoni's work nor any translation of it into either French or English known to me (de Rosny 1886-7 and Benzoni 1579).
The principal Vincentian tradition of the seventeenth century maintained that the Caribs had been slaves of the Arawaks on the mainland. The Caribs then rebelled but as they were weaker than the Arawaks they fled to Tobago and thence to the other islands. The Galibies were also slaves to the Arawaks and also rebelled. They, however, were stronger than the Arawaks who in consequence fled to the other islands in the Antilles, and the Galibies kept the Arawaks' mainland territory (Rochefort 1658).

Another version found in St. Vincent related that the Caribs came from the land of the Galibies, but made no mention of slavery under the Arawaks nor of fighting the Arawaks on the islands (Borde 1674). Judging from the many Vincentian traditions about wars with the Arawaks, this was probably inherent in this tradition (Rochefort 1658 and Borde 1674).

A later eighteenth century Vincentian version is given by Sir William Young who said that 'the Red Charaibes had a tradition' about their arrival in St. Vincent. As this is not found elsewhere, he most probably learnt it orally, but presumably from the use of the verb 'had' not directly from a Red Carib. This tradition stated that 'their forefathers came from the banks of the Oronooko(sic), whence, coasting Trinidad (sic) and Tobago, and thence by the Grenadines they arrived at St. Vincent's, subdued the native inhabitants, called Galibies, and possessed themselves of the island: according to their ancient custom in war, they put their male prisoners to death, but preserving the women, incorporated themselves with the Galibies' (Young 1795).

Rochefort in his dismissal of these tales did not realize how much they had in common, namely: (i) all the traditions maintained that the Caribs had come from South America and three of them said from the land of the Galibies in Guiana. The words 'Galibies' and 'Carib' are both the result of mishearing and imaginative orthography of the same word and thus the differentiation is of little significance. The term 'Galibie' is, however, sometimes still used to describe the Caribs of the Maroni River area in Surinam, and as these so-called Galibies were in the same area at the time of the telling of the tales it is probable that they were the 'Galibies' referred to. Furthermore at the time of the European conquest there were also Caribs on the Comantyre River who could have been the so-called 'Galibies'; (ii) two of the traditions agree that the Caribs had been slaves of the Arawaks and rebelled. This agreement did not necessarily include the same meaning of slavery in each tale and certainly had little relationship with European concepts of slavery. There were, however, to do Rochefort justice, considerable variations. Thus the tales differ as to: (i) whether the Arawaks or Caribs arrived in the islands first, (ii) whether or not the Caribs or the Galibies drove the Arawaks out of South America, (iii) whether or not the Caribs had been slaves to the Arawaks, and (iv) the precise relationship of the Caribs to the Galibies.

Anthropologists when confronted with such variations tend to take one of two courses. One group following Vansina (1965) tries to trace...
the history of the tradition under consideration by creating a stemma
and then discusses its use as historical evidence; and the second
following Levi-Strauss (e.g. 1967) looks at the oppositions underlying
the variations. Both methods are relevant to the study of these oral
histories of the Island Caribs.

A stemma of the tradition under consideration can be created thus:

(Emphasized numbers are recorded traditions while unemphasized ones
refer to hypothetical tales.)

1 is an early tradition stating that the Caribs came from South
America.

3 may have been a European rather than a Carib tale. This version
stated that the Caribs came from Uraba or Caribana which is what Peter
Myrter claims to have happened. This was probably a European myth
based on the resemblance of the words Carib and Caribana (D'Anglerius
1530).

2 stated that the Caribs came from the land of the Galibies.

4 said that the Caribs came from South America where they had been
related to the Galibies and had been slaves of the Arawaks until they
rebelled. The Arawaks then fled to the islands.

5 similarly recapped 4 but added that the Galibies had chased the
Arawaks out.

7 is the main Vincentian tale which repeats 5 with the addition of
various details.

8 is the second Vincentian tradition which has lost most of the
details and which purely on a content analysis could have come from the
second branch of the stemma, but by geographical reasoning was probably
related to the other Vincentian traditions.

10 is the Vincentian tale recorded by Young. In this slavery by
the Arawaks and close kinship with the Galibies is forgotten, and the
Galibies replace the Arawaks as the original inhabitants of the island. This tale like 8 could have been developed from 6 but again on geographical evidence, probably was derived from 7.

6 said that the Caribs came from the land of the Galibies and makes no mention of slavery in South America.

9 repeats 6 with the additional information about the Caribs marrying captured females and possibly about their killing captive males. It may also possibly have included a description of the small abstemious chief as the Carib leader, but this may well have been added at 11. If it was added at 9 it must have been dropped in 12. The island mentioned in version 9 was Dominica.

12 is the same as 9 but Kalinago's discovery of Dominica was certainly included. In this version Dominica's inhabitants may have been Arawaks or Igeneries.

13 is the Guadeloupe tale which says Dominica's inhabitants were Igeneries.

14 is similar to 12 mentioning Igeneries but not Dominica, and stating that the Caribs came from Urava. This is the tale given by de Rosny as being from Benzoni and it may well have been influenced by Peter Myrter's claim that Urava was their original home in South America. 11 is the Dominican tale which is the 9 with Kalinago being omitted and Dominica being one of several islands captured by the small chief. There are also additions detailing the division of land.

This system of analysis may have limitations in tracing the history of a tale, but it does suggest a probable derivation based on the recorded extant versions. It also makes clear some of the more superficial oppositions inherent in the tales. Thus if one looks at the six recorded historical traditions of the Island Caribs and at many of the hypothetical tales in the stemma many obvious cases of over-rating and underrating become evident. For example one set of oppositions is that between friendship and hostility. Thus in all but one version the Galibies are emphasized as being similar to the Caribs either because they were once also slaves of the Arawaks or because they were friendly mainlanders from whose area the Caribs had come. In contrast, the Arawaks are always seen as the enemy whether as slave owners or as inhabitants of the islands to be captured. This opposition is accordingly used to distance peoples socially. Thus the Galibies are made closer while the Arawaks, despite supplying females to the Caribs, are distanced.

The mention of women brings another set of oppositions to the fore. In the Dominican version there is clearly an opposition between taking women and abstaining from them. Thus the Caribs captured and kept alive the Arawak women as mates while their chief abstained from this activity. The opposition between men and women is also emphasized in that Arawak males were killed and the females kept. The difference
In language between the sexes was also emphasized. In practice this division does not seem to have been as great as the Caribs made it out to be (cf. Taylor 1977 and Trudgill 1974).

In the Guadeloupe story the male/female oppositions are retained. There is also the underrating of kinship ties in that the children of the first Carib poisoned him, thus in fact killing a male and so to some extent underrating the male. The version not attached to an island and of doubtful provenance is perhaps significant in that Matutino, the island reached by the Caribs, bears the same name as the island where in Arawak traditions all the original females were left behind. It is thus noteworthy that the Caribs mythically took their wives from an area where the Arawaks lost their first spouses.

The Vincentian versions do not include these explicit oppositions, but when it realized that the same word is used in Carib for both slave and son-in-law it can be seen that there could have been such a connotation in the main Vincentian version and in the hypothetical versions 4 and 5. Certainly I feel that the Dominican version which mentions both slaves rebelling and the capture of women could be regarded in this light. Thus not only are the sexes opposed, but wife givers (eg. fathers-in-law) are opposed to wife takers (eg. both sons-in-law cum slaves and wife capturers). In the Guadeloupe version Kalinago, the first Carib, while father of the Caribs was in many ways a wife giver to his sons because he brought his children to an island where they could capture women and thus it is mythically logical that he, as a wife giver, should be killed like the Arawaks who were killed or rebelled against in other versions and episodes of this tradition.

The Carib traditions about their advent in the Caribbean can thus at one level be seen as having a function of helping to resolve the conflict between wife givers and wife takers. It could therefore be claimed by the Caribs that on the whole their system was better than either extreme; that is to say, better than some slavery and worse than some conditions where there is no father-in-law. It could also be claimed that the oppositions inherent in the traditions helped determine the Caribs' relationship with other peoples.

The foregoing analysis also suggests the transformations of social distance oppositions into oppositions between son-in-law and father-in-law. Other transformations inherent in some of these tales show how a myth can take an event and transform it within itself. Thus in the main Vincentian tale there are the variations between rebellions. In the first, the Carib insurrection is unsuccessful and so the Caribs fled to the islands, while in the second, the Galibie revolution, the slaves won and the Arawaks had to flee to the islands. At yet another level it can be claimed that a transformational procedure has occurred in all the various Carib tales about their arrival in the Lesser Antilles. The tales may differ but the underlying oppositions are the same. If the oppositions are so important it may then be asked whether they are more important than historical accuracy. In that there are so many variations and contradictions between the tales it can be argued...
that the oppositions are more important. However, there may well be an element of truth somewhere in the mix.

The validity of traditions as historical evidence has been shown by Vansina (1965) to depend mainly on the functions the tales have in the culture relating them. The more important the function the less important is the accuracy. This is especially true of propaganda and land claims, and these Carib traditions fall into both classes. Thus there is the social distancing opposition of anti-Arawak propaganda which is also pro-Galibie. At the level of land rights these tales can be seen as claims by right of conquest and in some traditions the mating with the women of the original inhabitants or 'owners' combined with their semi-use of matrilocal marriage probably provided another title. The fact that the Caribs' main mythical title to the islands was by conquest, was probably why Europeans recorded so many variations of these tales. If the Caribs' rights were by conquest, then the Europeans' rights as conquerors of the Caribs were as valid. A similar realization probably led to the Caribs dropping such tales from their repertoire by 1797, if not before, and these traditions being replaced by versions of the modern comment 'we were here first' and the complete omission of any mention of the peoples on the island before them.

These tales may also have had the function of supporting residence which would mean that they functioned as another type of title to land. Given the act that the word son-in-law and slave were the same and basically meant 'helpers,' 'assistants' or 'followers' the tale may refer to a time of change-over from the Carib males having to live matrilocal and be 'slaves' (sons-in-law) to the women moving instead, the women thus becoming the equivalent of slaves. The Island Caribs were probably matrilocatalocal, that is the first year of marriage was matrilocal and the remainder of the marriage patrilocal. The chiefs alone were completely patrilocal. These tales may accordingly have been explaining this system of residence and thus referring to the rights of residence at a man's original village.

At a theoretical level these traditions can thus be shown to be suspect, and at a more pragmatic one some aspects can be shown to be false. Thus the Vincentian version with the Caribs coming to the islands before the Arawaks can be dismissed on archaeological evidence. The actual route taken by the Caribs mentioned in the various versions has, however, been defended by some archaeologists but attacked by others. The Bullens in the Second Congress (1969), for example, suggested that they came from Tobago to Barbados and from there filled the islands from a secure base. This could fit in with a chief in Barbados giving the other islands to his followers, as is recorded in the Dominican tradition. In the third Congress, in contrast, Mattioni supported a route from south to north through the islands which does not fit this tale to such a degree but would agree with the eighteenth century Vincentian one. Both the Bullens and Mattioni, however, seem to consider that one element of most of these tales, the hostility between the pre-Carib inhabitants and the Caribs had taken place and that they were, basically different peoples. Even this is, however,
disputed by Haag (1965) and later by Rouse (1976) who considered that the Caribs were derived from the Arawaks and that little movement of peoples through the islands was involved in the Caribs' prehistory. While unable to comment on these conflicts from an archaeological point of view, I feel able to offer some comments from an anthropological standpoint. The hypothesis that the Caribs were derived from the Arawaks does agree with linguistic and genetic studies of the Caribs' descendants. The Island Carib language is considered to be a member of the Arawakan family and not of the Cariban, though there are loan words from the latter family. Similarly, the Black Caribs of Central America are genetically descended from Arawaks rather than Caribs. I thus feel that Rouse has a case, though the Carib loan words still have to be explained. In reality I suspect that a small number of Carib speakers intermarried with the Arawak inhabitants of the Lesser Antilles. The differentiation into Carib and Arawak was then possible if the Carib definition of Carib was as flexible as it is now in St. Vincent and Surinam, and the Arawak one as rigid as the Surinam definition. Then, as happens in Surinam, the Carib-Arawak descendants would have been rejected by the Arawaks and accepted by the Caribs; thus eventually producing a people who, while genetically and linguistically mainly Arawak, called themselves Carib. If this were the case there would have been a slight movement of Carib speakers between the Islands and their routes could be debated and described in traditions. Continuing this line of approach, part of the process of defining mixed Caribs and Arawaks could then well have involved propaganda tales emphasizing the differences between the Caribs and Arawaks. The historical tales under discussion would thus form part of this corpus, while other parts would include tales of hostility between the two peoples including tales of cannibalism.

While this hypothesis is only tentative, I feel that it would also explain why only the fact of a provenance in South America is common to the Caribs' historical traditions about their arrival in the Caribbean Islands. It would also explain the emphasis on differentiation between Carib and Arawak, and if the fact that son-in-law and slave are covered by the same word in Carib is taken into account it could explain why slavery comes into so many tales. What the early versions of the traditions may have said is that the early Caribs were sons-in-law of the original inhabitants of the island and this status became changed at about stage 4 on the stemma to slaves and was then altered gradually in that branch of the stemma in the way described above. In the other branch at 6 (or possibly 9) the sons-in-law section altered to the capture of brides and the extermination of all males.

Therefore, there may well therefore be an element of fact in the various Carib tales about their arrival in the West Indies. Unlike most observers I do not see the truth in any one tale but would, like rochefort, prefer to consider them all together. Where I would, however, disagree with him is in dismissing the tales as being too disparate to be of any use. Instead I have considered what they have in common and in doing this have at least in a small way commenced the structuralist analysis of Carib myths and offered archaeologists some hypotheses to test in the field.
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