



## Carib Warfare and Slaving

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The first century after European discovery of the Americas is marked primarily by exploration of the Caribbean coast of South America and the Orinoco drainage. Along with the Lesser Antilles, this is the region from which most encounters of Caribs (or Cannibals) are reported. Almost invariably this group is reported to be extremely hostile, warlike and practitioners of anthropophagy. Often they are dismissed as bestial savages. Closer examination of the rather sketchy historical record, however, reveals complex practises of warfare and cannibalism, as well as related ritual practises, and extensive trade. Warfare continued to be a hallmark of the Carib until South American independence from Spain, and even after that they are reported as being involved in some of the civil wars of the 19th century. This paper will examine the practises and techniques of Carib warfare, as well as changes in the motivations and objectives over the 400 years following first European contact.

The definition of 'Carib' is itself a subject of debate, having been used in a wide range of applications (see Whitehead 1990b: 147-149). The group(s) that I am dealing with here are those self-denominated as Kari'nya, or Kari'nyaco, speaking a mutually intelligible language, and at the time of first European contact occupying large parts of the lower and middle Orinoco drainage. Some of these groups also occupied the Guiana coast east of the mouth of the Orinoco and others had migrated into the Lesser Antilles. Within the Orinoco Basin those groups identified as Carib are described by most sources distinctively and consistently enough that it is difficult to confuse them with other groups. For ease of discussion, I will hereafter refer to the Orinoco subgroup of Kari'nya as "Caribs." These Orinoco Caribs constituted a wide-ranging, loosely affiliated population of independent local communities which were nonetheless capable of coming together and cooperating in large-scale undertakings such as trading, warfare and ceremonial observance. Our best guess is that such intergroup collaboration was predicated on ties of kinship, particularly that of the son-in-law (*poito*) (Whitehead 1994: 41)<sup>1</sup>. There is nothing in the ethnohistorical record to support Whitehead's (1992) contention

<sup>1</sup> Riviere (1984: 97-98, 104-107) discusses the role of the Carib son-in-law at length.

that interaction with colonial European states produced a tribal organization. This point will be made clear in the subsequent presentation of data covering more than three centuries.

Although referring at times to the larger extent of these groups, this paper will concentrate on the Caribs in and adjacent to the Orinoco drainage. While warfare was endemic in this region, it was clearly exacerbated by the arrival of various European groups on the scene. In this my position differs somewhat from that of Whitehead (1990a) whose perspective focuses on the Guiana Caribs in the Dutch and French colonies along the Atlantic coast from Essequibo to Cayenne. He argues that, although attempting to maintain an independent stance vis-à-vis the European colonists, the Carib were inevitably subordinated to European geopolitical interests, thus steadily eroding their autonomy and facilitating widespread (though not complete) assimilation. I will show that in the Orinoco basin the Carib were able to exercise political autonomy much longer. While many were eventually pacified and assimilated by the expansion of Spanish missions, many others resisted Spanish hegemony by retreating further into the interior. Furthermore, the interaction between Caribs and Europeans is hardly as straightforward as Ferguson and Whitehead depict in their concept of "ethnic soldiering" (despite the fact that Whitehead developed the concept based on his analysis of colonial relations between the Dutch and the Caribs). Though lacking the material resources of the Europeans, the Caribs were every bit as manipulative of the relationships from their end as were the colonists (1992b: 2-3, 21-23; Whitehead 1990a).

This examination of Carib warfare in the Orinoco basin is more consistent with the reconstruction by Arvelo-Jiménez and Biord (1994) of a farflung "system of Orinoco Regional Interdependence." This system involved the production of modest surpluses of a variety of products which were then horizontally distributed throughout the region by means of complex relations of trade, marriage alliances, political pacts, ritual practises, raids, and warfare, all serving as "articulatory mechanisms whose functioning entailed the existence of interethnic levels of integration." This perspective is further elaborated in Pérez' argument that not only are they "not 'cultural islands'," but that "indigenous regional networks of trade, alliances, and warfare served...as mechanisms of cultural resistance and survival." There was a "dynamic intertwining" in the engagement between European interests and indigenous peoples. At the same time, the dominant colonial groups were able to incorporate the "resistance and accommodation of the (indigenous groups) into their broader plans of dominion and hegemony," particularly by incorporating "the indigenous system of exchange into the European mercantile system." While granting that Venezuelan oral-based cultures have their own autochthonous history, Pérez argues that they were inevitably subordinated by the dominant cultural groups under much broader projects of dominion and hegemony (2000: 516-518, 521).

While the Carib conform in general to the model presented by Arvelo-Jiménez, Biord, and Pérez, I will show that they exerted a much more active role in the interactive process with the various European nationalities, exercising more individual and cultural agency than is granted by Pérez (or Whitehead for that matter). In fact over the first several centuries of contact, they succeeded in presenting a much more assertive confrontation with the European powers. It was doubtful which would prevail until a combination of improved weaponry and an increasing European demographic presence finally shifted the balance in favor of the latter. Even then it took another century of gradual attrition to fully pacify the Caribs. But their warlike tradition lived on to motivate their participation in the War of Independence and the numerous civil conflicts of the 19th century.

Yet another theoretical perspective, drawn from outside this region, may prove useful in understanding the Carib situation. In presenting his model for world-systems Wallerstein (1974: 390-391) contrasts them with "mini-systems." "A mini-system is an entity that has within it a complete division of labor, and a single cultural framework. Such systems are found only in very simple agricultural or hunting and gathering societies." A world-system, in contrast, is simply described as "a unit with a single division of labor and multiple cultural systems." Wallerstein goes on however to elaborate the complex reality of world-systems. While he does not elaborate on the mini-system, one would expect that they too would be more multifaceted than suggested by the simple definition. Perhaps our understanding of Carib "politics" can be enhanced by considering their system as a mini-system. I think that this approach can be more informative than Whitehead's model which emphasizes the process of Carib subordination to the European system. The application of a "systems" approach will be further elaborated in the conclusion.

Carib warfare cannot be examined without also looking at their practise of taking slaves or captives, as the two were closely intertwined. Though warfare was undoubtedly practised at first for reasons other than obtaining slaves, the earlier habit of taking war captives for ritual purposes was gradually transformed into slavery and then into the commerce of slaves. Thus these two practises will be dealt with together in this paper.

### **First Contact**

The first European encounter with mainland Caribs came in August 1498 on Columbus' third voyage. While anchored at Punta del Arenal (Pt. Yacos) at the southwestern tip of Trinidad, Columbus describes the arrival from the east of a large canoe with 24 men in the prime of life, well-armed with bows and arrows and wooden shields. Columbus tried various stratagems to entice them to his ships, but they were extremely wary. Upon ordering a tambourine to be played, with some young sailors dancing, the

natives apparently took fright and began to shoot arrows at the ship. Columbus ordered to return fire with crossbows. A little later they agreed with the pilot of an accompanying caravel to talk with him on shore, but when they observed him going first to Columbus' ship to ask permission they paddled away (Jane 1988: 14-17).

These people seemed quite distinct from those encountered on the mainland of Paria, across the Gulf of Paria, who appeared more pacific and friendly. Fernando Colon says that the latter "had no shields or bucklers nor poisonous herbs for their arrows," rather these are customarily used by the Caribs (F. Colon 1892: II:56). Some of Columbus' people visited one of their villages where they were received courteously, and were invited to share a meal. Many wore pieces of gold and strands of pearls. When Columbus endeavored to learn the source of these treasures he was told that they came from a land to the west and north, but he was warned not to explore in that direction because the land was inhabited by cannibals (Jane 1988: 22-25).

Sailing along the south coast of Trinidad the following year of 1499 Vespucci (Vespucio 1951: 237) reports encountering a canoe of 70 men coming toward them from the high sea to the east. When he tried to intercept it, they jumped overboard and swam the nearly two leagues to shore. Left behind were four youths who had been captured. Their male organs had been cut off and consumed by their captors whom they called "Camballi," very fierce, eaters of human flesh. This account is interesting, however, in that it does not necessarily indicate that captives were killed and eaten, just that certain parts of the body (in this case the genitalia) were consumed. Vespucci's ships visited for 17 days with the more peaceful people of this region (presumably Paria), from whom they heard accounts of warlike enemies to the west, "who had an infinite abundance of pearls." Those which they had "they had taken from them in their wars" (Vespucio 1951: 325). Except for the abundance of pearls, these enemies of the Paria could very well have been Caribs (or more likely, Cumanagotos).

When Pinzón visited the Gulf of Paria the next year, however, he reported that most of the coastal villages were in ruins, encountering an occasional band of wandering Indians, "fearful and timid, upon spotting the ships they fled to the hills or hid in dense forests" (Navarrete 1923: 21)<sup>2</sup>. How to explain the radical change in demeanor of these people in the short two years since Columbus first encountered them? It might have been a response to early Spanish depredations, but more likely it represents evidence of massive Carib aggression.

<sup>2</sup> "Tocó de paso en varios parajes, por lo común incultos, sin ver mas de unos pueblecillos arruinados y tal cual tropa de indios errantes, que, asombrados y tímidos, al divisar los bajeles huían a las montañas o se encubrían en bosques espesos. Los de Paria, tan benignos y generosos con el Almirante, repugnaron venir a bordo; par benese en la playa como solevantados y prontos a pelear" (Navarrete 1923: 21-22).

Most of the coastal populations were enemies of the Caribs and engaged in continual warfare with them. Much of this seems to have been motivated by Carib practises of hostage taking and cannibalism (see Arellano Moreno 1964: 46-89 passim). Juan de Castellanos (1962: 17-18 - Elegia IX, Canto Primero, coplas 8-10) gives a more detailed account of Carib warfare and cannibalism. He attributes to them a certain bravery and skill in their warrior ranks. The Spanish were impressed with how lethal their weapons were, which included poisoned arrows, the *macana*, war clubs and long fire-hardened spears. The generally negative description of the Caribs, may, however, be colored by information obtained from their mortal enemies the Arawaks<sup>3</sup>, who were more friendly towards the Spaniards (Castellanos 1962: 20 - Elegia IX, Canto Primero, copla 50; Whitehead 1994: 38). He says that some of the Caribs ate human flesh to express their heightened emotions and to wreak vengeance on the enemy. Cannibalism was, however, a highly ritual act, conducted in isolated places away from their settlements. Utensils used in preparing the meal were never used for any other purpose. Further, the meal was treated as a solemn occasion - there was no celebration, no shouting, rejoicing, or even smiles. Castellanos in fact, describes it as concluding a period of anxiety.

At this period the Caribs were wide-ranging and aggressive. They even attacked the offshore island of Cubagua in 1519 (Acereda La Linde 1959: I:149). Castellanos continues by describing how in 1535 somewhere above the Río Caranaca, Alonso de Herrera was confronted by skilled Carib warriors who attacked in orderly squadrons, then fell back to fight like lions from well fortified groves of trees. Herrera's troops freed a number of captives who had been imprisoned by the Caribs. These they returned to their village at Caburuto (Cabruta?) further upstream on the Orinoco, but found that the Caribs had destroyed and devastated whole villages (Castellanos 1962: 48- 49 - Elegia XI, Canto II, coplas 43, 49-50, 59-60; Caulin 1966: I:245-248). Coming out into the open sea on their way back, they again encountered a fleet of Carib war canoes, which they attacked, for fear of themselves being attacked. This time the Caribs fled, but the Spaniards pursued one canoe to land. The occupants abandoned their canoe and disappeared, leaving behind an abundance of food, human body parts and valuables identified as belonging to at least one of the Spaniards (Castellanos 1962: 59 - Elegia IX, Canto III, coplas 81-84). Though commonly used among other peoples, the Carib apparently did not construct palisaded or fortified villages.

In the account by Francisco Vásquez (in Serrano y Sanz 1909: 447-448) of the Ursua/Aguirre expedition down the Amazon, up the Río Negro and down the Orinoco, there is mention of a visit in 1561 to a large Carib village 200 leagues upstream from the mouth of the Orinoco. He describes two temples. One contained a slab painted with a figure of the sun and a man, the other a slab with the figure of the moon and a woman. At the entrance to each

<sup>3</sup> Although at times the two groups both traded with each other and collaborated in attacking mutual adversaries, see below (also see Kloos 1971: 1-10).

building were two platforms where it was presumed the sacrificial victims were decapitated. Both buildings were covered with blood, concluded to be human.

In the 1570s Caribs from the coasts of Paria and Guaiana as well as the nearby islands of Tobago and Granada ranged along the eastern coasts of Venezuela attacking the Spanish slavers and even the Spanish settlements on Margarita island. In 1582 they crossed the central Llanos to invade the recently founded Spanish city of Valencia (Civrieux 1976: 13-14).

Toward the end of the 16th century (1584-1597) Antonio de Berrío, Governor of the new Kingdom of Granada, set out from Tunja in the Colombian Andes on several expeditions into the eastern lowlands searching for the fabled kingdom of El Dorado. While unsuccessful in finding this mythical land, he did repeatedly encounter Carib traders and warriors in his explorations. On the third journey in 1591 he traveled down the Casanare and the Meta to the Orinoco river. They continued down the river guided by two canoes full of Caribs of Barima, "who were going on a kidnapping expedition to supply their shamblers." For nearly 300 miles the adjacent country was uninhabited. Following this they passed through a province of Caribs which continued for more than 170 miles as far as the sea. "Every year these Caribs make two fleets of up to thirty canoes and go up the River to take people for their slaughter-houses (to be eaten); and on that account they have depopulated [the region] for more than three hundred and fifty leagues (probably about 500 miles) up the river, which is a very great pity" (Harlow 1928: 99, 95-96). In 1595 Domingo de Vera sent out six canoes from Trinidad to search for the gilded country of Manoa. When three were separated from the rest, they were attacked by more than 300 Caribs who massacred most of the occupants and carried off the surviving women (Caulin 1966: I:300-301).

Newson (1976: 75) cites documents in the Archivo General de Indias which report increasing intensity of Carib raids on Trinidad during the 16th century, carrying off the inhabitants to be killed and eaten. "By 1592 Carib attacks were occurring every day and it is possible that by then they had established settlements, either temporary or permanent, in the island."

In 1596 the captain of a fleet of Spanish canoes under Domingo de Ybarguen was returning to Trinidad from the rivers in the Delta when he fell in with a fleet of Caribs from the islands of Dominica and Grenada. Under cloak of friendship they killed him and destroyed the fleet. Ybarguen reports that they were headed to "the mouth of a river (the Guarapiche?) where they were on terms of peace and friendship with other Caribs, who go there to distribute prisoners and to make their sacrifices and to eat the Indians whom they take alive" (Harlow 1928: 109).

The experience of Sir Walter Raleigh confirms these reports. From the Gulf of Paria he tried to enter the river Amana (Caño Manamo), but turned back when his Indian guide warned "that the Canibals of Guanipa would assaile them with many Canoas." They were much feared by neighboring

tribes for their use of poisoned arrows in war. There is thus a concern that Raleigh's people could not withstand them (Raleigh in Harlow 1928: 35). These Cannibals inhabited villages a short distance upstream from the mouths of the Guanipa and Berreese (Guarapiche) rivers. Other Cannibal groups are reported south of the Orinoco, and west of the Caroni (Raleigh in Harlow 1928: 69-70). Finally, another group of Cannibals is said to inhabit the plains north of the Orinoco. Here is what Raleigh (in Harlow 1928: 57) says of that group: "On the North side, the first riuer that falleth into Orenoque is Cari, beyond it on the same side is the riuer of Limo, betweene these two is a great nation of Canibals, and their chief towne is a continuall markette of women for 3 or 4 hatchets 'a peece, they are bought by the Arwacas, and by them solde into the west Indies."

Since the natives who informed both Raleigh and Berrío do not appear to have counted them among the four principal nations of the plains, we can conclude either 1) that they were recent arrivals in that area, or 2) that they occupied only limited areas of the plains. Since they had also depopulated much of the area upstream, it seems likely that the first alternative is the more correct. The 19th century geographer Codazzi (1960: I:314-315) suggests that this expansion was stimulated by commerce in body paints, arrow poisons, colored stones, pearls; nuggets, sheets and small bars of gold, rock crystals, arrows, blowguns, watercraft, mats, salt and moriche cord for the manufacture of hammocks, as well as attractive young women.

Carrocera (1945: 390-91, 396) reports that the Caribs waged war on all the other nations of Indians, taking prisoners and "with great festivity killing and eating them, and they did the same with those killed in battle." Although less numerous than the other nations, the Caribs were the most feared. Their manner is quite agreeable with those whom they consider their equals or superior; but with Indians of other nations they behave as quite sovereign, making them serve them as their masters and overlords.

Carib bellicosity was further exacerbated by the orders (*cédulas*) of Queen Isabela in 1503 and King Ferdinand in 1511, giving license to Spanish explorers, conquistadors and colonists to capture and enslave only those Indians who were Caribs. By this means she hoped to discourage their warfare and cannibalism while at the same time exposing them to the benefits of Spanish Christianity and civilization. The result, however, was that the Spanish justified attack and captivity of any indigenous group by declaring them Caribs (see e.g. Whitehead 1990a: 379, f.n. 8) As for the Caribs proper, their initial response seems to have been increased belligerence - only with the passage of time did they gradually retreat from the centers of Spanish settlement (Arcila Fariás 1966: 15-21; Arellano Moreno 1961: 17-19).

Carib warfare was already well developed prior to European contact. These early historical accounts suggest that there had been an expansion of Cannibal Caribs down the Orinoco river at some time just preceding the European discovery of South America. This expansion probably encompassed

trade and aggressive warfare, the latter perhaps directed against those populations that resisted Carib occupation and settlement in their territories. The Carib were clearly interacting with groups ranging at least from the middle Orinoco out into the Caribbean. Furthermore, relations that were sometimes hostile, are described at other times as involving amicable trade (eg. with the Arawaks). Certainly the Caribs had decimated many of the settlements along the middle Orinoco. One may surmise that these were smaller and weaker groups, unable to effectively defend themselves against the fierce Caribs. Expansion was also probably linked with religious ritual-perhaps a new cult. Captive adult men were probably eaten in cannibalistic rites-perhaps linked with confirmation and reinforcement of warrior valor (as well as procreative prowess?). Women, at least young women, were taken captive, many being incorporated into the group, while others were sold to other more powerful groups downstream. Their population size and probable organization into chiefdoms may have enabled the coastal groups to protect themselves from Carib attack, while their greater wealth undoubtedly gave them the ability to trade with the Caribs for both captives and the spoils of war. With a pre-existing emphasis on warfare, the Caribs responded to Spanish belligerence and slave raiding with increased aggression. During this period in fact, the Caribs seemed to have been on the offensive most of the time, ranging far and wide along the coast of South America and beyond, into the Caribbean, often attacking Spanish settlements with impunity. Since the Caribs mostly traveled by water, or through forested country, horses were of little use to the Spanish. Carib weapons seem to have been nearly as effective as those of the Spanish who were still using crossbows and the arquebus. Only cannon, in those instances where they could be employed effectively (probably mostly from larger sea-going vessels), may have given the Spanish some tactical advantage.

### **Early Colonial Interaction**

By 1612 Caribs were attacking both the Spanish and the Indians of Trinidad, both of whom had moved inland to the foothills of the Northern Range. Even after they had been driven away from the island, they returned for many years to lay in provisions from their former plantations of plantains (Newson 1976: 78). A company of infantry was sent out from Santa Fe de Bogotá in 1638 to travel down the Meta and the Orinoco to provide assistance to the Spanish on Trinidad. The account of this expedition reports that every year during the dry season the Carib embarked with numbers of canoes to kill and steal all along the coast, then returning with their booty. They were as much a menace to the Spanish as to the other native populations. Some of these goods they were trading with "Lutheran" (presumably Dutch) ships. The Spanish felt strongly that armed force should be employed to deter the Caribs



and protect the other indigenous communities of the region (Arellano Moreno 1964: 355-359).

Although Cumaná was settled sometime between 1516 and 1521, serious Spanish colonization of eastern Venezuela did not occur until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the founding of the Franciscan mission at Píritu in 1656. Nonetheless there is relatively little information on Carib activities in this region or the Orinoco basin until the latter half of the century. Pelleprat documents the entry of French Jesuit missionaries in the Guarapiche drainage beginning in 1651. In that period Caribs were still aggressively pursuing warfare against European colonists in the Lesser Antilles and Trinidad. Along the lower Orinoco they were allied in an offensive-defensive league with the Cores, Arotos and Parias against the Aruacas, Chaimas and particularly the Spanish. The French were buying and using Indian captives, especially Aruacas, Chaimas, and other enemies of their indigenous allies, which suggests they were being obtained from the Caribs of the Guarapiche (1965: 41-46, 32, 50-51; Civrieux 1976: 24-26).

These communities were each lead by their own headman or captain, who was chosen by enduring a month of fasting, followed by a series of rigorous trials without showing pain. Pelleprat says it was these captains who lead their people in war. War parties attacked their enemies by surprise or from ambush. At this time their principle arms were the bow and arrow for attacking from a distance, and the *boutou* (war club) or macana for hand to hand combat. They did not yet have firearms, but had expressed to the French a desire to obtain these weapons, recognizing the great advantage it would give them. They killed their opponents quickly, with a blow of the macana to the head, rather than allowing them to suffer. Pelleprat reports that they often took a hand or foot from their enemies, which was then slowly dried over a fire, to preserve as a trophy, but he is dubious about reports of cannibalism, having never observed it himself. Men and boys were killed on the spot. Women and girls were taken as captives and incorporated into the community and frequently taken as wives. It may be surmised that such captives were also sometimes traded to the French to be sold in the islands as slaves. Longer expeditions were undertaken in large pirogues (canoe-shaped boat). These were carved from the trunk of the caobo (*Swietenia candollei* Pittier), were 60 to 70 feet long, five to six feet wide, and capable of carrying 50 men. As many as six to a dozen pirogues with 300 or more warriors, might combine for such a voyage (Pelleprat 1965: 70-71, 75, 45).

In the western Llanos during the 1660s and 1670s the Caribs exhibited great hostility toward any attempts at pacification and reduction to mission life. In 1665 Fray Nicolás de Renteria and P. Plácido de Belicena attempted to reduce a group of them at Parayma, near the modern town of El Pao. But the next year at Pentecost (30 May 1666), the Indians rose up, murdered him, and dismembered the body. In 1676 they killed an Indian interpreter sent out to the Río Portuguesa to attract them to the missions, and the following year

another missionary was killed along the Río Guanare. Even when the missionaries avoided death, they were inevitably met with hostility, being attacked, robbed, and driven out (Lodares 1929-31: I:80-82, 95-96, 105-107). In 1670 the Dutch, allied with Caribs and Arawaks attacked the city of Guayana, wreaking such destruction that the surviving inhabitants abandoned it for the coastal cities. The Spanish then constructed several forts along the lower reaches of the Orinoco, but these only marginally discouraged the entrance of Dutch merchants who were trading with the Indians (Caulin 1966: I:317-318).

By this time the slave trade had grown to sizable proportions, and was increasing every year. The Caribs may have continued to take captives through warfare, but they were also promoting warfare among other groups by offering European trade goods, such as clothing, tools, and baubles (mirrors, knives, beads, etc.) in exchange for their captives. Caulin (1966: II:272) estimates that every year 200 captives were brought out and another 400 persons were killed in the course of these raids. Raiding parties killed the older people and infants. Younger people of both sexes, old enough to make the trek across the wilderness, were taken captive to be sold into perpetual slavery among the Dutch of Essequibo.

During most of the 17th century the Caribs still dominated most of their traditional territory. The Carib in the Lesser Antilles were still making annual voyages to the mainland where they traded both with the mainland Carib *and* with their sworn enemies the Arawak of Guiana (Rivet 1923: 191). Carib trading parties ranged widely throughout the Orinoco basin and even reached into the Amazon drainage, from the upper Orinoco, and Edmonson (1906: 249) reports that they also traveled overland from the Essequibo to the Río Branco and thence downstream to the Río Negro and the lower Amazon. Once again their trade extended to their traditional rivals and enemies the Manóas. At first trade proceeded along the Orinoco, but as the Spanish established fortifications near the mouth of that river, alternative routes were followed up the Caura to its headwaters which lay a mere quarter league from the Caño Paruspo, a tributary of the Paragua. From here they descended to the Río Caroni and up the tributary Caño de Limones which was only a short portage to the Río Cuyuní. Then it was downstream to the Essequibo and the Dutch colonies. When a fort was established by the Spanish near the mouth of the Caura, the inland route bypassing the Orinoco was extended even farther. The Río Ventuari gave direct communication to the upper Orinoco, and a four day trek overland from its upper reaches gave access to the upper Caura and the rest of the inland route (Caulin 1966: I:97-99, 104, 107, 113, 123-124; II:272).

Tauste (cited by Lodares 1929) provides a detailed account of Carib cannibalism still being practised in the region south of Cumaná toward the end of the 17th century (1678). The bodies of those killed in warfare were roasted to preserve the flesh. If in a hurry, or pressed by their enemies, and

thus prevented from carrying off the bodies, they would cut off a limb or two to take with them. Captives would be brought home and fattened for later consumption. This occurred at congregations of up to 4000 individuals for feasting, drinking and dancing over a period of several days. According to Tauste, these were not limited to adult males, for one Spaniard reported being unsuccessful in buying two five year olds who were destined to be eaten at a drinking party. Ruíz Blanco also reports that the Caribs sometimes consumed the flesh of those Indians against whom they pursued war. He is quite clear that cannibalism was practised as a kind of trophy display and not for sustenance (Lodares 1929-31: II:38-40; Ruíz Blanco 1892: 50-53).

Even though widely scattered, the Caribs were able to prevail over their opponents because they were able to bring together and coordinate large numbers of warriors, whereas most of the other nations could rely on no more than their kinsmen in time of war. Fray Ruíz Blanco speaks of the continuing hostilities between Spanish settlements and the Caribs in the interior of eastern Venezuela. This was fueled by ongoing abuses by the Spanish and was further exacerbated by Dutch attacks on Spanish settlements. By the latter half of the century the French were active also, particularly moving up the Guarapiche river. They often joined with the Caribs in attacking Spanish missions in the region (Lodares 1929-31: II:113-114). In this part of the eastern Llanos they impeded successful missionization until well into the 18th century. Arcila Fariás claims that the Caribs were also encouraged in their slave traffic by Portuguese from Pará (presumably trading via the upper Orinoco - Río Negro corridor) (Lodares 1929-31: II:38 f.n.1; Acereda La Linde 1959:I: 149; Arcila Fariás 1966: 45; Armas Chitty 1956: 102, 276-284).

The Jesuits entered the middle Orinoco in 1662. They concentrated particularly on the Sáliva, establishing the Misiones de Casanare in 1670. But in 1684 a party of 140 Caribs incited the Sáliva to rebel, killing three of the four missionaries. Cassani recounts how the Caribs dismembered the bodies of the missionaries in order to eat the limbs. (They were also known to convert the skulls of their enemies into trophy drinking cups.) Their principal objective at this time, however, seems to have been to interdict Spanish expansion into the western Llanos. The Sáliva fled from the Caribs and the mission towns were abandoned. A second massacre perpetrated by some 30 pirogues, occurred in 1693, definitively ending Jesuit activity until the 18th century. Again the Caribs celebrated their success by consuming two children. These depredations were encouraged by the Dutch both to ensure their trade in the aromatic *aceite María* (*Calophyllum lucidum* Benth.) and annatto (*Bixa orellana* L.) (Whitehead in fact argues that the trade in *achiote* - or annatto - was more important than slaves 1988: 160-161), and to prevent the expansion both of the Spanish and of the Catholic faith. This early trade soon expanded to include captives, which rapidly came to dominate their commerce (Lodares 1929-31:III: 275; Gumilla 1963: 334; Cassani 1967: 248-255, 275, 279, 385).

Early in the 17th century the Caribs were indomitable, able to attack coastal settlements with relative impunity. But as the Spanish presence grew they gradually withdrew into the interior where Spanish efforts at settlement were successfully repelled for another century. There they continued to be strong, dominating the interior regions from the mouth of the Orinoco as far as the Casiquiare and the upper Río Negro. Trade relations were maintained with numerous groups, involving a variety of goods, including aceite María, annatto, and captives. Warfare continued to be pursued both for ritual purposes, including cannibalism, as well as to acquire trade goods and captives who could serve as slaves. The French and the Dutch seem to have been incorporated into the Atlantic end of this trading network (or system of Orinoco Regional Interdependence), the difference being that the value of the goods traded (including captives) was greater for both parties. With encouragement and support from both the French (in the eastern Llanos - particularly in the Guarapiche drainage), and the Dutch (throughout most of the Orinoco drainage and along the Atlantic coast of Guayana), they ranged widely, intimidating the other indigenous populations and extracting captives to be sold to the Dutch. It appears that early on many of the captives were acquired through trade with friendly tribes (though the Carib demand must have forced many of these "friendly" groups to acquire their captives through warfare against their neighbors). As the volume of the slave trade grew, more and more of the accessible populations near the Orinoco were decimated, forcing the Caribs and their allied subordinates to range ever more widely in search of captives. The evidence indicates, however, that the Carib were still in control. They initiated much of the interaction with the French and Dutch, and especially mounted the offensive against the Spanish. Efforts by the Spanish to establish missions were inevitably met with hostility, massacre, pillaging, and destruction. Both the Carib and Dutch seem to have been aware that successful missionization by the Spanish would inhibit or terminate the lucrative trade being carried on up and down the Orinoco. The Protestant Dutch also seem to have propagandized against the Catholic faith as well as promoting Carib fears that they would be enslaved and mistreated by Spanish colonists. Thus the first chinks were made in the autonomous Carib system by the expanding European world-system.

### **The Mission Period**

By the 18th century Spanish missionaries were beginning to penetrate the eastern Llanos as well as the lower and middle Orinoco, but not without stout resistance from Carib groups occupying those territories. The governor of Cumaná sent troops to the Guarapiche to pacify the area and eliminate the Caribs. An expedition of reduction to the middle Orinoco in 1720-21 found the local indigenous populations significantly diminished - some had been killed by Carib incursions, others had been carried off as captives, still others

had fled, seeking security elsewhere (Lodares 1929-31: I:184). The Carib threat was temporarily abated, however, when after three years of warfare with the Caverres (who were supplied and armed by the Portuguese on the Río Negro), the former were decisively defeated and nearly wiped out. This opened up the Orinoco for missionary intrusion and also settlement by cattle ranchers (Civrieux 1976: 43, 45; Lodares 1929-31: II:188-189; III:370).

It would be ten years before the Carib recovered enough to once again pose a threat to the Spanish missions. Their hostility toward these mission efforts was great. In 1733 four missionaries tried to convince a group of Caribs to settle a town at Río Aguirre. But when their gifts ran out, they were killed by the Caribs. A mission founded at Tiramuto on the south bank of the Orinoco near Uyapi lasted nine months, before the Caribs gave the missionaries three days to evacuate at peril for their lives. In 1734 and 1735 Carib attacks intensified. Up to 500 bowmen destroyed a town of Sálivas, a Guamo mission, attacked an Otomaco settlement, and destroyed two other mission settlements. In 1735 they attacked the Sáliva again. That same year another mission was founded at Mamo, to serve as a way station on the road to Barcelona province. Believing that they had definitely annihilated the Jesuit missions, they proceeded downstream to destroy the Mamo mission as well. The missionaries were warned in advance that the Caribs were organizing to attack the mission. Thirty pirogues and 400 armed men were gathered on the Río Caura in preparation for the attack. During the 1730s Gumilla (1963: 139-140) reports that he could never pass the mouth of the Río Caura without suffering heavy gunfire from Caribs ranged along the beaches and *barrancas*. By that time the Caribs were armed with Dutch muskets. After only six months the Mamo mission was assaulted by the Caribs, who killed the missionaries and stripped the church of its ornaments. On this occasion the missionaries were first downed with a gunshot, then clubbed to death with a single blow of the macana. In 1736-37 the mission of San Joaquín de Pariri was repeatedly destroyed by allies of groups who had been forcibly settled there by the missionary Fray Fernando Ximénez. A mission established at Pariaguán in 1744 also suffered repeated assaults by the Caribs. Their armed force of arquebusiers was little defense against Caribs equipped with Dutch muskets. Not until a fort was constructed at El Pao and supplied with four cannons and 16 muskets were the missionaries able to mount an effective defense. Nonetheless, the Spanish continued to depend on the arquebus as late as 1752. Carib hostility to the Spanish was fueled in part by their fear that Spanish control of the Orinoco would sever their trade relations with the Dutch who provided trade goods, firearms, powder and shot. But on a more fundamental level it was undoubtedly driven by their intent to maintain an autonomous sphere of influence (Lodares 1929-31: II:196-197, III:290; Caulin 1966: II:207-217; Gumilla 1963: 328-334; Civrieux 1976: 55,58, 64, 73).

Whenever the Caribs visited a friendly tribe, they demanded entertainment, and dancing. After drinking day and night, they were liable to turn on their hosts, unexpectedly killing them with macanas and muskets, or taking them captive. At the same time, Gilij (1965: II:57) is quite specific that while the Guaipunaves and Cabres practised cannibalism at this time, the Caribs did not. The Palenques and Guayquiries who occupied the opposite or north shore of the Orinoco had by that time been almost wiped out by the Caribs. The few that were left were treated as personal slaves, cultivating fields to provision the Caribs as they traveled up and down the Orinoco. Their fears of the latter led them to readily subject themselves to missionization as a means of surviving. In like manner the missionaries were able to gather the Mapoyes of Uruanay and the Paos into mission settlements. Carib depredations along the middle Orinoco were only diminished when Spanish missionaries and soldiers fortified the hill Marumaruta on the right bank of the river in 1736, later named San Francisco Javier (Gumilla 1963: 201, 315).

In contrast to the small number of most Indian groups, Gumilla estimates the Carib as having 12,000 warriors spread widely from the middle Orinoco and along the Guiana coast as far as Cayenne. Adding in wives, children, and the elderly, the Caribs probably had a total population of 60,000-100,000 at that time. The other numerous population were the Cabres who were even more bellicose than the Carib (Gumilla 1963: 313). These facts lead one to speculate whether, at least in this environment and at that time in history, warfare may have provided a positive selective advantage for these populations.

Thus during the first half of the 18th century Carib trade, warfare and trade in captives/slaves seems to have intensified, as did the confrontation with both other bellicose Indians, such as the Cabres and Guaipunaves, and with the Spanish. Although some captives were kept as personal slaves, most were sold. The Dutch trade for slaves, their provision of firearms, and their propaganda against the Catholic Spanish encouraged the Caribs even more. The profitability of this trade probably led to Carib abandonment of cannibalism by this time. The Dutch also became directly involved in these expeditions to acquire captives. Carib success helped to maintain a large population in comparison to most of the other indigenous groups. The more accessible Indian populations were increasingly decimated, driving the survivors to move away from the easily approachable riverine locations to seek refuge in more inaccessible regions. At first Spanish efforts at reducing these populations to mission settlements merely served to concentrate them for easy Carib pickings, but eventually as the missions became protected by detachments of Spanish soldiers, they were able to fend off these attacks, which in fact increased their attractiveness as places of refuge from the Caribs, thus leading to growth of the missions. As the mission frontier expanded, the confrontation between Caribs and Spanish intensified. The Caribs put up a determined offensive to stem Spanish expansion into the

eastern Llanos and the middle Orinoco basin. During the early part of the century the Caribs held a tactical advantage because they were using Dutch supplied muskets, whereas most of the Spanish were still using the arquebus. But eventually the Spanish prevailed when they began to fortify commanding points along the Orinoco. The missions were also defended more successfully when small platoons of soldiers supplied with muskets were sent out to defend them.

Though the Caribs were still fiercely defending their autonomy, they were increasingly being engaged by the European capitalist world-system through coercion on the one hand (Spanish) and seduction on the other (Dutch). They had not yet been absorbed into the capitalist world-system, nor dependent upon it, but they were certainly in no position to ignore it.

### **The Practise of Warfare**

Gumilla provides much more detailed information about Carib warfare than most sources (1963: 324-238). The following discussion is based mostly on his information drawn from 17th and 18th century sources. Every year an armada of 30, 60, or up to 100 dugout pirogues, each holding up to 30 persons, and often fitted with sails, would travel up the Orinoco during the dry season which runs from December through April. He reports that the Caribs were more interested in taking women and children captives than sacking villages or acquiring booty. Originally, he says, the object was to increase their authority by adding to their gang of field workers and attendants. But when the Dutch appeared the purpose of warfare changed, being driven by the desire for trade goods. The Dutch often paid in advance for captives, thus obligating the Caribs to produce a certain number each year.

The Carib would creep up on an enemy village at night, attacking without warning and setting fire to the houses. The surprise of the fire and the noise of the firearms created confusion, giving the Caribs great tactical advantage. The only recourse for the defenders was to flee, but the Caribs had generally set up ambushes along all the escape routes, leading to general massacre and plundering. All men old enough to bear arms were slaughtered, along with the elderly, who were considered useless. Women and the "rest of the crowd" (*chusma*) were reserved to be sold. The captives were sent downstream in one or two armed pirogues to the Carib home territory, while the rest of the expedition continued upstream (Gumilla 1963: 325). It is unclear what Gumilla means by "chusma." Might this refer to slaves held by the local tribe? Or were there adolescent or adult men who did not practise warfare, and thus might not have been put to death but reserved as slaves?

To their allies the Carib asserted that they were not at fault for burning and taking captive a given settlement, for if the inhabitants had received them well and sold them supplies for their voyage, they would have done them no harm. But having taken up arms against them so discourteously, it was

necessary to punish them, so that other nations would see how they should be received, and with what courtesy they should be treated. Gumilla (1963: 325) notes cynically that this was, however, a mere stratagem for assaulting that population again the following year. If, however, these expeditions represent long-standing practises of exchange within a "system of Orinoco Regional Interdependence," the Carib argument would appear to have a more solid basis. Their attitude seems to reflect an increasing breakdown of a long-standing and well-structured trading system. From 1731 on some Dutch accompanied the Carib on these voyages, donning a loincloth and painting themselves with *Bixa*. Their presence served to encourage the daring of Carib raids and the depredations they carried out. And although Dutch authorities remonstrated that such trade with the Indians was prohibited, they apparently made little effort to interdict it (Gumilla 1740; 1963: 328).

Several days upstream from the Orinoco on the Río Guaviare, the Caribs held an annual fair where they bought captives. From friendly groups they paid for each captive two axes, two machetes, some knives and bundles of glass beads. Those who lay more distant might be paid only half that amount. Gumilla claims that some of these tribes were so destitute that they would sell their own children in exchange for these meager trade goods. One wonders, however, whether they might not have been so constrained by Carib demands for captives that they were forced to offer their children when falling short of the expected quota. Of course it cost the Caribs very little for those captives acquired by attacking their enemies. For each captive delivered to the Dutch merchant, the Carib warrior was paid a locking chest filled with 10 axes, 10 machetes, 10 knives, 10 bundles of beads, a piece of linen for his breechcloth, a mirror for painting his face, a pair of scissors for trimming his hair, as well as a shotgun, powder and shot, a flask of aguardiente, and baubles like needles, pins, fishhooks, etc. It is clear how profitable this was for the Carib slave traders, yet Gumilla maintains that through advance payments most were perpetually indebted to their Dutch factors who obliged them to produce a certain number of captives on time (which must have served as an even greater incentive to continue their bloody raids) (Gumilla 1740; 1963: 324-327, 353).<sup>4</sup>

Arvelo-Jiménez and Bjord (1994) in fact characterize this system as "debt/peonage." European traders "maximized their profits by setting high prices for their goods while at the same time devaluing the price they paid for indigenous goods." The Indians were drawn into the system because of their desire for and eventual dependence on goods which they could not produce (such as metal tools, firearms, cloth and distilled liquor). They became trapped in the system because they erroneously perceived it in terms of their traditional practise of deferred exchange. However, the unequal rate of

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of Dutch mercantilism from the Dutch perspective, see Whitehead 1988: 150-171.



exchange compounded through time, deepening the Indian partner's debt, until it became impossible to repay.

Having penetrated as much as 600 leagues inland, and having bought as many captives as they could, the Caribs would leave behind with the local caciques any surplus goods they had not dispensed, to be used to buy more captives in anticipation of their return. To prevent any fraud, two or three Caribs were left behind in each community to watch over these goods. The caciques were further warned that, should any harm come to these guardians, their villages would be set to the torch and their wives and children carried off into captivity (Gumilla 1963: 327).

The expedition then returned downstream with their captives to the Carib homes along the lower Orinoco and the coast. After resting a short while they transported them to the Dutch colonies, some to pay off their debts and receive advances for the next trip, others merely to sell their captives (although these were in the minority).

Training for warfare began early. Young boys spent their time making weapons. They practised continually with the bow and arrow, and learned to handle the war club, the macana, the lance (said to be as sharp as a bayonet) and shield as well. The youth formed their own companies, elected corporals, arranged their battle formations, and joined in youthful battles, so that when they became adult they were well prepared for war. Many warriors were skilled in deflecting arrows with the shield; some could accomplish the same feat using only their bow! Arrows were sometimes fitted with poisoned points. Carib bowmen were deadly in skill and accuracy. Contact with the Dutch led the Caribs to replace their bows and arrows with muskets, and they sometimes also had the use of light guns. Gumilla actually considered this a providential development, since he says the Caribs were much poorer marksmen with the gun than with the bow and arrow. They also tended to overload their muskets with powder, believing that that would increase the power of the shot, not realizing that it also made it fly higher and farther. Furthermore, a good archer could get off six or eight shots in the time it took a gunman to load and fire his weapon. Warriors painted their bodies with fearsome designs, that dismayed even the Spaniards. The din and confusion of war cries was bewildering as well, although Gumilla found them amusing: "I'm as fierce as a tiger." "I'm furious as a cayman." Hand drums were sometimes carried into battle to encourage the warriors, while huge signal drums were used by those who were attacked to warn nearby villages (Gumilla 1963: 335-346).

Warfare itself was pursued to gain prestige, to be acclaimed as valiant, and to merit promotion to captain. To this end warriors preserved the trophies and spoils of war. Small finely woven palm figures were made to represent each enemy killed. These were hung from the roof of the house, and whenever a guest entered the warrior would boast, "I am very brave; I have been on so many campaigns; and look there how many enemies I have killed; I will be a great captain," etc. (Gumilla 1963: 337).

All the warlike nations required the candidates for captain to undergo a series of rigorous trials, but the Carib were even more harsh than most. Gumilla (1963: 340, f.n.1) cites Carvajal (written ca. 1648) on the details of the procedure. A candidate first had to kill three enemy males, roast their flesh, and bring it to his home settlement. For the next six months he had to remain in his hammock, while maintaining absolute silence, and fasting by eating but a single cassava cake and one gourd of *masato* a day. The flesh of those killed was distributed among the rest of the population.<sup>5</sup> At the end of this period of fast, a large group of Caribs was called to witness his further trials. He was placed in a hammock three feet above the ground, covered with banana leaves and provided a straw through which to breathe. Then a small fire was lit under the hammock and the candidate had to endure this roasting a certain period of time without moving or crying out, for this would cause him to fail the test. Successfully passing this trial, he was given a liter of ground red peppers to drink without blinking. After this, he was enclosed in his hammock while each captain present emptied a length of bamboo filled with fierce biting ants into the hammock. Again this had to be endured without moving or making a sound. If successful in this, the candidate then had to endure two strikes of the whip from every person present (sometimes as many as 1000) without moving even a muscle. Some initiates died during these trials. If the initiate showed pain, his kinsmen were killed, for he had brought dishonor to the lineage. But if successful, the initiate was feted with a drinking party that lasted for days. His success also put him in position to seek in the future the chieftainship of his group. Cassani (1967: 399) names at least two General Captains, leaders of the Carib expeditionary fleets - Taricura and his successor Mayurucari. Both men achieved their positions of leadership neither through inheritance, election, or merit, but through their ability in public oratory, and they were potentially succeeded by anyone who could outdo them.

Expeditions for trade and captives lasted several months, and were rigorous and physically demanding. Training for warfare began at a young age, and involved becoming dexterous with all the weapons, skills and strategies of war. Only those who could endure the extreme tests of initiation could qualify to serve as leaders or captains for these expeditions. It is unclear whether the Carib themselves developed the many ruses and deceits they used in assaulting their enemies, or whether some of these were taught them by the Dutch. Certainly the Spanish considered them devious, under-handed, and perverse. The practise of massacring all adult males and the elderly may be linked to the circumstances of the slave trade. It was efficient to take only those captives who were in demand for their labor. Slaughtering adult males

<sup>5</sup> By Gumilla's time, 90 years later, the cannibalistic part of these ceremonies had probably been abandoned. Dutch demand for slaves and the material profits to be obtained from the slave trade seem to have supplanted the practise of cannibalism.

prevented the possibility of revenge and made it easier to mount later raids. Skills in warfare, the large numbers of several hundred warriors participating in each expedition, and the added advantage of firearms superior to those of the Spanish obtained from the Dutch, gave the Caribs an invincibility that ensured their success - until finally confronted by opponents equally able.

Warriors were initially drawn to engage in these expeditions to acquire prestige and status in their community. But eventually the allure of trade and material wealth that it promised came to be an even bigger enticement. That in turn led to chronic indebtedness to the Dutch merchants, which only further exacerbated Carib warfare and raiding.

### **Pacification and the Decline of Carib Warfare**

Early in the 18th century, the Marques de San Phelipe y Santiago thought that two pirogues armed with small artillery would be sufficient to close the Orinoco to traffic by Caribs, French and Dutch. But Gumilla (1740) pointed out how ineffective this would be, and argued both for fortifying isla Fajardo and patrolling the river with nine good-sized pirogues manned with 90 soldiers (plus additional oarsmen). Gilij, who arrived on the middle Orinoco in 1749, reports that the Caribs were still trying to oust the missionaries from that region, and to destroy the communities of Indians reduced to mission settlements. Changes in policy on the part of the Dutch government of Essequibo in the 1740s included a refusal to supply firearms to the Caribs (Whitehead 1988: 154-155). Epidemic disease during this century undoubtedly contributed to general population decline throughout the region as well.<sup>6</sup> This may explain why, after 1750, they ceased to make frontal attacks on the missions, and concentrated instead on capturing smaller groups from ambush or by other cunning methods. By the 1760s most of the Caribs had ceased their fearsome depredations, and many had become Christians, the outcome particularly of the efforts of the Padres Observantes along the lower Orinoco. The assignment of small contingents of Spanish soldiers to each mission, armed with muskets and supplied with cannon, also helped to discourage attacks (Gilij 1965: I:127, 77; III:118). By 1755 the missions of the plains were sufficiently widespread and strong to make it possible to extend mission influence across the Orinoco into Guayana (Caulin 1966: II:26-269).

A map of the Cumaná province (*gobernación*), prepared by the Governor, Col. Don Jos. Diguja Villagomez in 1761 was accompanied by extensive explanatory notes. In these notes he reports that north of the Orinoco all the Indian communities had by that time been pacified and were being

<sup>6</sup> Information on disease and epidemics in the Llanos is sketchy at best. The first direct evidence for widespread disease comes from the latter half of the 17th century, while Morey (1979:86) characterizes the 18th as the "Century of Disease."

administered by missionaries from Piritu. He relates that the 16 Indian parishes (*pueblos de doctrina*) and the 17 missions contained more than 3500 men at arms (Arellano Moreno 1970: 282-283). South of the Orinoco, however, the Caribs remained fierce and warlike, ranging throughout the whole of Guayana, and parts of Barcelona, Caracas and Santa Fe, waging war against other more pacific Indians, killing the men and taking captive the women and children. In this they continued to be aided and abetted by the Dutch, who provided arms for war and a market for their captives. These were put to work on the sugar, coffee and cotton plantations along the Essequibo and other rivers to the east (Arellano Moreno 1970: 290-291).

In 1764 a Spanish expedition to the upper Orinoco reached the Gran Sabana where they encountered Macos and Ye'cuana. These peoples related how the Caribs would attack with muskets, which they greatly feared. Many were killed, the rest taken as slaves. A few might be kept by the Caribs as personal slaves, but most were taken several days journey to Essequibo where they were sold to the Dutch (Arellano Moreno 1964: 393).

By the end of the 18th century Carib warfare against the Spanish and against other groups of Indians had ceased. But that does not mean that their attraction to warfare had entirely ended. Indians were also involved as soldiers on both sides during the War of Independence, and while tribal affiliations are difficult to determine, many of these came from Carib communities. The battalion "Conquista de Guayana" fought enthusiastically against the Spanish and were an important factor in the rebel victory of San Felix (Lodares 1929-31: II:317, 320; Civrieux 1976: 112-113, 116; Whitehead 1990a: 370). Later, during the unsettled times of the 19th century numerous armed conflicts impacted these interior regions. To this day legendary accounts persist among the Caribs of eastern Venezuela, recounting their involvement in such conflicts as the Five Years War (Guerra Federal 1858-1863) and the Guerra de los Azules (1867-68), with some of their number even achieving positions of military leadership (e.g. "General Chiroco")<sup>7</sup>.

During the first half of the 18th century the Caribs continued to exercise dominance up and down the Orinoco. As Spanish presence grew in the Orinoco basin, as missionaries, as protective military detachments, and eventually as settlers, Carib supremacy waned in this region. More and more Caribs were pacified and brought under the umbrella of mission reduction. Only in the isolated regions along the headwaters of southern tributaries to the Orinoco did it survive until at least the end of the 18th century. But the scope of Carib warfare, both in areas impacted and in captives taken seems to have gradually diminished. By the time Venezuelan independence was

<sup>7</sup> During fieldwork with the Karinya of Mamo in 1962, I repeatedly heard stories about the participation of their forefathers in the Guerra Federal (1858-1863) and the Guerra de los Azules (1867-1868) (cf. Tavera Acosta 1954:517-558), which was also a time of great suffering. General Chiroco, one of their own, was especially renowned for his exploits in these conflicts.

achieved, Carib warfare for the slave trade seems finally to have come to an end. However, recurrent opportunities to participate in warfare continued through the 19th century, and anecdotal evidence suggests that the Caribs did at times take advantage of these opportunities to continue their time honored traditions of armed conflict.

Throughout the century the Caribs became increasingly dependent upon and indebted to the Dutch traders of Essequibo. What had begun as a partnership evolved into a relationship of mastery (for the Dutch) and dependency (for the Caribs). As the plantation economy expanded in the Guianas, the Dutch interest in trade for the products of the hinterlands diminished. Spanish expansion into the Llanos north of the Orinoco firmly established their hegemony there. Carib control over the region was lost, and their sphere of influence progressively diminished until it survived only in the headwaters of the southern affluents to the Orinoco. With the disintegration of their traditional political and social system, they became a mere periphery of the periphery of the European capitalist system.

### **Summary**

The preceding exposition of more than three centuries of Carib warfare, taking captives and trading them as slaves has documented the wide-ranging mobility of Carib warriors and traders. The Caribs (or "Cannibal" Caribs) began expanding out of an unknown homeland<sup>8</sup> some centuries prior to European discovery of the Americas. This period may be characterized as one of aggressive expansionism, comparable perhaps to that of the Vikings in northern Europe a few centuries earlier. Like many other lowland South American groups they probably practised warfare against their neighbors. But in this case they seem to have developed a particularly strong war complex which glorified exploits of the warrior and was centered on a religious cult that ritually reinforced these activities. Again, consistent with tropical forest practise, warfare involved killing male enemies and taking women and children captive. Along with, or subsequent to, development of these features the cult of war was elaborated to include ritual cannibalism.

At the time of European contact the Caribs were traveling regularly from the middle Orinoco out into the Lesser Antilles. Along the north coast of South America it is unknown how far they reached in the west, but they certainly ranged along the whole Guiana coast in the east. Probably they were also traveling up the many rivers that open into the Atlantic along that coast, from the Essequibo to the Cayenne. We do not know whether they reached the upper Orinoco and the Río Negro at that time. However, by the 17th century there is documentation of their voyages of trading and warfare reaching the

<sup>8</sup> For a variety of reasons, which will not be considered here, I believe the most likely area of origin is along the eastern slope of the northern Andes.

upper Río Negro via the upper Orinoco on the one hand, and the lower Río Negro via the Essequibo and the Río Branco on the other. Taken together, these practises made of the Carib fearsome enemies who were able to vanquish with relative impunity many of their opponents. Religious fervor undoubtedly stimulated them to warrior excess. Their ability to bring together sizable numbers of warriors would also provide a significant advantage over adversaries living in small independent villages. On the other hand, those populations organized into chiefdoms seem to have been more successful in resisting Carib assaults. We don't know precisely how the Carib were organized at this time. What information we do have suggests that they lived in small independent settlements of communal houses (Ruíz Blanco 1892: 51). Yet their success in war seems to have depended upon the ability to call together large numbers of warriors from many different settlements. There are hints that this was achieved on the basis of kinship ties, but the exact organizational structure and mechanism by which this was accomplished remains obscure.<sup>9</sup>

The Caribs were trading goods produced throughout the region—ornamental items (some of which, such as gold, pearls, and crystals, were valued for their scarcity), weapons, some specialized utility items such as watercraft, and captives. Their trade partners were other groups similar in size and organization to themselves, as well as those larger and more complex chiefdoms located along the lower Orinoco and the Caribbean coast.

But trade was only one facet of a complex structure of relations among these various groups. The Carib often attacked other groups to obtain goods and captives. In the first centuries they were motivated also by a desire for sacrificial victims dedicated to their rituals of cannibalism.

At times they established marriage links or made political agreements with their trading partners. At other times they completely decimated these settlements. Certain groups, identified as sworn enemies of the Caribs, would nonetheless become trading partners at times. Some sources refer to “annual excursions” to enemy territory, which raises the question whether there may have been designated times and/or places where a temporary truce was observed for this purpose? The continual interaction meant none of these groups was a cultural island. Instead, their relationships were complex and shifting, at times predictable, but subject to sudden changes of strategy, at least on the part of the Caribs. This system extended over an area at least as wide as that reached by the expeditions of the Caribs, and it may well have reached beyond the area over which they exerted ascendancy. By detailed examination of Carib warfare, trading, captive taking and slaving we are enabled to enlarge our understanding of the system of Orinoco Regional Interdependence.

<sup>9</sup> One is reminded of the segmentary lineage system of Africa which operates in this type of society as a mechanism for recruitment, but there is no way of knowing whether something similar was at work here.

It is also clear that these regional networks were quite effective until the mid-eighteenth century as a mechanism of cultural resistance and survival. True, Carib depredations drove some of the smaller and weaker indigenous groups into extinction. But by allying with some, and incorporating others, they were effective in pursuing the offensive against Spanish settlements, while taking the initiative in many of their dealings with French and Dutch traders. In fact, they may well have been expanding their sphere of influence and ascendancy, if the 17th century reports of their presence on the upper and lower Rio Negro indicate a recent arrival. Though the French were modestly successful with their missionary efforts in the Guarapiche drainage, the Carib were generally belligerent towards attempts at missionization until the latter part of the 18th century.

The appeal of commercial profit led to abandonment of warfare for religious motives, and diminished even the incentive of enhanced status. Although profitable in terms of acquisition of trade goods, this commerce also propelled many Carib warriors into a condition of perpetual debt to their Dutch trading partners, which only drove them to persist in their captive-taking activities. What may have at first involved mostly trade with friendly groups for their war captives was insufficient to supply Dutch demand for slave labor. Increasingly the Carib fell back on raiding hostile groups for captives, massacring everyone unable to flee and who was considered unfit for the slave trade. In short order most readily accessible populations were decimated. But this only forced the Caribs to look farther afield for their victims. The Carib fought with a variety of weapons, including firearms. Raiding parties were coordinated in their attacks and in general their war tactics were more shrewd than those of their enemies, further contributing to success.

The complex relations of the Caribs with other indigenous groups became intertwined even more as European groups became part of the equation. In earlier centuries Spanish settlements on the coast were raided for goods. By the 17th century French and Dutch traders became a source of manufactured items. But it wasn't until the 18th century that the Dutch finally incorporated Carib trading as an extension of their own trans-Atlantic mercantile system, and gradually relegated them first to the status of indebted clients and then to peripheral elements of the late colonial plantation system. But in the process, they encouraged the Caribs as surrogates to resist Spanish expansion, undoubtedly with the hope of carving out a larger region for their own colonial control.

However, the growing Spanish population, improved weaponry, and determined missionary initiatives began bit by bit to erode Carib ascendancy. The first missions were established at the edges of territory controlled by the Caribs. As some Caribs were reduced to mission settlements, other relatives were often induced to join them. On the other hand, relatives would often attack to "liberate" their compatriots from the missions. This jockeying for

influence and control went on through most of the 18th century, but gradually the missionaries prevailed. Spanish cattlemen who were also penetrating the Llanos sometimes supported, but sometimes opposed the extension of mission communities into the area (Civrieux 1876: 54). So again we see how complex and intertwined the interactions were among Caribs, Dutch, French, and diverse elements of the Spanish. As we have shown, however, for more than 300 years the Caribs dominated trade, warfare, and interethnic relations throughout the Orinoco basin. They succeeded at this longer than any other ethnic group in the Circum-Caribbean region, most of whom in fact disappeared within one to two centuries of European contact.

## **Conclusion**

### *Theoretical Perspective*

Returning to Wallerstein's world-systems model, the process we have just described above may be seen as one where the autonomous Carib were, by the late 18th century, incorporated as a peripheral element in the European capitalist world system. Yet the system of Orinoco Regional Interdependence hardly qualifies as a "mini-system." While it encompasses a division of labor, that division is dispersed among multiple cultural frameworks. But then neither does it constitute a "world-system." While we are talking about agricultural societies here, the component groups ranged from single farming villages among the Caribs and some other groups of the Orinoco basin, to the more complex chiefdoms along the coast (Wallerstein 1974: 390).

Wallerstein characterizes world-empires as basically redistributive in economic form. No doubt they bred clusters of merchants who engaged in economic exchange (primarily long-distance trade), but such clusters, however large, were a minor part of the total economy and not fundamentally determinative of its fate. Such long-distance trade tended to be, as Polanyi argues, "administered trade" and not market trade, utilizing "ports of trade" (1974: 391).

In some ways this seems quite descriptive of the system of Orinoco Regional Interdependence. There were clusters of long-distance merchants (traders and warriors). Yet the nature and relative quantity of their trade goods suggest that it could not have represented more than a minor part of the total economy. It did nonetheless supply crucial commodities not obtainable locally. It also facilitated interaction among diverse populations over a wide geographical area. For more than 300 years this system was dominated by the Caribs. But it was only with massive expansion of the slave trade in the latter half of the 17th and first half of the 18th centuries that trade came to dominate the economy. It was, in fact, when this occurred that the Carib economy began to move toward its ultimate fate of subordination and incorporation into the capitalist world-system.



Were the periodic “markets” (such as Acamacari in the 16th century, or the Río Guaviare in the 18th century) ports of trade, sites of market exchange, or merely aggregations for individual reciprocity? Nothing in the historical record clarifies this question. But the fragmentary information that is available suggests that exchange involved relations of dominance and subordination, with captains or traders providing goods to subordinates linked by enduring ties of kinship, political covenant, and in later times, economic contract. Unlike the world-system, trade was not administered, nor does redistribution seem to be important. While some captains may have used redistribution to bolster their standing in the community, most exchange seems to have involved a kind of asymmetric contractual reciprocity between superior and subordinate persons.

Wallerstein notes that in capitalism “specialization occurs in specific and differing geographic regions of the world economy.” In the Orinoco basin certain specializations seem to have been the forte of specific communities, while the Caribs served as intermediaries in distributing throughout the region the goods produced. When captives became a valuable commodity, the Caribs also became specialists in procuring them for that trade, and in circulating European manufactures back to those individuals and groups providing captive persons. Here the division of labor is essentially as described by Wallerstein, where “Economic actors operate on some assumption...that the totality of their essential needs...will be met over a reasonable time-span by a combination of their own productive activities and exchange in some form” (Wallerstein 1974: 400, 397).

In a world-empire there is social stratification, with the middle stratum focused on trade, while the upper stratum concentrates on controlling the military and buying off the urban population with some of the surplus. With transition to a world-economy the absence of a single political system means economic roles are concentrated vertically rather than horizontally (Wallerstein 1974: 404-405). But in the system of Orinoco Regional Interdependence there was no social stratification. Trade and military functions were combined in the same Carib persons. There was no formal elite, there were no urban populations, and the exchange of goods could hardly be treated as ‘buying off’ subordinate populations. Economic roles were indeed distributed horizontally.

This lack of stratification eliminates one of the three major mechanisms cited by Wallerstein as enabling world-systems to retain relative political stability. The other two, however, seem to have been operative in this region: 1) “The concentration of military strength in the hands of the dominant forces,” and 2) “the pervasiveness of an ideological commitment to the system as a whole...(or) the degree to which the staff or cadres of the system...feel that their own well-being is wrapped up in the survival of the system as such” (Wallerstein 1974: 404). The dominant Carib monopolized regional military strength until the rise of the Cabres and Guaipuinaves (with Portuguese

assistance) early in the 18th century. Furthermore, their success was intimately tied to the conviction on the part of Carib warriors that they benefited immensely from survival of the system of regional interdependence. That would explain the ferocity with which they pursued both trading and warfare. They would suffer from its demise. And in fact, when the system did begin to break down in the 18th century, the benefits derived from it by each individual diminished rapidly, thereby contributing to its further disintegration.

Wallerstein in fact characterizes world-economies as unstable, "leading either towards disintegration or conquest" (1974: 391, 400). The inherent instability of the system of Orinoco Regional Integration is evident in the relative rapidity with which it collapsed. It remained vigorous, even expansive, for more than 300 years. But when it began to corrode around the edges, with economic subordination to the Dutch and demographic subordination to the Spanish, it collapsed rather rapidly, and was quickly absorbed into the European capitalist world-system as a periphery of the periphery.

How then can we best understand the Carib and their place in the system of Orinoco Regional Integration? Wallerstein talks only of "mini-systems" and "world-systems." But in the Orinoco basin we seem to have something that falls between these two in terms of complexity, area of influence, and economic characteristics. I propose a third systems category of "regional-systems." Using this case as an example, we can define a regional-system as one where the division of labor is dispersed among multiple cultural systems ranging from localized farming villages to chiefdoms. Long-distance exchange was in the hands of specialists (Carib men) who exercised both trade and military functions. Trade was in both utilitarian and luxury or scarce items (captives and slaves were costly, at the least), which came from a variety of cultural groups (Alvarado 1956: 54-55). Exchange probably involved asymmetric contractual reciprocity between superior and subordinate persons. But economic roles were distributed horizontally throughout the system. Military superiority on the part of Carib traders was reinforced by a powerful ideological commitment to the system as a whole. In fact, the origin of these patterns may well have been initiated by pre-Columbian ideological innovations promoting warfare, captivity, and cannibalism. However, because of its regional scope, the system was inherently unstable, necessitating either expansion or collapse. When expansion was no longer possible, and in fact the system was beginning to be compressed by outside forces, it collapsed quite rapidly.

Carib participation in the nationalistic wars of the 19th century was but a final gasp in what had once been a driving force in their way of life. Once haughty warriors feared by Spaniard and Indian alike became farmers dismissed as ignorant Indians, many ultimately being absorbed into the lower ranks of national society. Yet as we enter the 21st century, something of the independent spirit of the warrior survives in the scattered Carib communities that continue to maintain an indigenous identity in eastern Venezuela, Guyana and Surinam.

## Abstract

*Carib warfare and slaving are documented over a period or more than three centuries and a geographic area encompassing at a minimum the Orinoco basin, the Lesser Antilles and the Guiana coast. In spite of their social organization based on independent farming villages Carib warfare, trade and slaving was the linchpin in the farflung "system of Orinoco Regional Interdependence," a complex indigenous regional network of trade, alliances and warfare, that also provided a mechanism of resistance and accomodation to expanding European systems.*

*The Caribs successfully maintained the offensive-initiative throughout most of this period, asserting their ascendancy over indigenous allies and enemies alike, keeping the Spanish at bay and successfully negotiating their relationships with the French and Dutch. Not until the latter part of the 18th century, overwhelmed by demographic expansion of the Spanish and burdened by economic subordination to the Dutch, did the Carib system disintegrate.*

*It is proposed that this case represents a regional system, a middle level between Wallerstein's mini-system and his world-system, incorporating some elements from each, but remaining distinct in others. The very characteristics of such a system are inherently unstable. When expanding European populations made it impossible to expand, there was no other recourse but collapse.*

## Resumen

*Este trabajo recapitula las actividades guerreras y la toma de rehenes practicadas por los Caribes durante más de tres siglos en un área geográfica que abarcaba, como mínimo, la cuenca del Orinoco, las Antillas Menores y la costa de las Guayanas. La organización social de los Caribes tenía como base aldeas independientes dedicadas a las actividades agrícolas. Sin embargo, la guerra, la toma de rehenes y el tráfico de esclavos eran la clave del "sistema orinoquense de interdependencia regional", una complicada red indígena de comercio, alianzas y guerras que servía también como mecanismo de resistencia y adaptación a los sistemas europeos en expansión.*

*Durante casi todo este período, los Caribes mantuvieron con éxito la superioridad ofensiva, afirmando su poderío no solo sobre sus aliados indígenas sino también sobre sus enemigos, acosando regularmente a los españoles y negociando exitosamente sus alianzas con holandeses y franceses. Esta situación se mantuvo hasta fines del siglo 18. Pero la abrumadora expansión demográfica de los españoles y la subordinación económica a los holandeses terminó por desintegrar el sistema Caribe de interdependencia regional.*

*El autor postula que el sistema orinoquense representa un sistema regional a medio camino entre el minisistema de Wallerstein y un sistema mundial.*

*Aunque incorpora elementos de ambos sistemas, sin embargo difiere en otros. Las mismas características del sistema regional son inherentemente inestables. A medida que los europeos ocupaban su territorio, se les hacía muy difícil extender éste y no les quedó otra salida que asistir al derrumbe de su propio sistema.*

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