

ON THE HISTORICITY OF CARIB MIGRATIONS IN THE LESSER ANTILLES

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This paper questions the historicity of Carib migrations in northeastern South America, especially from the Guianas to the West Indies, on the basis of (1) recent chronological work on the late prehistory of the Lesser Antilles, and (2) a critical reexamination of ethnohistorical data on the Island Caribs (migration myths, linguistic dimorphism, distribution, early European contacts). A new interpretation of the previously elusive Island Carib pottery complex allows for a reevaluation of cultural continuities and affiliations. The question is further approached through a more precise definition of the Island Carib as an ethnic group in relation to other groups in the Guianas.

THERE SEEMS TO BE A GENERAL AGREEMENT among culture historians of South America that the Spaniards' arrival in the New World interrupted the expansion of a people known as Caribs, the speakers of a Cariban language. The theory holds that these Caribs originated in the tropical lowlands of the Amazonian basin, and that by the late fifteenth century they had reached the eastern part of the West Indies where they were in the process of conquering the Arawaks, the original inhabitants. Because of the association of this population movement with the coming of the Europeans, it is also generally believed that this migration constitutes a historical event, one documented by historical evidence. Even recent summaries of Tropical Lowlands prehistory still contain such statements as, "the last major expansion in the tropical forest was that of the Cariban peoples, which was vigorously carried out when the Europeans arrived in the area" (Lanning 1974:100), and refer to the "known facts of the Carib expansion" (Lathrap 1970:170).

It is my contention that (1) there is nothing "historical" in the nature of the evidence; (2) the dating of the event to historic times is also questionable; (3) the evidence for a migration or population movement must be reevaluated in the light of documentary and archaeological evidence; and (4) the term "Caribs" may not express the ethnic quality of the group involved.

The idea of a widespread, sweeping Carib migration through South America has deep roots in the culture historical literature. One sixteenth-century German explorer seems to have originated the legend that Caraios or Caribs migrated from the Parana River Valley of Argentina toward northeastern South America and the West Indies. The legend has it that the Caribs expanded through military conquest, introducing in the conquered areas such arts of civilization as agriculture, urbanism, and metallurgy (Church 1912). These Caraios, although Tupian-speaking, were believed to be ancestral to Cariban-speaking groups. Indeed, Tupian-speaking peoples known as Caribs or Cannibals still occupy areas of the southern coast of Brazil (Metraux 1948).

This legend is now mostly ignored by archaeologists, but perhaps more historically plausible are a series of seventeenth-century Carib traditions mostly collected by French missionaries in the Lesser Antilles. They relate the migration of the historical population of the islands, known today as Island Caribs, from their ancestral home on the Guianese coast to the islands, which they conquered by killing the men among the original Arawak inhabitants and taking the women as wives. This legend, to which are added some observations from the early Spanish voyages, constitutes the basis of the alleged historical evidence that I now want to examine more critically.

The first historical documents on the Caribs are those collected on Columbus' second voyage to

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the Lesser Antilles in 1493. The only "verifiable" historical fact is the observation that female captives from the Greater Antilles were indeed kept in great numbers by the Caribs. This supported complaints heard by the Spaniards from the people of the Greater Antilles about repeated Carib raids to take captives, thereby confirming the fact that the Lesser Antilles people were raiding the larger islands to the west.

Another report lends further support to the idea of warlike tendencies among these early Caribs. When the Spaniards landed on the island of Guadeloupe, they were told that the small nearby island of Montserrat had been recently depopulated by the Caribs (Chanca, in Salas and Vasques 1964).

This historical "evidence" of a migration consists merely of an interpretation of the motives of Carib warfare and raiding in the Greater Antilles; it does not record an actual observation of a population movement, such as the early eighteenth-century migrations of the Tupi-Guaranis witnessed by the French in the Guianas (Metraux 1927; Hurault 1972).

If the historicity of these documents is dubious, can they still be interpreted as indicative of a migration? A population expansion suggests a unidirectional movement out of an original area, and the eventual colonization of the appropriated lands. It should first be emphasized that references to an overall military conquest of the islands, such as those so often found in the literature, are totally unrealistic within the general cultural context of the populations involved. Although it is true that the Island Caribs raided the Greater Antilles, and even west as far as Jamaica, they also constantly raided in the opposite direction, on the eastern coast of the mainland, where their deadliest enemies, the Arawaks or Lokkono, were located. Moreover, although the practice of taking female captives was known and recorded in the Guianas as well as in the islands (since at least Columbus' first visit), the practice consisted in bringing the captives back to the Carib settlement, not in settling in the newly conquered enemy territory. Furthermore, the raids in both directions persisted well into the later part of the sixteenth century, when they were waged against Spanish settlements (Barome 1966), at a time when population decline in the wake of the contacts made any true expansion unrealistic.

How reliable then are the legends of recent Carib prehistoric migrations? It must first be emphasized that there are three different versions of a migration myth among the Island Caribs. The earliest version comes from Father Breton's writings (Rennard 1929) and was collected in the early 1600s. It narrates the migration of *Kalinago*, the ancestor of all the Caribs, and his family from the shores of Guiana. Although this version is still rich in mythological themes, Breton further adds to it "the common belief" that the early Caribs had taken the islands by conquering the Arawaks, their traditional enemies. The legend, collected among the Dominica Island Caribs, was later published by many other French chroniclers, all of whom seem to have borrowed it from the same source (Du Tertre 1671; Mathias Du Puis 1972; Pelleprat 1965; La Borde 1674; Labat 1742). These later versions emphasize the capture of Arawak women as an explanation of the peculiar sex-based bilingualism among the Island Caribs, the phenomenon most often used by culture historians in reconstructing the late prehistory of the Lesser Antilles.

The other two versions of the migration myth both come from the island of St. Vincent. The first was recorded in the 1650s (Rochefort 1658) as peculiar to that island. It states that the Caribs (when living in the Guianas) were under Arawak domination; after fighting for their freedom, they fled to the islands *which were then uninhabited*. The other version (Young 1971:5) dates from the later part of the eighteenth century. It traces the Caribs to the banks of the Orinoco; from there they wrested the islands from their original inhabitants, but these inhabitants were no longer the Arawaks, they were the Galibis, a Cariban-speaking group of the Guianas. Even though all three versions refer to a migration of people, they certainly cannot be used either to identify the original inhabitants of the islands or to explain the bilingualism of the Island Caribs. It is impossible to select one version as being more historically accurate and therefore more suitable as a basis for culture historical interpretations.

If there is thus no truly acceptable historical evidence for a migration or population expansion, let us consider the archaeological evidence. This question has intrigued archaeologists as long as research has been done in the islands. The task of finding an answer has, however, not been easy,

mostly because the traditions of origin were accepted as the basic framework of the islands' prehistory and thus dictated the way in which the data were to be interpreted. If for example, Carib men married Arawak women—as one version of the myth suggests—and took over their language, it could be expected that their pottery, usually a woman's craft, would also perpetuate Arawak standards. This argument, so often repeated in the literature, is untenable, however, since there is no indication anywhere that only Carib men were involved in the migration. Furthermore, some primary sources report, though perhaps ambiguously, that among both the Island Caribs and the Galibis (the former's traditional ancestors), the men rather than the women were responsible for pottery making (Allaire 1977:62).

Despite various theories, the most plausible archaeological culture or people in the Lesser Antilles to be correlated with the Island Caribs is the Suazoid series. The extremely crude ceramics associated with the culture and its late occurrence—radiocarbon dated to between AD 1100 and just before the arrival of Columbus—make it a tempting correlate of the historic people (Figure 1). There is as yet, however, no evidence of a historic contact site that would establish this correlation on empirical grounds, and the post-1500 radiocarbon dating of the complexes is still inconclusive (Bullen and Bullen 1972; also see Allaire 1977).

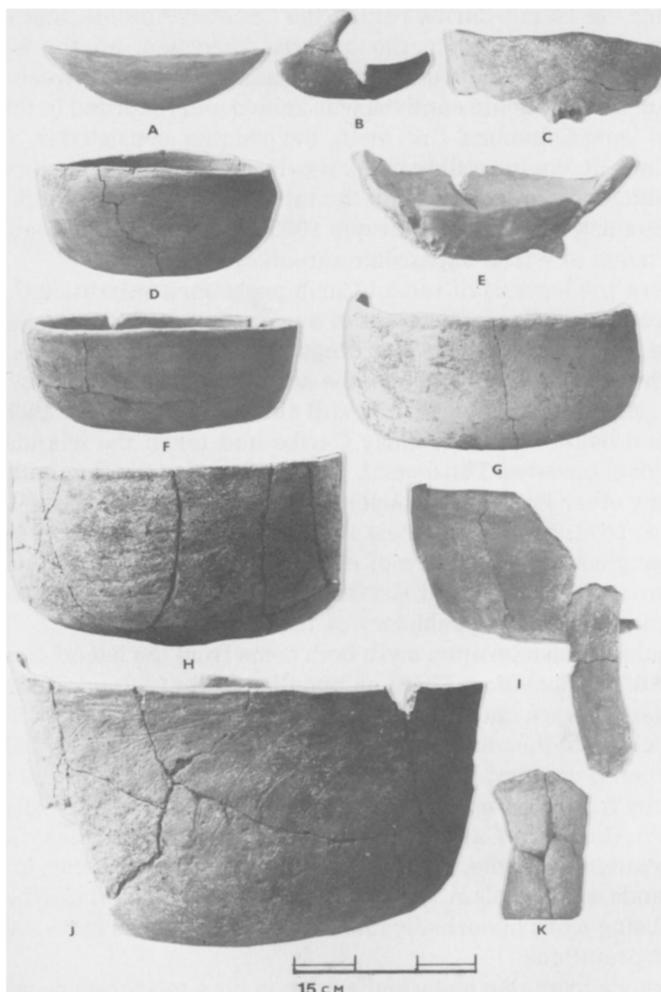


Figure 1. Suazoid pottery vessels from the Macabou site, Martinique.

Several arguments intervene against correlating the Suazoid and the Island Caribs. Despite the fact that Suazoid ceramics are distinctive enough from the earlier Saladoid pottery to represent a possible site-unit intrusion, no exterior origins for the complexes or their diagnostic features have yet been established. There is barely a hint from the Guianese coast to suggest that the series developed in that direction; on the contrary, more cultural influences seem to be filtering into the Lesser Antilles from the Greater Antilles in Suazoid times. Nothing remains any more, however, to indicate Arawak (e.g., Saladoid) survivals in these late ceramic styles. On the contrary, the Suazoid appears as a development unique to the Lesser Antilles, and more especially to the Windward Islands. It is distributed from about Grenada in the south to Martinique in the north. It is most elaborate in Barbados, where no Caribs were ever reported, and is totally lacking in Trinidad and everywhere on the mainland (Figure 2). It is indeed strange that archaeologists have sought to explain the Suazoid as the result of a migration even though the overwhelming bulk of the evidence suggests just the opposite, that it is a local development.

This could be verified archaeologically by identifying intermediary stages of development between the more distinctive cultures such as the Saladoid and the Suazoid. This is what I have tried

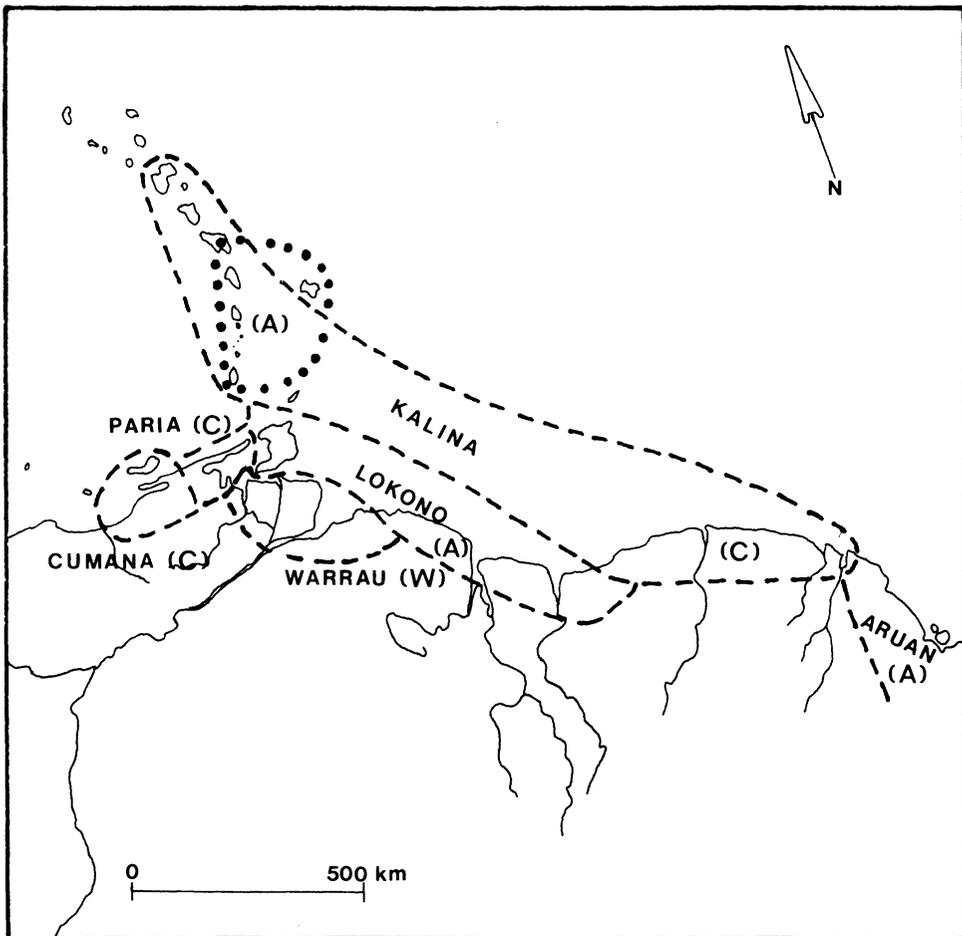


Figure 2. Early seventeenth-century ethnic and linguistic groups of the Lesser Antilles, eastern Venezuela, and coastal Guianas. Note: the Leeward Islands, north of Guadeloupe, were uninhabited in the seventeenth century, with the exception of a small and late Carib settlement on St. Kitts. Linguistic groups: (A) = Arawakan; (C) = Cariban; (W) = Warrau. The thick dotted line represents the distribution of Suazoid ceramics.

to do on Martinique, where I was able to identify and document one such intermediary unit, termed the Troumassoid series, that marks the transition between Saladoid and Suazoid series (Allaire 1977; Rouse and Allaire 1978). The series itself was first defined in St. Lucia by McKusick (1960), but it had been largely ignored since its initial formulation.

In the absence of any evidence from historic Island Carib archaeology that could bridge the gap between history and prehistory, the answer could be sought in the documentary evidence. Unfortunately, little exists in the sources on the pottery of the historic population, and previous attempts at reconstructing their ceramic complex have proved inconclusive. However, an exhaustive survey of most of the available primary sources (Allaire 1977) has made it possible to determine that the pottery of the historic island population (as could be expected from their general cultural context) was similar to historic Carib pottery of the Guianas (Figure 3). There is therefore little similarity between the Suazoid and the historic Carib potteries, which belong to entirely different traditions. On this evidence alone, no archaeological correlation can be established between the late prehistoric complexes and the historic ceramic assemblage.

Yet the question of Island Carib origins still remains open. To investigate this further, it becomes necessary to ask who were the Island Caribs as an ethnic group, and what are the units archaeologists are trying to correlate. One such unit is the Suazoid culture as discussed above. The other, its historic counterpart, is the Island Carib people. Frederick Barth (1969) has recently critically reviewed the concept of ethnic group and ethnicity as used by anthropologists, and his theories are equally relevant to prehistorians. Barth rejects the usual cultural criteria used in

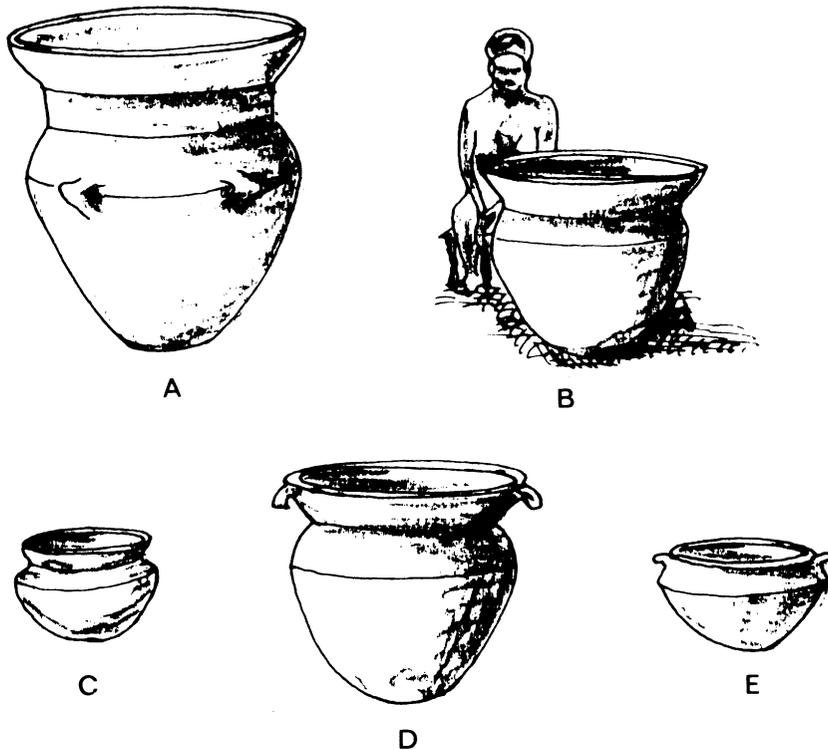


Figure 3. Historic Kalina pottery from Surinam (after Ahlbrinck 1931). a, *samaku*; b, woman sitting behind a *samaku* vessel; c-e, various sizes of *toma-hiene* or pepper pots.

defining tribes or ethnic groups and emphasizes instead the criterion of self-ascription by the members of a group and their neighbors. We are privileged to know from Breton's (1665) dictionary that the people anthropologists now call "Island Caribs" called themselves *Kalinago* (Kalina, plus suffix -go), a name also shared by the Kalinas (or Galibis) of Surinam and French Guiana, among whom the island peoples claimed their origin. Even the French missionaries could interpret this situation in terms of ethnic identity when they compared the distinction between a Frenchman from Paris and a Frenchman from Lyon. The term "Island Carib" remains valid only as a linguistic term; it cannot claim to apply to cultural or ethnic realities. The culture of the island Kalinas in the seventeenth century was similar to that of the mainland Kalinas, as it was also typical of most of the Guianas (Rouse 1953). Logically, it becomes impossible to define a distinctive ethnic group in the Lesser Antilles at the beginning of the historic period. The island population belonged properly to one ethnic group whose distribution included both the islands as far north as Guadeloupe and a section of the Guiana coast between the Corentyne and Oyapoc rivers (Figure 2). This ethnic group, despite its cultural uniformity, was essentially bilingual in speech, although perhaps in the process of assimilation to the Cariban language of the mainland. This seems to have been a recent phenomenon, however, since when the Black Caribs of St. Vincent were deported to the coast of Honduras at the end of the eighteenth century, the Cariban elements in their language decreased in favor of the original Arawakan base, as Taylor (1954) demonstrates.

In this perspective, trying to correlate the Island Caribs or, more properly, the Kalinas with a ceramic complex is in fact trying to correlate two irreconcilable entities: one a construct of the archaeologist's mind based on remains belonging to the cultural spheres, the other an ethnic group defined on the basis of self-ascription by its members, a reality "cognitive" in nature and therefore beyond the scope of the archaeologist.

The problem of reconciling history and prehistory is not yet solved. We can only offer an alternative: the drastic changes that have taken place between history and prehistory in the Lesser Antilles are either the result of a very late migration, not represented archaeologically, or the result of a rapid acculturation to mainland Carib culture. A migration theory can thus now be reintroduced in its proper context, as a working hypothesis, and involving Arawakan and not Cariban peoples. Such a migration fits the pattern of the replacement of two distinct ceramic complexes, one of which (this time the historic Kalina complex and not the Suazoid) is traceable to a plausible area of origin. Acculturation, however, is perhaps a more realistic explanation because it does not make the depopulation of the islands a necessary event, but allows for a continuity in the local population that seems to fit better the archaeological evidence of site occupations. This question no doubt needs much further investigation. The fact remains that the Galibis (or mainland Kalinas) held in the early seventeenth century, and perhaps in precontact times as well, an important position as trading intermediaries between the hinterland and the coastal regions. Their language was already widely used as a trading jargon over this area (Gomberville 1682). This situation may have been one factor helping to accelerate the acculturation of the island peoples. It also would allow for a local linguistic development on the islands of the Island Carib, a basically Arawakan dialect. Lathrap (1970) has suggested that Maipurán (an Arawakan branch to which Island Carib belongs) could be correlated with the spread of Barrancoid ceramics in Venezuela. The strong wave of Barrancoid stylistic influences that permeates the Saladoid ceramic developments in the Windward Islands around A.D. 500 may well parallel some linguistic changes. This is the only time the archaeological record indicates such a possibility in the islands. In conclusion, if no prehistoric migration can be inferred from the archaeological record in the Lesser Antilles, there is nothing that allows the use of the terms Island Caribs for either a site, a culture, or a prehistoric people. The hiatus that must be introduced between prehistory and history in that region should not appear as an enigma; the situation is quite common in many other parts of the world but its investigation would go beyond the scope of this paper.

Yet, looking back at the problem of Carib migration just reviewed, one further question might still be raised as a hypothesis that must await future research. Why weren't the Guiana Arawaks—or for that matter the peoples of the Greater Antillean chiefdoms—more the invading

and intruding peoples rather than the Caribs? Such a case would provide an alternative explanation to the protohistorical warfare in the Caribbean area. Indeed, such a hypothesis is not without grounds. In 1596, Laurence Keymis (1904:455) had heard from two Yaos Indians in Guiana, a Cariban-speaking people, that they had previously occupied the entire coast, all the way to Trinidad, but had recently been expelled from their lands by the Spaniards who gave away the country to their Arawak allies. Such a continuous distribution of Cariban languages all along the Guiana coast is more consistent with the Caribanization process that the Island Caribs were experiencing in the sixteenth century. Arawak incursions into Carib territories, rather than Carib invasions, would change our interpretation of Carib warfare from that of an expansion strategy to one of territorial protection.

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