

The Consequences of Colonialism to the History and Lives of the Garifuna People of St. Vincent

Maria Fernanda de Almeida

Centre for Caribbean Studies

Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto

Maria Fernanda de Almeida is a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. She is pursuing a History & Political Science specialist degree and a minor in Latin American and Caribbean Studies. In 2021, she received the UofT Excellence Award for continuing research at OISE (The Ontario Institute for Educational Studies). Maria's writing and research interests revolve around Latin American and Caribbean political history, especially the impact of colonialism and civil wars on contemporary politics. In September 2023, she will start her masters degree in Global Affairs at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy.

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ABSTRACT

Garifuna people have lived on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent for over 300 years. Land ownership struggles, racism and discrimination and attempts at cultural erasure mark their history. This paper analyzes the relations and consequences of colonialism to the current status of the neglect of the Garifuna of St. Vincent. It argues that the arrival of Spanish, French, and British to St. Vincent influenced the genocide of Caribs, the creation of stereotypes associated with their people, and the spread of academic literature based on false narratives of their stories. These consequences led to the current struggles that the Garifuna face on the island and in their fight to rewrite historical memory and knowledge. Finally, it is essential to recognize their progress in rebuilding an identity of self-recognition by restoring historical memory and demanding governmental recognition.

The Garifuna people's origin and culture date back to 1635 on St. Vincent. At that time, two ships carrying enslaved Africans to the West Indies were shipwrecked near the island. Its survivors formed alliances with the indigenous

people and established themselves there. Hence, the Garifuna, also known as the Black Caribs, developed their ancestral culture and heritage through the union of Africans, Arawaks, and Caribbeans throughout the centuries. They

lived peacefully until the 18th century when the British and French started to dispute control of the island for economic gains and attack the people. Consequently, three wars happened in the region: the Seven Years' War, and the First and Second Caribbean Wars, which impacted the future of the Black Caribs in the territory and overseas.¹ More importantly, the period was marked by the British and the French's historical characterization of the Garifuna—with negative stereotypes and connotations—still associated with them today. Little academic research challenges the false historical narrative created by the colonizers and aims to tell the true story from the Garifuna point of view. Therefore, this essay argues that colonialism caused the status of social neglect, discrimination, and cultural loss that the Garifuna experience. The arrival of Spanish, French, and British to St. Vincent influenced the genocide of Caribs, the creation of stereotypes associated with their people, and the spread of academic literature based on false narratives of their stories. These consequences led to the current struggles that the Garifuna face on the island and in their fight to rewrite historical memory and knowledge.

The social and economic realities of the Black Caribs of St. Vincent have their roots in the arrival of the Europeans and the conflicts they initiated for colonial interests. Enslaved Africans who had survived the sinking of two Spanish ships in the 1600s became the first non-American group to settle on the island. They were also the first and foremost group to resist European colonizers during the next century. The region became a site of British and French disputes for control until 1763 when England gained power through the Treaty of Paris. However, more disagreements emerged.

¹ Julie Chun Kim, "The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance during the Age of Revolutions," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11, no. 1 (2013): pp. 118-129.

² Kim, "The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance," p. 127-9.

³ Kim, "The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance," p. 130-2.

⁴ Adrian Fraser, "Revisiting the Carib Story," *Caribbean*

Between 1772 and 1773, the British were forced to retreat due to the First Caribbean War.² Taking advantage of the situation, in 1779, with support from the natives, France once again occupied the area. Only in 1783, with the Treaty of Versailles, the British regained authority over the island. Unsatisfied with external control, the inhabitants fought the British again during the Second Caribbean War in 1795. The close contact with Europeans and their limitation on social welfare and access to medication caused many Caribs to die from starvation, distress, and epidemic diseases, such as yellow fever, that disseminated the population.³ This time, a year later, the Vincentians were forced to surrender. The survivors were deported and sent to the island of Baliceaux, where many perished. Eventually, they were allowed to return to live under English colonial rule, except for the Black Caribs, who were sent away to the Roatán island on the coast of Honduras. This forced migration led to the spread of the Caribs to Central America.⁴⁵

Moreover, since colonizers' contact with St. Vincent began, the Garifuna people have been a target group. The Second Carib War gave rise to the debate on the morality of owning land and enslavement, which forced the British to create justifications for their forced acquisition of Garifuna land. They appropriated Columbus's characterization of Caribs as cannibals and spread narratives of their hostility and illegitimate right to the territory.⁶ The term "Carib" was created by the Spanish to differentiate the indigenous groups (Red Caribs) from the African descendants (Black Caribs). It was mainly a way to alienate the latter and portray them with negative associations, terms, and narratives. For instance, Kim writes that William Young's *An Account*

Quarterly 60, no. 2 (2014): pp. 57.

⁵ Taylor E. Mack, "Cultural Maladaptation and Preadaptation in Colonial Honduras: Spaniards vs Black Caribs, 1787-1821," *Journal of Latin American Geography* 10, no. 2 (2011): pp. 189.

⁶ Julie Chun Kim, "Natural Histories of Indigenous Resistance: Alexander Anderson and the Caribs of St. Vincent," *The Eighteenth Century* 55, no. 2-3 (2014): p. 220.

of the Black Caribs in the Island of St. Vincent's (1795) was the first to use the Black-Red terminology. The British continued to use this characterization as an ideological strategy to satisfy the conquest of the land.⁷ Nevertheless, the relationship between Africans and Amerindians strengthened during the first colonial years as slaves who successfully ran away from the English sugar plantations joined the indigenous communities. This impacted the decision of natives to also adopt the term Carib as a form of European resistance.⁸ Although the two groups were allies, history purposely separated and differentiated them to continue a narrative that explained the enslavement and land possession of the Black Caribs. Thus, the historical, social, and cultural genocide of the Garifuna started by the European in colonial times. Their economic interest in developing sugar plantations and continuing slavery caused them to target the Garifuna and influence history writing according to their financial interests.

Furthermore, these narratives impacted the literature on the history of the Garifuna for centuries. Only contemporary scholars started to challenge and rewrite them as they pointed out the biases in historical accounts. In 1789, the botanist Alexander Anderson wrote on the effects of the Seven Years' War in St. Vincent and how the Caribs were responsible for the destruction of architecture, British plantations, and the country's flora. He called them "infernal banditti" since they prevented him from completing his work.⁹ His accounts of the physical and mental effects that the massacres and the deportation caused on the Black Caribs during the Caribbean Wars were justified by the logic that if they were to be on the island, war and destruction would continue.¹⁰ Another work with the primary

historical influence on the Carib's history is Charles Shephard's reports from the European point of view. He dedicated his piece to "the survivors of the Carib War," which, to him, were only the planters and soldiers.¹¹ Hence, it includes stereotyped accusations against Caribs, such as allegations of cannibalism, which would influence future academic and research work and historical knowledge. Many still go back to these accounts instead of searching for contemporary literature, critics Hulme.¹²

In addition, the main historical consequence is the creation of the term Black Carib and the negative association it gave to the people within society. As mentioned, the name was created by Spanish explorers, who divided the peoples they encountered in the Caribbean into the two groups of Arawak and Carib to distinguish friendly from hostile natives. Any hostile groups were deemed Carib and portrayed as cannibals.¹³ In the eighth century, the British started naming the African descendants (their enemies) as Black Caribs since they were viewed as ethnically different from the original inhabitants of St Vincent. In contrast, the Aborigines were called Red or Yellow Caribs. The terminology was first encountered in British reports focused on appropriating lands. Hence, the term black negatively references aggressiveness.¹⁴ Young's accounts have also influenced later versions and reports in identifying the population as predominantly African descendants of Black Caribs. He tells the story that the Red Caribs were the first to inhabit the island until the arrival of fugitive slaves from Bequia in 1675. The latter would become enslaved people for the indigenous communities. These enslaved people, however, belonged to a hostile tribe and eventually killed all the men and kidnapped the women, which explained the

⁷ Kim, "Natural Histories of Indigenous Resistance," p. 222.

⁸ Kim, "Natural Histories of Indigenous Resistance," p. 221.

⁹ Kim, "Natural Histories of Indigenous Resistance," p. 217-8.

¹⁰ Kim, "Natural Histories of Indigenous Resistance," p.

218.

¹¹ Fraser, "Revisiting the Carib Story," p. 55-6.

¹² Fraser, "Revisiting the Carib Story," p. 55-6.

¹³ Kim, "The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance," p. 121-22.

¹⁴ Kim, "The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance," p. 122.

significantly low number of Red Caribs by the time the British arrived in 1763. Young's book was dedicated to an English colony agent who was responsible for controlling the deportation of Garifuna from St. Vincent. Hence, Elsa Goveia describes his work as a "piece of settler history."¹⁵ These narratives not only deemed the Garifuna of St. Vincent as enemies but also as mere African interlopers who had no right to the island. In other words, it was a convenient fiction to attack anti-British oppositions as they inhabited the most fertile lands.¹⁶ Fraser points out that there has been no "comprehensive retelling of the true story," especially on the history of all Caribs and their roles in the Second Carib War.¹⁷ In 1973, scholar Bernard Marshall pointed out that after 200 years of the war, the main work of reference was still dated back to 1795, a biased and unexamined account.¹⁸ Later in 2005, Peter Hulme argued that the only stories being questioned and analyzed were of those British planters and allies, which revolved around the reasoning of white men's burden. It was a historical truth that had never been challenged.

It was in the mid-20th century that a new academic trend emerged with intellectuals who included and considered indigenous sociological theorizing, which was a start to understanding the region and its movements of independence and wars and their national and postcolonial identities.^{19,20} Scholars who managed to stay truthful and objective faced hardships. For example, Gullick wrote a "small" book on Black Caribs' cultural development during the 19th century and early 20th century. However, Kerns criticizes his work as it lacks enough documentation and presents false statements on relations between Caribs and

Europeans.²¹ Also, Frederick Ober's *Camps in the Caribbees*, written in the 1880s, focuses on the lives of those who remained on the island and were not exiled—becoming a minority in their homeland. It is a central piece of research; however, the book was written when the Caribs suffered significant discrimination from society, and many denied their ancestry; hence it is also an incomplete work.²²

Contemporary scholars are the ones who obtained success in accounting and writing from the Carib's perspectives. Hulme is a contributor to the retelling of these stories. His work focuses on European accounts of those who lived closer and with more contact with the Vincentians, which makes their statements more accurate. His main study discusses the perspectives of French soldiers who militarily trained Caribs. More specifically, Emmanuel-Francois, marquis de Lambertye, who was part of the French Antilles service in the 1750s and Alexandre Moreau de Jonnes, whose memoir of his career as a soldier was published in 1858. Scholars have mostly ignored their writings.²³ Other disregarded reports are from French missionaries. Although they have biases, they help balance and open the narratives for different interpretations as they all present diverse relationships with the Black Caribs. Fraser points out that the French in the 18th century enjoyed close contact with the Garifuna as they lived among them, traded and provided military aid as opposed to the British, who had a more "antagonistic" contact heavily focused on the acquisition of lands and slavery.²⁴ However, sociologist Paget Henry says there is still significant reliance on western literature that has historically compromised and

¹⁵ Fraser, "Revisiting the Carib Story," p. 55.

¹⁶ Kim, "The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance," 122-23.

¹⁷ Fraser, "Revisiting the Carib Story," p. 53-4.

¹⁸ Fraser, "Revisiting the Carib Story," p. 53-4.

¹⁹ Rhoda Reddock, "Radical Caribbean Social Thought: Race, Class Identity and the Postcolonial Nation," *Current Sociology* 62, no. 4 (2014): pp. 505-7.

²⁰ Kim, "The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous

Resistance," p. 121-22.

²¹ Virginia Kerns, "Exiled from St. Vincent: The Development of Black Carib Culture in Central America up to 1945 . C. J. M. R. Gullick," *American Anthropologist* 80, no. 2 (1978): pp. 434.

²² Kim, "The Caribs of St. Vincent and Indigenous Resistance," p. 121-22.

²³ Fraser, "Revisiting the Carib Story," p. 55-6.

²⁴ Fraser, "Revisiting the Carib Story," p. 57.

excluded pillars of the Caribbean theory and the absence of ongoing feedback on the regional intellectual tradition.²⁵ Recent scholarship by Melanie Newton and Brooke Newman was the first to emphasize the story of the indigenous side of the Carib Wars and the importance of race and indigenous land claims. This analysis is still new and lacks contributions.²⁶

This lack of knowledge in history might be unknown worldwide, but not for the Caribs. On his research trip to St Vincent, Twinn writes that people know the historical lies. As one interviewee said: "Even that story about Columbus coming here, Doctor Fraser proved that he couldn't have done that. He was in Spain, so how come he discovered St. Vincent? They have been telling us lies for years." There was a general agreement that they had a history of bias, and people did not care to correct it.²⁷ Therefore, to gather the historical truth, it is essential to understand the Caribs' history and perspectives from both sides: from them and the Europeans. These mythologies of division and origin influenced British views on Carib/Kalinago racial classification, their access to rights, and their strong resistance to colonization. Academic and historical literature significantly affects the development and creation of historical knowledge and consciousness and the formation of national identity. Current research needs more resources to continue challenging false narratives and offer justice to the story of the Caribs and the Garifuna.

Finally, although they managed to survive and maintain their culture alive, the Garifuna people and their descendants overseas continue to suffer from these historical consequences and fight for historical, political, and social recognition and change. The 2014 documentary *Yurumein (Homeland)* by Andrea Leland demonstrates the reality of the Black Carib now in St. Vincent and the lost contact with their American descendants. It shows the lives of the Garifuna people on the island while interacting with Caribs from Honduras coming to visit their ancestor's land for the first time. A fusion of culture and customs occurs as the film shows interviews with the people. Many say they are still affected by the cannibalism rumours. They are called "stupid, evil, warlike, ferocious, cannibal."²⁸ The documentary also provides a story of the Carib's history and their attempt to challenge European narratives and supremacy. It shows attempts to revive their culture and overseas linkage through their accounts of reclaiming historical knowledge and identity. Those who live on the island also talk about how they lost knowledge of the Garifuna language as many tried to negate their ancestral identity and lack of written knowledge to pass it on. It shows how history affected their relationship and proximity to their own culture. Throughout the film, Vincentians and Catrachos connect through dance, music, food, and instruments to celebrate the future and remind others of the past.²⁹ Their long-lost exchange of knowledge denounces the importance of oral history and the impact of the written ones created by colonizers as both groups contrast in cultural

²⁵ Kerns, "Exiled from St. Vincent," p. 494.

²⁶ Heather Freund, "Who Should Be Treated 'with Every Degree of Humanity'? Debating Rights for Planters, Soldiers, and Caribs/Kalinago on St. Vincent, 1763–1773," *Atlantic Studies* 13, no. 1 (May 2015): pp. 127–8.

²⁷ Paul William Twinn. "Hegemony, Carib history and historical consciousness in St. Vincent." Electronic Thesis or Diss., University College London (University of London), 2008, pp. 213–4.

²⁸ Keri Vacanti Brondo, "A Garifuna Homecoming:

Cultural Revival among the Caribs of St. Vincent, *Yurumein Homeland: The Caribs of St. Vincent*. Produced and Directed by Andrea E. Leland in Conjunction with New Day Films. Original Music by Andy Palacio, Rhodel Castillo, and Abuza. Still Photographs by Kingsley Roberts; Edited by Tom Shepard, 2014., " *Current Anthropology* 57, no. 2 (2016): pp. 244.

²⁹ Mark Anderson, "Yurumein (Homeland): The Caribs of St. Vincent." *American Anthropologist* 116, no. 4 (2014): 860–61.

proximity.³⁰ The documentary closes by exposing the current struggles to rebuild history. The island of Balliceaux, where they were planning to build a memorial for the dead Caribs in the war, is for sale, demonstrating the current land dispossession black Caribs continue to encounter.³¹

Besides, Smith and Rhiney's study points out that Carib communities are still isolated and vulnerable to struggles like climate conditions. The study analyzes the impact of climate hazards on indigenous Carib communities on the island. Extreme weather, such as hurricanes, impacts their livelihood activities, especially in farming communities, for example, the hurricane Thomas in 2001. The authors explain that the causes of this vulnerability are rooted in historical economic neglect and political marginalization of these communities that live within lower social and economic conditions and vulnerable geographic locations that depend heavily on agriculture to survive. Scholars argue that despite being the region that contributed less to greenhouse emissions, Caribbean countries were early impacted due to their small geographical size, high concentration of settlements and economic activities along low-lying coastal areas, and more.³²

Another example of their isolation on the island is the situation of public transportation. Twinn gives the example that their public transport consists of small buses carrying less than 20 passengers. To go to Georgetown, the biggest town on the island, Caribs travelling from rural areas need to cross the Rabacca Dry River, a dangerous pathway that degenerates into a rock-strewn dirt track because of the lack of a bridge. Drivers must cross via a shifting ford that can rapidly be transformed into a dangerous torrent

following storms in the highlands. At one time, certainly in the early part of the twentieth century, there had been a footbridge over the river, and the failure of the government to build a new bridge capable of carrying traffic is seen as another instance of the Caribs being treated as second-class citizens.³³ Thus, it also affects their identity as both Vincentians and Caribs, as anti-Carib attitudes remain.

Nevertheless, one must acknowledge their success in surviving and maintaining their culture alive during several attempts of cultural genocide and the fight for social and political reforms. They managed to spread overseas. After being exiled from St. Vincent, the Black Caribs migrated and spread across America; this phenomenon is due to cultural preadaptation and maladaptation that define their success and the Spanish' failure in surviving in the Trujillo region even though they arrived at the same time, for example.³⁴ The Carib population has one of the highest fertility levels in the world. Crawford writes, "the Central American Black Carib population has increased from fewer than 2,000 persons in 1800 to approximately 70,000 at present."³⁵ In addition, different economic and political reasons made the Caribs relocate on other temporal waves of migration. They went to places near Honduras and later spread to Haiti, benefiting from their French knowledge. Some began migrating into the Mosquitia, while most remained in the Trujillo area.³⁶ This constant reallocation enabled them to increase overseas contact and survive colonialism.

The Garifuna in St. Vincent has sought to situate themselves as people who live, fight, and exude their mixed culture of Arawak and black ancestry in a transnational

³⁰ Brondo, "A Garifuna Homecoming," p. 244.

³¹ Brondo, "A Garifuna Homecoming," p. 244-5.

³² Rose-Ann J. Smith and Kevon Rhiney, "Climate (in)Justice, Vulnerability and Livelihoods in the Caribbean: The Case of the Indigenous Caribs in Northeastern St. Vincent," *Geoforum* 73 (2016): pp.29-30.

³³ Twinn. "Hegemony, Carib history," p. 188-9.

³⁴ Twinn, "Hegemony, Carib history," p. 187.

³⁵ M. H. Crawford, "The Anthropological Genetics of the Black Caribs 'Garifuna' of Central America and the Caribbean," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 26, no. S1 (1983): pp. 161.

³⁶ Crawford, "The Anthropological Genetics of the Black Caribs," p. 166.

territory. Efforts include the government's newly implemented reforms and policies to celebrate Garifuna culture and indigenous national identity. For instance, it recognized Chief Joseph Chatoyer as its first national hero and former Garifuna leader during the Caribbean Wars. Another example is the discontinuation of the "Discovery Day" celebrations in the 1990s and replacement with "Indigenous Peoples Day."³⁷ This festival has strengthened relationships between the island and other Caribbean countries and groups. Today, the official recognition of the Garifuna as part of a cultural diversity that until a few years ago was denied by the Indo-European mestizo nationalist discourse that prevailed in the region is a historic achievement. In 2001, UNESCO proclaimed Garifuna culture as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity and recognized St. Vincent as the primary cultural site of their culture.³⁸ Although the roots and consequences of the past are still seen and lived by them, they continue to fight for a rightful space and rights in their ancestral home.

In conclusion, the written history of the Garifuna is heavily influenced by the European perspective and manipulated narratives. Due to the consequences of colonialism—its exploitation of labour, massacre, deportation and spread of false stories—caused the Garifuna of St. Vincent to become a neglected population and lose contact with their culture. Today they are trying to rebuild an identity of self-recognition by restoring historical memory and demanding governmental recognition. However, their case is complex. They carry indigenous and African identities, which insert them into movements and struggles on transnational networks and narratives of belonging around indigenous and black or Afro descendants' movements.

³⁷ Twinn, "Hegemony, Carib history."

³⁸ Anderson, "Yurumein (Homeland)," p. 860-61.

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