

Amerindians

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Let start by mentioning a distant situation. Ancient Egypt in Northeastern Africa has radiated along the lower reaches of the Nile River for over three millenniums from around 3000 BC to its fall to the Roman Empire in 30 BC. Civilizations are as such. They have to be appreciated on the long run. They do represent a substantial part of the Human Kind's history.

Therefore, the ones we can all agree to consider as the historic inhabitants of the Caribbean Islands are the Amerindians. There are the ones who have occupied the land. The ones who have fished in the sea. The ones who have traveled and exchanged extensively through the archipelagos for far more than a millennium. They have developed various successive or interconnected cultures including Ciboneys, Caribs and Arawaks. They have been, as a whole, the ones who had the best knowledge of the region; the ones who have patiently built an intimacy with what has now become Caribbean.

Robert Devaux a former field engineer is well known in Sainte Lucia for having devoted most of his life to studying and documenting the history of the island. Late Mr Devaux is credited with re-discovering numerous historical sites, including the ruins of early settlements. He has interestingly worked on the close connection of those Amerindians with their surroundings. They were associated some particular sites to their deities. Petit Piton was for instance referred to as Atebyra, and represented their God of Fertility, Food and Manioc, whereas Gros Piton referred to as Yokahu, represented their God of Fire. Above all, Robert Devaux developed a quite convincing theory regarding the Arawak settlements' choice. Thanks to their extended experience of their environment, they have been in position to pay a careful consideration of the position of their villages in accordance to the run of stars and sun.

Unfortunately, we know very few about believes and customs of the Arawaks at the pick of their civilization. They have in a way "vanished", not to say that they have been wiped out by the History. And here is the aspect I want to dig in with you today. What is the real meaning of "vanished" from an historical point of view?

The disappearance of a People, as such, is usually more a question of assimilation. Was it really the case for Amerindians? At a minor extend, the answer could be "Yes". Mixings have occurred. Some of the Marons who did escape slavery seek refuge in the Indians villages and settled. In some cases it eventually leads to the emergence of new people as the Garifuna who are still leaving in Saint Vincent, Nicaragua, Honduras and Belize.

Unfortunately, we all know that most of the Indians who did populate the Caribbean islands have been simply decimated through the process of conquest, forced labor and imported deadly diseases. The sixteen century in the region has been known as “The Great Dying”. Hundred thousand if not millions of Amerindians have been killed. From 1492 to 1530 that is to say in less than 50 years, almost the entire Amerindian population of Hispaniola (including Haiti and Dominican Republic) disappeared. And it has been pursued for centuries. The word “genocide” is definitely appropriate to describe what has been perpetrated by the Europeans of this time.

But for an Historian, “the vanishing of a People” has also another meaning. The question is: What does remain as a memory of the Amerindians here in the Eastern Caribbean?

My knowledge of the region is still very limited and I have definitely more to learn than to teach about it. What I rather could bring to the debate as an add value is a comparative approach. As an academic, I am a Southeast Asia’s specialist. I have published a couple of books under my name or a pen name describing the history and current situation of various minorities in Indonesia, Burma, Viet Nam and, at a minor extend, Thailand.

Some of those minorities settled in these countries long before the Burmese, the Viet or the Tai. The memory of their ancient splendor or more simply the memory of their organization as inhabitant of their own land is known by different means.

He begins our comparison:

1 – Some of the Southeast Asian minorities have left us their own written records. It has been the case for the Cham who did rule Central Vietnam from the Third Century to the 18th Century. It has been the case for the Môn, who occupied flat lands of Southeast Asia including lower Burma and Thailand from the beginning of first millennium to the 16th Century.

Chronicles on silk, leather or paper leaves could be sometime found. Stone inscriptions are frequent relating facts and giving figures.

We have nothing of this kind for the Amerindians of the Eastern Caribbean Islands. Only to mention Sainte Lucia Petroglyphs or stone carvings could be found at Jalousie and Stonefield in Soufriere, and Dauphin in the north. But there are not giving much informations about the one who have carved them.

2 – In Southeast Asia, Some of the minorities have developed a very elaborated oral history. We can mention the Jaraï who have been extensively approached, the Shan or the Phnong. They have preciously kept alive Creation Myths, Epics and numerous tales. The present generation has not been mixed at a large extend due to isolation, and the link with the

ancestors has never been broken. All these rich oral materials are accessible to visitors, including anthropologists who pay interest to learn their language and to participate to the various events punctuating their social life.

We have very few things of this kind for the Amerindians of the Eastern Caribbean Islands.

Extended mixing and displacements have blur the memory of the ones who avail themselves of the legacy of the Amerindians. A lot is probably to be done to get more from this scarcity but it is obviously an enormous task.

3 – There is another important source of informations about the history of the ancient inhabitants of Southeast Asia: the written records of the neighboring civilizations. Chinese chronicles have been particularly rich and well preserved. There are very precious because of their sustainability. Some documents have been issued by the Han Dynasty (25-220 CE) and preserved ever since. Those external testimonies are also precious because of the long run relations in between China and Southeast Asia. Most of the time China has had no intention at all to invade its southern neighbors. Its fulfilled aim was to include its neighbors in its sphere of influence as vassals. So Chinese officials, ambassadors, traders, monks and travelers were not disruptive. So they were able to describe the reality of the ones they did encounter.

At the opposite what we can get for the Caribbean region are relations from the European sailors from the 16th century. They were amongst the invaders facing the twilight of people struggling to survive. What they did report is precious but certainly not sufficient to get a good idea of who were the Amerindians before those trouble times.

Referring all those factors contributing to the Vanishing of the Amerindians' memory, I will not surprise you by revealing how essential it appears to me to disclose every possible trace of the late Amerindians. Those traces are elusive but there are of various natures. Oral testimonies of people from Amerindian descents even if this filiation is a distant one, could be precious. The excavation of artefacts from burial sites or ancient villages is also crucial.

Ceramics, stones, clay pots, glass beads are not silent if you know how to make them talk. On the same vein, no document from the first Europeans who have encountered Amerindians should be ignored.

All and every elements, artefacts and archives, have to be disclosed, preserved and made available to researchers and the public. They also have to be carefully gazette and protected for the future generations.

That's why I am so happy and proud to share the floor tonight with people who have given so much for the sake of the Amerindian history. That why I am so glad to see the Alliance française presenting the exhibition "Towards Reassembling the Fragments".

Let me particularly acknowledge the dedication of Mr Laurent Jean-Pierre from the Folk Research Center and PEYI, an organization dedicated to Heritage. I will be also delighted to have the occasion to hear the lecture of Mrs Anne Pajard from the MANIOC Program of the UA. I am also particularly happy to see around representatives of the National Archives of Sainte Lucia and the National Trust (including his Director Bishnu Tulsie).

But let me conclude by telling you one of the main reasons I consider the work of bringing out the Amerindian's memory so crucial. I strongly consider that the present Caribbean people, you (and me for a while) are not only the descent of some ancestors who did live three or four centuries ago in Africa or Europe. As Caribbean islands inhabitants we are first and foremost the heirs of the People who have experienced this land before us, namely the Amerindians. We have to preserve their heritage accordingly.