

Amerindians of the caribbean

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Topic: The Arawak of Guyana, their cultures, land use patterns and their effect on the landscape and biota. Introduction The Arawaks are thought to have settled at Hosororo creek on the Aruka River around 3, 500 years ago. They planted manioc (*manihot esculenta*) which they baked into bread on ceramic griddles on the hilltops. Arawaks occupied the Corentyne River also around 2, 000 years ago leaving a unique type of rock engraving, called Timehri Petroglyphs.

Due to the amount of rich protein supply found along the coastal swamps, the Arawaks moved hundreds of tons of earth with wooden shovels, in order to build habitation mounds and raised fields for farming. According to Denis Williams this settlement strategy has sustained human population on coastal swamps during the European era and into the present. During the rainy

season the Arawaks hunted a lot, when animals were said to migrate from lowlands in search of high ground. Animals commonly hunted were the deer, tapir, labba, wild hog, agouti, birds, parrots and turtles.

They were known as food producers, also they are also known for their pottery making skills as they were the first people to bring pottery to Guyana. The Arawaks have made great contributions to Guyana culture, today many places are named by the Arawaks, most of our rivers and creeks are named by the Arawaks. The Arawak nation is deemed the most intelligent of the Amerindian nations. Fig. 1 Map of Guyana showing the location of the Arawaks History The Amerindians is said to be the first inhabitants to Guyana who entered the territory about 11, 000 years ago.

Amerindians initially lived on low, swampy coastland regions. The coastal plain was built up by alluvial deposits from the rising Atlantic Ocean ranging from 17, 000 to 6000 years ago. The Arawak nation is said to be the second nation to arrive in Guyana after the Warraus who came before approximately 84000 years ago. It is said that a number of Arawak tribes have been extinct for several hundreds of years. What could have happened that would bring a population that once numbered 2 to 3 million down to just a few thousand by the early part of the 16th century?

Throughout history the Arawak were subject to many hostile take-overs, diseases, enslavement, damage to food supplies and much more. Inevitably, by the end of the 16th century the Island Arawak had become extinct. Sadly, the Arawak Indians have been eliminated or greatly reduced in number in many areas, some of which include the Caribbean, Guadeloupe, West Indies, Barbados, and the Virgin Islands. Their numbers have been slowly rising, so

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that today upwards of 30, 000 Arawak currently reside in Guyana, with a very small number existing in Suriname and French Guiana. Appearance

Because of the broad distribution of the Arawaks, little uniformity can be found in their culture or racial type. It has been found though that the language they speak distinguish them from the rest of the world. The Arawaks were well shaped, slightly built and medium height. It appeared that they were physically weak in comparison with the Africans and Europeans. Their skin was "olive" which mean smooth and brown. The Arawaks were considered naturally good- looking but distorted their features by artificial means. As babies their heads were flattened at the forehead, this elongated head was considered a mark of beauty.

This is thought to have been done to thicken the skull thus it could withstand heavy blows. The Arawaks had broad nose and their nostrils probably flared wide. Their hair was straight and black but coarse and was usually worn long. Figure 2: showing an ArawakfamilyThe Arawak men painted their bodies with bright colored dyes with clay and fat mixed all over smearing patterns all over their bodies: "some of them ... with black, others white and others red, most of them on their bodies and some on their faces, and eyes or only the nose".

The favorite paint was Roucou a red dye, besides being colorful, the clay and grease kept insects and rain off. The Arawaks also had body piercings and wore ornaments made from clay, shell and cotton. A plate of gold and copper alloy called the guanin was worn by chiefs who also dressed in gold crowns and feather headdresses. Sometimes the Arawaks had gold in their noses as plugs or hanging ornaments. The Arawaks saw gold as nothing more than a

form of decoration. The women wore simple bead aprons and necklaces. A number of small amulets (Fig.) or charms were carried in sacks around the neck, foot and wrist. Others made from cotton; shell and clay were woven into hair. Figure 3: showing amulets worn or carried by the Arawaks Entertainment The Arawaks had ample leisure time and many festivals marked by the Arawak year, some religious and some not so. For example the naming of a baby was time to rejoicing of the Arawaks that a child without a name will meet with great misfortune. The wedding of a cacique and the inauguration of a new cacique were times of festivity.

Arawaks are fond of sports, although not competitive like us. The favorite sport called batos was a ball game with the cross between volleyball and football. The game was played with a hard rubber ball. The main aim of the game was to keep the ball in the air using only the thighs and never touching the hands or feet. The most well-known of the Arawaks' pleasure was that of smoking. The Arawaks called the tobacco plant cohiba and the pipe for smoking the leaves, tabaco. The Arawaks liked tobacco for peace and contentment, and for helping them to meditate.

They made cigars and smoked it in a pipe which they enjoyed very much. Fig. 4: showing Arawak harvesting and smoking tobacco Housing All the Arawaks needed were a shelter to keep off rain. Arawak houses were rectangular with steep thatched roofs. The larger ones had a covered porch before the door. The construction of these houses is rather simple. Wooden posts were put into the ground in a circle and canes were woven between them and tied with creepers. The roof was thatched in a conical shape and a hole was left at the top to allow smoke to escape.

There were no windows and only an opening was left for a door and the houses were thoroughly built and could withstand hurricanes. The tasks of building houses were done by the men. Fig. 5: showing the house of an Arawak Survival (farming and hunting) The Arawaks were subsistence farmers, growing food mainly for their own needs and with a little left over for trade. Some crops are shown in fig. . They cut down trees to make room for planting and used the " slash-and-burn" method of farming. This is a simple method where the land was burnt to clear it of weeds and bush.

The ash produced was mixed with fish and urine to produce fertilizer to help prolong the productiveness of the land. Crops were then planted in the ashes among the blackened tree stumps. These primitive farmers did not practice crop rotation, after about five to ten years, the soil would become exhausted, and the village would proceed to clear fresh land, however, slash and burn is no longer used. Instead, shifting cultivation is their new form of farming. Women did the planting and were responsible for the preparation of food.

The crop cassava (also known manioc), slips were cut from the stem and planted in mounds on the level earth. Cassava was planted twice a year when the soil was damp. The Arawaks ate a variety of other fruits and vegetables including pineapples, star apples, guavas and cashews. The Arawaks did not touch mammy apples as they believed that it was food for the dead. Arawaks did not rely on field crops for all their food. Due to living on the coast oceans and rivers were rich in foods which needed little effort to gather: shellfish, turtle eggs, snails and gull.

Huge piles of shells have been found among the remains of camp sites. Arawaks trapped many small animals including bots, lizards, snakes, iguanas and agouties. The only domestic animal known to Arawaks was a small dog.

Fig. 6: Showing some crops grown by Arawak As mentioned, the women were also responsible for all food preparations. The main food of the Arawaks was cassava, which required special preparation since it was poisonous in its natural state. First, the root was grated on a board covered small pebbles or rough coral until it formed a paste. Fig. 4 is an indication of this tool.

This was put into a wicker tube, one end of which was hung from a branch, while a weight was attached to the other end. This caused the tube to contract, and forced the poisonous liquid out through the wicker. The remaining paste was left to dry and then pounded into flour using a stone mortar and pestle. The flour was formed into flat cakes and baked on a clay griddle until they were hard and dry. In this way, the cassava flour could keep from an extended period of time. Fig. 7: showing an Arawak grind stone

Seasoning played a big part in food preparation. Salt and especially pepper were the common seasonings used.

In addition, a sauce called cassareep, which was made of cassava juice, salt and pepper was frequently used, especially when serving the Arawaks' simplest dish, ' pepperpot'. Note that both cassareep and pepperpot are widely used throughout Guyana today. Pepperpot was prepared in a large clay pot. Cassava juice, with the poison extracted of course, beans, peanuts, potato and some meat were all allowed to simmer. This pot of soup was used to feed a family about three times a day and as the pot is emptied, more

ingredients are added so that one can have pepperpot at any time of the day or night.

The Arawaks could also make intoxicating drinks out of cassava and maize such as piwari and cassiri, but drunkenness was uncommon except on some ceremonial occasions. However, smoking tobacco was a big part of the Arawak culture. Religion The Arawaks' religious believe was called animism and was based on a spirit world, this practice aimed at honoring the spirit god. However Hillhouse claimed that the Arawaks worshipped the universal creator, a supreme being who they called Aluberi. They also believed that the sky was the source of all things powerful and good.

Certain men in society were single out to explain the mysterious and control the spirit world. They were called shamans or piaimen and were said to have supernatural powers. Arawaks believe that disease was nothing but the presence of evil spirit. These medicine men had the power possessed to drive out disease. The piaimen were versed in the knowledge of herbs to treat disease. Connected with the belief in evil spirits also was the Kanaima. The Kanaima would track down its victims for years for the sake of revenge.

He was thought to be an evil spirit in the form of a man. References Some notes on the Amerindians of Guyana Then and Now. Compiled by Shebana Daniel Uncle Basil: An Arawak Biography. By Justin Greene- Roesel The Prehistoric Arawak of Guyana. By Jennifer Wishart, Walter Roth Museum The Amerindians and the Europeans. By M. N. Menezes [http://www. google. ca/imgres? q= Arawaks+of+Guyana//html](http://www.google.ca/imgres?q=Arawaks+of+Guyana//html) accessed December 10, 2012 [http://www. google. gy/imgres? q= arawak+smoking+tobaccocigarettes. org/history. html](http://www.google.gy/imgres?q=arawak+smoking+tobaccocigarettes.org/history.html) accessed December 10, 2012

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