

The lesser and greater antilles history essay



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The Spaniards came to the Caribbean region in the 15th century. Prior to their arrival, three waves of immigrants had already migrated in the Caribbean. About 5000 BC, the Paleo-Indians came from Central and South America. They came across the sea from Central and South America and established small seaside communities that had no real knowledge of pottery and were nomadic. About 500 BC the Meso-Indians came from South America. They were more developed than the Paleo-Indians in terms of pottery and tools which show that they were evolving a Civilization. The third wave of migration was about 300BC. These inhabitants were called the Neo-Indians as they were the newest of the three waves to arrive. The Neo-Indians consisted of different groups; however archaeological evidence and historical research principally point to two groups that had sufficient characteristics showing forms of a thriving Caribbean Civilization which most definitely was long before the arrival of the Spaniards in the 15th Century. These two groups are known as the Tainos and Kalinagos.

The Tainos and Kalinagos were generally similar. Linguistics shows that the Tainos spoke 'Arawakan' and the Kalinagos spoke 'Cariban'. The Tainos ultimately settled in the Greater Antilles and the Kalinagos settled on the smaller islands of the Lesser Antilles. Both groups began establishing their culture in terms of social, economic and political organisation which showed signs of civilization existing in the Caribbean.

Both villages showed signs of a political and social lifestyle. According to Reid, the Tainos had caciques who presided over the village in which they lived. They organized the daily activities and were responsible for the storage of surplus commodities, which they kept in buildings constructed for

this purpose and redistributed among the villagers as needed (123). The Kalinagos didn't have Caciques in their political structure but they had a chief. Usually the chief was the head of the largest family (Beckles and Shepherd 18). He was responsible for all forms of leadership, most importantly military leadership. Taino villages were constructed around a village square where games and recreation took place. The Taínos were adept at constructing plazas and ball courts (Reid 124) However the Kalinago villages were constructed based on military defence.

Gender differentiated the type of work being done in both societies. Men and boys were responsible for clearing the fields, hunting and fishing and defences of the villages. House construction and canoe making were also their tasks. Women and girls did crop cultivation, spinning and weaving of cotton making handicrafts such as baskets, hammocks and utensils, daily food preparation and child nurturing. Another aspect of their social organization was gender segregation among the Kalinago. The men lived in separate houses from the women which was different than the Taino villages where there was no segregation where living arrangements were concerned.

Forms of science and technology were seen in the agricultural aspect of both groups. In order for proper starch crop production, the groups had an outstanding and organised system of agriculture. They engaged in conuco cultivation which was small plots of land that was nurtured. Large amounts of cassava was produced on the conuco. Beckles and Shepherd stated:

A family would cultivate a conuco intensively for two to three years. When the soil was no longer fertile and production levels fell, the family would

move on to a new fresh plot. The old conuco would be left uncultivated for about the same length of time. Before it was brought back into production. It was only later that the Taino developed the technology of fertilising soils with animal and vegetable manure. (8)

This evidence shows that the Tainos used some form of science in the way they cultivated their conuco and then advanced to fertilisers. These fertilisers were developed and used prior to the coming of the Spaniards. This advancement displays that they were developing their society and adheres to the fact that they were indeed civilised. The Kalinago society was not as agriculturally advanced as the Tainos. As a result their captivation of Taino women took place so that regardless of the Kalinagos drawback as compared to the Tainos in agriculture they still had ways of cultivating their crops.

Moreover the both groups had other ways of retrieving food by creating a domestic economy, which comprised of domesticating plants and animals. In order to domesticate plants they had gardens where they planted fruit trees such as cashews, paw paw, plum, pineapple, guava et cetera. They localized animals by catching them and keeping them in their yards for eating. This is where they got their main source of protein. They kept animals such as pigs, wild animals, birds and reptiles and fish.

Both groups had developed particular world views and concepts about the afterlife. The Tainos had three main gods, evidence of which have been found in carvings in many of the Lesser and Greater Antilles. According to Footprint the principal male god was called Yocahú, which was associated with cassava and volcanoes. The main female deity was a fertility goddess,

often referred to as Atabeyra, and had roles relating to the sea and the moon. A third deity is a dog god, named Opiyel-Guaobiran, meaning ' the dog deity who takes care of the souls of the immediately deceased and is the son of the spirit of darkness. This deity was believed to be responsible for looking after the recently dead. (55). Small statues were created to represent these deities called zemis which they would use to try to make contact with the spiritual realm. The Kalinagos did not have Zemis like the Tainos. The Kalinagos each believed that they had a personal spirit which took various forms. They also believed in good and evil. They had priests which interacted with the spiritual world on their behalf.

The Neo-Indians had concepts about their physical appearance. Their Civilization and cultural aspect of beauty differed from the Spaniards. They flattened their foreheads as one sign of beauty. Both men and women grew their hair long which was also another sign of beauty. Women of the communities wore ornaments made from beads, shell, and gold pieces. Jewellery was commonly used such as nose rings and earring by both groups and both sexes. Presence of artistic creativity and ornaments and pottery were also present giving evidence that both groups were civilized. The Taino women were sophisticated in their artistry. They wove cotton into high quality fabric and wove baskets of different shapes and styles. The Tainos made ceramics such as bowls, pots and ornaments and weaponry and tools out of stone. These tools would then allow them to build houses, canoes and other utensils needed for their survival. The Kalinagos were not as sophisticated in their artistry as the Tainos but they did however weave cotton and baskets and made pottery and canoes.

Upon the Spaniards first arrival in the Caribbean they did not discover primeval societies with basic ways of living but societies that already had many factors established amongst themselves. Clearly the Spaniards did not bring civilization to the Caribbean but instead found socially complex native communities scattered throughout the region. It would have been complex to the Spaniards because they would have also come from a different background with a different culture and different ways of being civilized but that does not undermine the fact that the Caribbean also had their ways of becoming developed. They did not meet the communities, the Paleo-Indians and Meso-Indians in which civilization began with, but encountered the Neo-Indians who ultimately left evidence to show that their civilization was evolving and their human society was being developed.