

Saltwater Empire: The Caribs and the Politics of Smuggling, Insurgency, and the Slave Trade in the Circum-Caribbean, 1763-1833

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On March 16th of 1795, Governor Seton of Saint Vincent Island convened a War Council. This meeting was a response to recent news about French Republican insurgents taking the British Governor of Grenada as prisoner. Attending these meetings was customary for British officials and planters after Great Britain entered into war with France in 1794. Yet, some absences perturbed the council's agenda. Despite the governor's invitation, the Carib chiefs of Saint Vincent did not attend to the assembly. A few days later, Governor Seton was declaring martial law. The Caribs and French Republicans had allied to dismiss the British rule over the island. Quote: "These barbarous savages [the Caribs] and their rebellious allies [the French] continue to burn and destroy whatever falls in their power and inhumanly murder our unarmed and unoffending Negroes."

These Caribs burning plantations and terrorizing the British were members of the largest and most powerful indigenous community of the Antilles. They resulted from decades of intermarriage between Carib Indians and fugitive slaves from the nearby islands. The Europeans labeled them "Black Caribs," highlighting their mixed-blood nature and dark skin color.

The Caribs formed a constellation of small chiefdoms in Saint Vincent. Influential Carib leaders governed over large families and enjoyed wider political power. The advantages of establishing larger chiefdoms led most of the Carib leaders to extend their kinship to fugitive slaves through adoption and marriage. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Saint Vincent functioned as a de facto sanctuary island for runaways looking for freedom. Decades of welcoming African descendants and trading with Europeans shaped a permeable and cosmopolitan Carib community.

By the mid-1770s, the Caribs formed one of the dominant powers in the Lesser Antilles. They controlled the intercolonial traffic of tobacco and slaves, welcomed fugitive slaves into their extended families, and were attractive military allies for Europeans. The Caribs' crescent influence on Antillean affairs promptly created a serious threat to the colonial status quo. Frustrated by the natives' raids on sugar plantations, refusal to submit to the British king, and disregard for imperial borderlands, the British took the drastic measure of forcefully relocating the entire community to the Spanish Bay of Honduras in 1797.

Once on Spanish soil, the Caribs established effective patronage relationships with the Spaniards, joined colonial militias, and functioned as intermediaries between Spanish, British, and North American smugglers. But what makes this case study different from other instances of subalterns' participation in clandestine trade, popular insurgency, and massive uprooting? Far from offering a history of how imperial borderlands became bordered-lands, I illustrate the opposite process.

My research project, generously funded by the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET), hypothesizes that the Caribs imposed their notion of space onto European hegemony and transformed imperial spaces, such as the Lesser Antilles and the Gulf of Honduras, into de facto borderlands. Whereas French, English, and

Spaniards identified imperial dominions, the Caribs recognized spaces for commercial opportunity, pillaging, slave raiding, and political alliances. My research inquires the extent to which the most powerful “subalterns” of the Lesser Antilles and the Central American mainland, the Caribs, derived their power from Old Regime practices and institutions such as smuggling, slave trading, and monarchical loyalism, while universal ideas of Enlightened freedom and the consolidation of modern nation-states in Central America ultimately undermined their autonomy and political influence.

With the support of the History Project Research Grant, I had the opportunity to conduct substantial archival research in the General Archive of Central America, located in Guatemala City. As the colonial capital of the Spanish Captaincy of Guatemala, Guatemala City was the center of the Spanish government in Central America and its archive holds most colonial records of present-day countries of Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, and Nicaragua. While conducting research in Guatemala, I examined the series A1 centered on legal cases, the series A2 devoted to records about the Spanish colonial militias, and the series A3 focused on documents of the Spanish office of treasury. My intention was exploring the Caribs’ early integration in the Spanish colonial society and their intervention in local economic activities.

Nevertheless, some early findings opened new ways of inquiry and broader research question. While examining the documentation of the Spanish office of treasury, I found several legal cases of smuggling in the main ports of the Bay of Honduras, namely Trujillo, Puerto Caballos, and Omoa. The smugglers who arrived to these ports established complex networks of trade that included different points of the Atlantic world, such as New York, Philadelphia, Curaçao, and Jamaica. These records will not only allow me to reconstruct the circum-Caribbean trajectories of these smugglers, but also how African descendants and Caribs participated in these activities. I have archival sources that reveal how the Caribs functioned as intermediaries between these smugglers and individuals who distributed the illicit merchandise from the Atlantic shores of Central America to the hinterlands of Honduras and Guatemala. Such materials will allow me to offer a multiethnic and circum-Caribbean history of the Bay of Honduras, that had more relationship with Jamaica, Cuba, and Philadelphia than with Guatemala City.

I also had the good fortune of finding substantial archival records about the Caribs’ participation in the Spanish colonial militias during the late colonial era. I gathered documents that demonstrate that the Caribs were employed as militiamen, carpenters, and construction workers in the port of Trujillo, soon after the British forcefully relocated them in Spanish territory in 1797. Likewise, legal petitions and cases of militias and civil courts are critical to illustrate how Carib women and men participated in the Spanish legal culture, wrote petitions to the Spanish Crown, and took advantage of the Spanish military *fuero*—a legal system exclusive for members of the Spanish colonial military forces. I also found important records revealing the intervention of Caribs and African descendants suffocating pro-independence rebellions across the Captaincy of Guatemala in the 1810s.

The collections at the General Archive of Central America also illuminate the Caribs’ responded to the Captaincy of Guatemala’s independence from Spain in 1821. The Honduran officers attempted to incorporate the Caribs into the new political order. Yet, some local reports narrate the officials’ difficulty to incorporate the Caribs into institutions such as the national militias. The Honduran government explicitly alluded to the Carib loyalty to the remote figure of the Spanish king Ferdinand VII. These preliminary observations reinforce my early working hypothesis. The Caribs’ loss of political and

commercial influence in the early national era evidences that the most powerful “subalterns” of the Lesser Antilles and Central America derived their power from Old Regime institutions and patterns of trade. While smuggling, slave trading, and monarchical loyalism fostered their economic and political influence, the Age of Revolutions and the nineteenth-century national order ultimately curtailed Carib hegemony.