

THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL and Dominica's first Catholics. Part I by Bernard Lauwyck



Roseau Cathedral stained glass window on the Sacred Heart of Jesus

“Apostolat de la prière et la communion réparatrice”

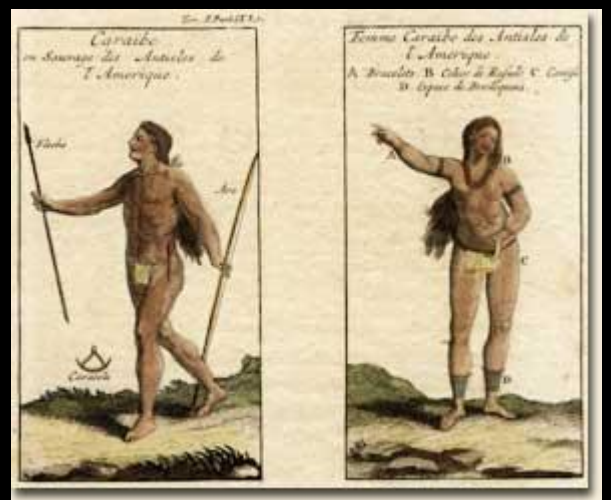
As we know, the Kalinago people were the first baptised Catholics in Dominica.

Father Raymond Breton wrote: *“Among the Caribs of Dominica there is not one who has not been instructed in our holy religion; they listened willingly to me and offered me their children to be taught the Christian doctrine “* Before his death in 1679 Father Breton wrote his friends this letter (found in Bishop Moris’ “History of the Diocese”)

“To the Caribs of Dominica.

My dear friends,

Several years have passed since my departure from your island. During all this time my body was far from you, but not my mind and heart, because you are created, as well as we, to the image and likeness of God. It is the desire of your salvation which had urged me to be the first to remain with you. As I can no longer instruct you personally in the mysteries of our holy religion, on account of much infirmities, I have translated a summary of our belief from French into your



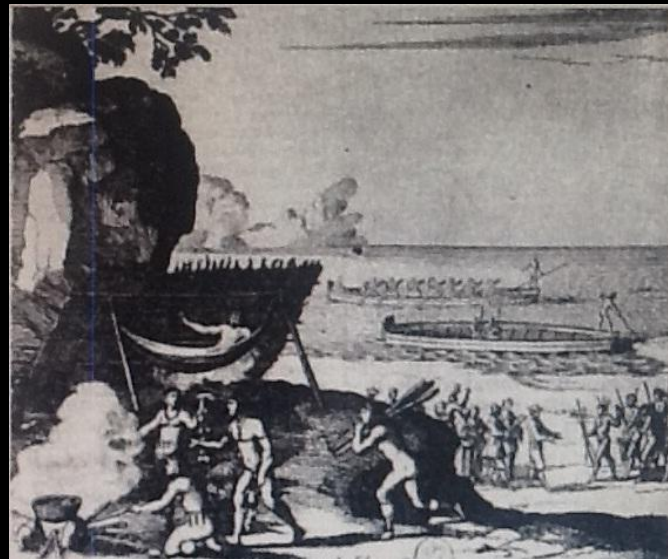
language, in order that our fathers and yours, who will visit you, may be able to teach you.

I conjure you by our old friendship to receive them well when they come to you, to listen to them when they instruct you and to obey their orders. They will love you as I loved you; they will bear with your weaknesses and try to please you. I beseech Jesus, my God and yours, to send you many of them, to touch your hearts, and to hear the continual prayers I offer for your hearts, and to hear the continual prayers I offer for your conversion, having no other wish, my friends, than to remain forever, your

Baba Raymond (Father Raymond Breton)

Fr. Breton claimed that the Kalinago had no religion because they had “no proper terms for God, no prayers, no altars, and no temples”.

The Catholic friars arrived with a heavily ritualised religion with dogmas set rigidly within a Roman legal and administrative frame work, based on Greek philosophy, Jewish and Christian sacred Scriptures, the writings of the Church Fathers and the Magisterium. No wonder that this was difficult to absorb by the Kalinago, who had none of these elements in their religion or background.



Another important difference is that Christians look at history in a linear way, as salvation history moving towards the second coming of Christ. The Kalinago, as many ancient cultures such as the Babylonian, had religious beliefs based on cycles of the seasons and fertility rites.

(see in <http://www.lennoxhonychurch.com/article.cfm?id=392>)

Although fond memories of the early missionaries remained with the Kalinago, the impact of this first evangelisation effort was not lasting as French missionary Jean-Baptiste Labat observed in his “*Nouveau voyage aux îles de l’Amérique*” (6 vols., Paris, 1722)(available on Google books). Fr. Labat (1663-1738) was very negative about the religious beliefs of Caribs which was understandable as he was also a plantation and slave owner in Martinique, where the Kalinago had been driven out by aggressive settlers. In Guadeloupe they were slaughtered. Labat made such a bad name for himself by abusing his slaves, that up to a century ago his name was used to discipline children “*Moin ké fais Père Labatt vini pou ou*”. But he also “had a wide reputation as a mathematician and won recognition both as a naturalist and as a scientist” (Wikipedia). His well-written volumes were very influential and translated in English and Dutch. A rum is also named after him.

Concerning the state of religion among the Kalinago of Dominica at the time of his visit to the island from the 9th to the 28th of January 1700, Père Labat wrote: “*At this moment there is not a single missionary in the island....All that has been done in the West Indies so far to instruct the Caribs and make them embrace the Christian religion has been in vain. For more than thirty years our Order supported those missionaries who studied their language, lived in their midst, taught them the Catechism and the prayers, and neglected nothing to win them to God; yet for all that, everything has been fruitless.*”.



“QUE VOTRE REGNE ARRIVE”

“MAY YOUR REIGN ARRIVE”

“All the old Caribs whom I met knew how to make the Sign of the Cross and could say the Christian prayers in their own language; some even still knew them in French. That is all they have retained of the instructions given them by the Fathers Raymond Breton and Philip de Beaumont” (volume 4. Ch.14). In chapter 18 of the same book, he dismisses the religious beliefs of the Kalinago: “What I know full well is that the Caribs have no religion at all and no definite worship. They seem to know no beings but material ones; in their language there is not even a term for God or a spirit.”(History of the Diocese of Roseau by James Moris).

However, a later account, written by a lay Protestant traveller, Charles Cesar de Rochefort, notes that the Kalinago word for rainbow is "God's plume of feathers"”. (see *“Wild Majesty: encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the present day : an anthology”* by Peter Hulme and Neil Whitehead 1992).

This reminds me of the “feathered God” of the Mayas named "Quetzalcoatl", their war god. The pre-Columbian Mayas inhabited the present-day southern Mexican states of Chiapas and Yucatan.

Also the ancient Egyptians had a feathered God, named “Maat” the goddess of Right.

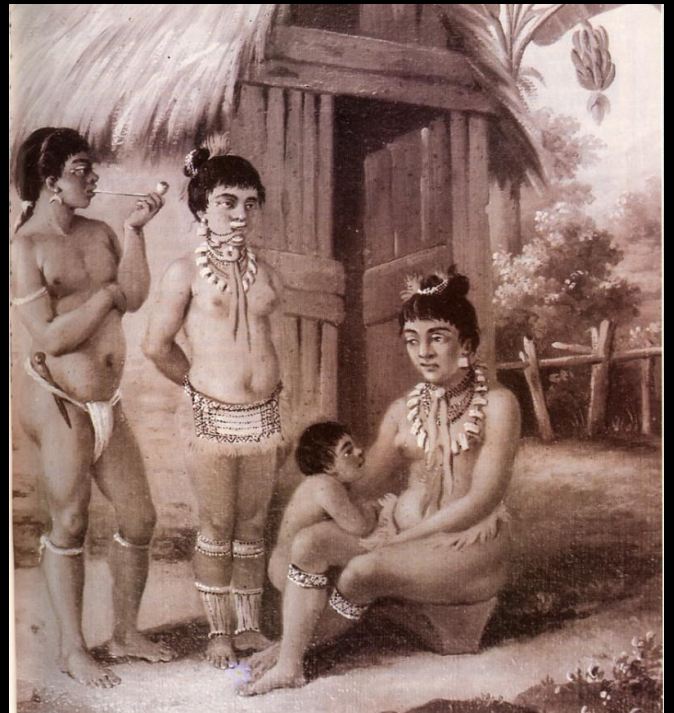
The North American native Indians had their chiefs wearing elaborate bright feathered headdresses as an honor of battle.



Up to the present time, misconceptions about the Kalinago are propagated: James A. Michener’s “Caribbean”, a 1990 bestseller, states *“The heritage of the Caribs was brutality, warfare and little else”*. (p. 11).

Another French missionary of the Preachers order (Dominican friar) Jean Baptiste DuTertre would have been very upset with Mr. Michener’s harsh judgement and Fr. Labat’s dismissal.

In Du Tertre “Histoire Générale des Antilles habitués par les François” he writes on the Kalinago :*“They have good reasoning, and a mind as subtle as could be found among people who have no smattering of letters at all, and who have never been refined and polished by the human sciences, which often, while refining our minds, fill them for us with malice; and I can say in all truth that if our Savages are more ignorant than us, so they are much less vicious, even indeed that almost all the malice they do know is taught them by us French.”*

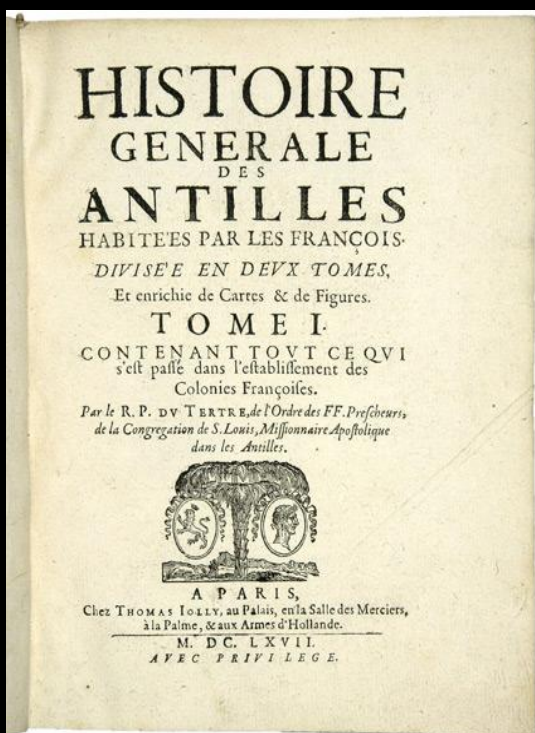


Father du Tertre (1610-1687) based his writings on his 18 years in the French West Indies, from 1640 to 1658, and published his work in 1667. Where Labat looked for interesting stories, Du Tertre aimed to put out exact history and left anything out that he was doubtful off. Père Du Tertre, while accepting Breton's ideas about the origins of Karipuna culture and language, sees the Kalinago as exemplifying a noble simplicity, and he stresses the difficulty in learning their language, that it is "impoverished and imperfect" (Hulme and Whitehead 1992).

Based on the Kalinago in Dominica, he introduced the concept of “Nobel Savage” from his long time experience in the islands, Man in their natural state, as he describes it, free from the corrupting influences of civilization and I translate from French:

“ Man in the pure state of nature

The savages of these islands are the most contented, less vicious, the most sociable, less artificial and have less sickness than all the nations in the world because they are one with nature, living with a great simplicity and natural innocence. They are all equal and do not know master or servant, poor or rich and only take from nature what is absolutely necessary to survive... They do not have any clothing except what nature gave them. (Histoire générale des Antilles, Paris, Jolly, 1667)



This concept of the "noble savage ", based on the writings of the first missionaries (on the Kalinago of Dominica) was greatly expanded by famous philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), who saw a fundamental divide between society and human nature. While the missionaries, limited by the Christian concept

of "original sin", could call no man free of evil, the philosopher J.J. Rousseau contended that man was good by nature, a "noble savage" when in the state of nature (the state of all the "other animals," and the condition humankind was in before the creation of civilization and society, but man is corrupted by society. Many Enlightenment philosophers were profoundly influenced by the work of the missionaries. Indeed Jean-Jacques Rousseau used du Tertre's characterization of the Caribs as "noble savages" as a point of departure in his writings on human nature and society" (Wild Majesty: encounters with Caribs from Columbus to the present day: an anthology by Peter Hulme & Neil . Whitehead 1992) .

Ideas developed from interaction with the Kalinago of Dominica, inspired Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was the main philosophical force behind the ideas of the French and American revolution. His main idea can be summed up in the first line of his most famous work "*Le Social Contract*" (1762): "Man is born free, but everywhere is in chains"

In turn, the ideas of the French and American Revolutions inspired the slave revolts in the islands and the revolution that led to Haitian independence from the colonial rule of France. Jean-Jacques Rousseau ideas had a major influence on Toussaint L'Ouverture, the main architect and driving force behind the Haitian struggle.

Dominica influences the world, the world influences the region.

Yes, Dominica was the "Land of the Brave".

A lot more is available on the life style of the Kalinago in original French documents (Labat, Breton, Du Tertre)on Google books and I encourage students to take up this topic. Dr. Honychurch did his doctoral anthropology thesis on the topic of 500 years of Kalinago history and archaeology at Oxford. Dr.Helen Seaman did her doctorate on Kalinago history at UWI, Rev. Fr. Vanty Auguste C.Ss.R. did his Master of Theology thesis on Family Ministry among the Kalinago and now, Mr. Cozier Frederick of the Kalinago Territory is doing his Masters on Kalinago history of the Territory at the University of the West Indies. And there is more research to be done !!

bernardlauw@yahoo.com PO Box 317 Roseau Dominica