

# The Kalinago and The Garinagu

The earliest human habitation of St. Vincent occurred somewhere in the region of 5000 years ago. The Salanoid people were the first inhabitants of what we now call the Windward Islands and were overtaken by the Arawaks, who are believed to have originated in Venezuela. The Arawaks, in turn, were pursued and conquered by the Caribs around 1300, thus leaving the Caribs as the dominant people on St. Vincent when Christopher Columbus arrived in the Caribbean in 1492. The Island Caribs are more properly known as the Kalinago (Karifuna in the singular). The name Carib is of uncertain origin, and was first put in written form by Columbus, resulting



A Kalinago canoe, used for sea voyages

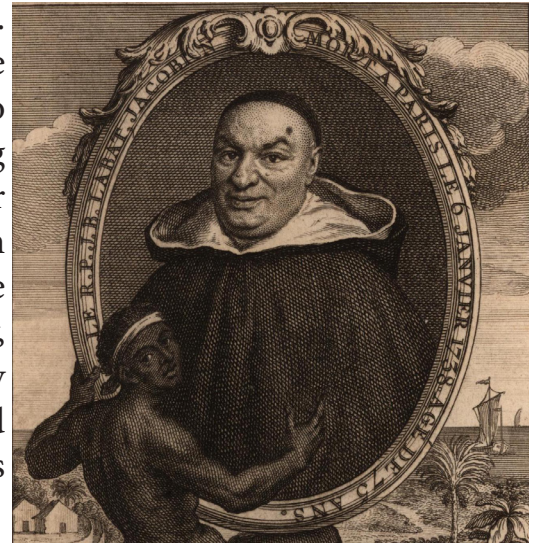
in the name Caribbean. It is also linked to the term 'Cannibal', as the Kalinago and, indeed, the other pre-Columbian peoples of the Caribbean were believed to have eaten human flesh on occasion, although how widespread this practice was is hard to say.

The earliest origin of the Garinagu people is lost to legend. Tradition holds that there was a ship, carrying slaves from Africa, that was wrecked nearby St. Vincent on the small island of Bequia. The survivors of that wreck made their way to St. Vincent, either by themselves, or, as is more commonly told in these stories, they were rescued by the Vincentian Kalinago.

More recent historical thought has pointed perhaps to Dutch involvement in the story. The slave ship is traditionally said to have been Spanish, but in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was quite a strong anti-slavery feeling amongst the Dutch and it was not unknown for them to capture slave ships and either turn the ship over to the liberated or to leave them on the first landmass they reached and keep the ship. The date for this shipwreck is often given as around 1675, but the date of 1635 is also cited and is the far more likely answer, being supported by accounts of 'Black Caribs' on St. Vincent before the later date.

Some stories say that the Kalinago treated these survivors as slaves themselves, and they were brought back to the island for that purpose. However, over time, the Garinagu became the larger population body. There are various explanations given for this. Firstly, it appears that their numbers swelled with escaped slaves from other islands, including nearby Barbados, as the currents and winds can naturally carry a canoe or raft across the twenty-eight miles to St. Vincent. Secondly, they may simply have had more children than the Kalinago. Some French sources recorded that the Kalinago encouraged French intervention on St. Vincent as the Garinagu had a habit of kidnapping their wives and daughters, which might also explain the reduced birth-rate amongst the Kalinago. European observers never truly had an accurate picture of the population of either the Kalinago or the Garinagu, as the tribes successfully repelled invasion for some time, but it was estimated in 1763 that the population comprised 3000 Garinagu and about 100 Kalinago, although these figures are highly questionable.

Some think that by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, on St. Vincent at least, the Kalinago and the Garinagu were one and the same people, with a distinction between the two barely recognisable by the people themselves, and existing only in the minds of outside observers. Certainly, our understanding of the Garinagu comes almost entirely from outside observers, be that of the French priest Jean-Baptiste Labat at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or from reports made by both British and French Military officers, and the later influential (but undoubtedly biased histories) of the younger Sir William Young and Charles Shepard.



Jean-Baptiste Labat

The Garinagu of those times left no written records, and even oral histories are scarce. This bias of surviving sources makes it impossible to create a complete picture of their culture and history. However, several French sources report, around the year 1750, that many of the Kalinago decided to leave St. Vincent, due to a poor relationship with the Garinagu and opted to remove themselves to Trinidad.

An oral tradition, left by Chatoyer's daughter, Gulisi, to her descendants describes six different tribes or groups: the Oreyuna, the Awawaraguna, Oligin, Masiragana, Habaraguna, and Saiwaina. Members of these groups did not intermarry with those of other groups, and were also reputed to have certain characteristics belonging to each group. For example, the Oreyuna were supposed to be the hardest workers. Others were supposed to be lazy, great fighters or to be less clean than others.



A device for flattening a child's forehead and the result on its parent

All sources agree that the Garinagu adopted many of the customs of the Kalinago. Charles Shepard, writing in the early 1830s, claimed that the practice of flattening children's foreheads by binding them up when the children were young, practised through much of the Pre-Columbian Caribbean and South America, was only adopted by the Garinagu particularly when the French settled with Black slaves on the island, as a way for the Garinagu to differentiate themselves from the slaves. This also apparently led to the slaves referring to the Garinagu as 'Flat Heads'.

The Garifuna language is also derived heavily from the Carib tongue, as is evident from the similarity between their names 'Karifuna' and 'Garifuna', but has its own distinctiveness. They named the island St. Vincent as Yurumein, meaning "*the beauty of the rainbows in the valleys*". It is also logical to assume that some of the Garinagu's practices were also adopted by the Kalinago, but there is no surviving evidence to verify this.