



Pan-Tribal Confederacy of Indigenous Tribal Nations

The Only Multi-Racial Worldwide Indigenous Confederacy In Existence

GUYANA CONSUL (BARBADOS) VISIT TO FORMER AMERINDIAN VILLAGE SITE IN B'DOS

(FOR HIS COLUMN IN GUYANA CHRONICLE NEWSPAPER)

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ICHIROUGANAIM !--HOMAGE AT VILLAGE SITE OF FIRST BAJANS.

by Norman Faria

According to the history books, Barbados was first sighted by Europeans in the early 1500s when the Portuguese captain and crew of a sailing vessel passed by as they headed to Brazil.

It is not known for sure if any indigenous people were still on the then densely forested island. The first inhabitants were Amerindian-type people who had several villages with a sustainable agriculture. These were the first Bajans. Many centuries before, their ancestors had migrated from what is now Guyana and Venezuela in big ocean going canoes to the Eastern Caribbean Islands. Recent carbon dating of their pottery showed they had arrived in Barbados around 1600 B.C.

In 1627, some 80 white settlers from England (together with ten African slaves) landed to start other settlements. There is a monument to them at Holetown on the island's west coast. By then, most of indigenous people, (often called "Arawaks" and "Caribs") had left, depleted by slavery raids or disease.

In the 1980s, teams from the University College London in collaboration with the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, carried out the first systematic archaeological digs on the island at the indigenous peoples' former village sites. One of them was at what is now Silver Sands district on the southernmost tip of the island. It is about three and half kilometres east along the coast from Oistins town. A couple weekends ago, while spending the weekend with a Guyanese family at Oistins, I set out on a hike to the village site.

It was a pleasant walk in the early morning sunshine along Enterprise Road. This is in Christ Church parish which is the equivalent of a region in Guyana. The road was lined with well to do middle and up market residences. Some were old, maybe hundred years old. They were made of foot and half thick coral stone blocks dug from quarries in the interior. They had inverted V shaped roofs while newer buildings had flat ones.

Now and again, there were vacant lots where the hardy "cassia" tree provided shade for cows tended by people from more working class homes slightly to the north on a parallel road and along a mini-bus route. About half way to the village site, I stopped to quench my thirst at one of the few remaining "stand pipes" (this was before the Barbados water authority extended their piped service to all houses).

As I turned a corner I saw a wonderful garden and some squash on the fence and lying on the ground. I rang a bell and Leo Branch, one of the Barbados' top astronomers (he has the most sophisticated telescope in the island besides the one in the main Harry Bailey Observatory), came out. We gaffed and he gave me a dried squash from the ground for its seeds. It is the common long one like we get in Guyana.

By 1030 hours I was descending a slight decline into Silver Sands proper and onto what I knew was part of the former Amerindian village. I walked across an open area which was recently bulldozed, probably for new housing. I knew it was on the outskirts of the village because I had visited with Dr. Peter Drewitt, head of the University team when they were digging there in the mid 1980s.

I saw sherds (broken pieces) of pottery, made by the indigenous people, on the ground surface. Further east, walking towards the actual village centre, there was a big drainage trench and it had churned up artifacts. I was surprised to find two shell tools, one of whose tip was broken off while the original smooth surface of the other (see photo) had borer damage. These were axe/adze heads. They would have been fastened to wooden handles since long rotted away. A similar tool with handle is in the Walter Roth Museum in Georgetown.

The tools had to be of conch shell. Because Barbados is of coral formation there was no hard stone like granite found in neighbouring islands or Guyana. The coral stone is soft. The material from conch shells the "Indians" harvested from the outlying reefs for food were ground down and made into these implements. The trench and surrounding area was littered with broken shells. As I cleaned away dirt, I caressed the tools in my hands and threw myself back hundreds of years to among a group of villagers lovingly making them to, perhaps, dig new holes for cassava plants.

As an aside, I had earlier found a similar adze head at another village site (at Heywoods on the west coast) and wanted to turn it over to the Museum. But Director Dr. Allisandra Cummins said: "Don't worry, Norman, they are so plentiful, you can keep it," she said.

The actual village site is now a public park and children's playground, shielded from the sun by towering casuarina trees (or "mile" trees as Bajans call them because of their relatively great height). There is also a playing field and on the Sunday morning I walked by, the local youths were playing football.

Adjacent to the park, there is still a fresh water stream. This was a main reason the village was here. A hundred or so metres away is the sea and a further five hundred metres out across a lagoon was the outlying reef where the Atlantic swells broke on the coral in shallow waters. As an aside, the word "Ichirouganaim", said to be an Arawak word which the Amerindians used to describe Barbados, is thought to refer to the imagery of "teeth" imagery of the waves breaking on the reefs off most of southern and eastern coasts.

In the lagoons (between the shore and the outlying reefs), there must have been an abundance of conchs for the villagers to harvest. Aside from the many discarded shells (a slightly different type from those found in the shell mounds in the Pomeroy area in Guyana). Dr. Drewitt also found cleverly designed and made artificial lures and hooks to catch fish, perhaps from canoes that took the villagers beyond the reefs into deeper water. They probably also cast nets and captured sea turtles that came onto the beach to lay eggs. Birds included ducks were trapped. For the climate and their needs, the agricultural technology was probably on par with what was obtained in Europe. Sadly, much of their artwork made of wood, feathers and leather has been lost forever.

It seemed like a Garden of Eden. But Dr. Drewitt told me that even though there appeared to be a sustainable fisheries economy (and agriculture including cassava, corn, peanuts and fruit trees like papaw) , life could be hard. Studies of the skeletons found at the site showed most people died before they reached their 30s.

Relaxing with a beer at a little bar overlooking the now slightly polluted stream, proprietor and now retired Bajan fisherman/boatbuilder Graham Nurse related as a teenager he used to catch mullets in the stream. That would be back in the 1930s or 1940s because he recounted stories of him helping shipwrecked sailors coming ashore in lifeboats after their ships were torpedoed in World War II. So the stream was most useful to the early inhabitants not only for drinking water but for fresh water fish as well.

I watched too the Bajan fellows jump and whirl and shout as they played their football. I watch the children laugh happily on the swings and slides in the playground. I know the first Bajans, and their gods, would themselves be pleased that the present villagers are themselves happy. As I walk towards the mini bus turnaround point to take me back to Oistins, I pluck some wild flowers and place on the ground . I say a little tribute, a little homage, to the first true settlers and great explorers with their civilisation who came to Barbados from today's Guyana and Venezuela so many years ago.