

Indigenous Populations of Brazil (16th Century)

Not much is known with certainty about these populations, in part because much archeological evidence decayed long ago in tropical climate; however, good information has been provided by

- 1) surviving societies recently "rediscovered" by Western anthropologists
- 2) an extensive literature on Tupi people written by European travelers, settlers in 16th century (Caminha's letter is first of many); these cultures perished long ago, as did hundreds of others

- hundreds of distinct groups (see map), but four main language groups: Tupi (Tupi-Guaraní), Gê, Carib and Aruak (Arawak)

- the most sophisticated pre-Conquest cultures developed in the Amazon basin, although many of these were already gone when Europeans arrived

- most cultures were nomadic or semi-nomadic, in part due to lack of domestic animals to provide protein and in part due to the difficulties of living in the Brazilian tropical rainforest and dry plateaus; permanent settlement, therefore, was only an option for the strongest groups, who lived on coasts or along fertile riverbanks

Tupi peoples of Brazil:

- much of what is known about dress, adornment and housing comes across in remarkably accurate description found in Caminha's letter

- families were self-sufficient: men and women made their own personal belongings (baskets, hammocks, bows and arrows, adornment, tools, utensils, canoes, straw huts)

- social organization: marriage was generally matrilineal (husband moved in with wife's family), except in cases where the husband was powerful enough to establish his own household; polygamy was practiced by chiefs and famous warriors; related groups lived together in one large hut, as Caminha describes; each family group had a chief, as did each larger group; groups were advised by a council of elders; still, as Caminha surmises in his letter, councils and chiefs did not hold much power in what were essentially egalitarian societies

- spiritual beliefs: no organized religion or official gods, but belief in spirit world, especially in the presence of evil spirits; celebrations were linked to agricultural calendar, hunting, warfare and life-cycle; oral tradition passed on stories of heroic ancestors and malevolent spirits; shamans (*pagés*) were attributed powers of healing and prophecy

- warfare: warfare was an important part of life for most groups, who fought constantly with near-by groups, usually in order to capture prisoners for ritual execution and/or cannibalistic ceremonies

- myth of the noble savage: one misconception on the part of early European observers, however, was that the egalitarian nature of these societies resulted in freedom from any kind of law at all; in practice, any member of a group who did not conform to accepted standards of behavior was condemned by the shaman as an evil spirit and killed by the rest of the community

Indigenous Populations of the Caribbean and Circum-Caribbean (1492)

Upon Columbus' arrival, the islands of the Caribbean sea and the nearby mainland were densely populated.

- 1) the peoples of these regions were most often organized into chiefdoms or rank societies (i.e. societies containing two social sectors, elites and commoners, which were hierarchically related) of varying complexities
- 2) these societies could be divided into two areas of significant political interaction
 - a) the first centered in the northern part of modern-day Colombia and included what is now Panama, Costa Rica to the west and northern Venezuela to the east.
 - b) the other centered on the islands of Hispaniola (Haiti/D.R.) and Puerto Rico and included other islands in the Greater Antilles, such as Jamaica and Cuba.

Outside of these areas, for example in the Lesser Antilles, were to be found other societies, less complex in their political organization. This handout will focus on the populations of the Greater and Lesser Antilles (Dominica, Guadeloupe, St. Christopher, etc.). Most information is derived from the observations of 16th and early 17th century European chroniclers from archeological evidence.

The Greater Antilles:

- social organization

- individual rank societies tended to occupy mountain valleys because of their fertility and proximity to grasslands that could be cultivated and rivers that provided a means of transportation and access to the sea

- housing settlements of the elite consisted of 12 to 15 large, conical dwellings which would each house several families; focus of an elite settlement was the chief's house, which opened onto a plaza used for public events

- housing settlements of commoners were usually located near cultivated rivers or grasslands

*food sources and methods of cultivation:

-societies of the Greater Antilles took advantage of the island's rich and diverse natural resources; diets consisted of fish from rivers, lakes and the ocean; water and land fowl; and crabs, lobsters, sea turtles and manatee
-in addition, both the mountain valleys and grasslands were cultivated using slash and burn techniques and crops of starchy root vegetables, cotton and tobacco were grown

*warfare: formal warfare took place over matters such as trespassing on fishing or hunting territory, breaches of marriage agreements between elite families of different groups, etc; successful leaders were successful warriors

*role of the elite:

-directed some agricultural, fishing and hunting activities, especially those connected with public feasts and celebrations; received first fruits during harvest time
-engaged to an unknown extent in long-distance trading
-controlled production and distribution of certain luxury goods, such as salt (southern Puerto Rico) and objects carved from a particular black wood (western Hispaniola)
-possessed decorative items which distinguished them from commoners, such as textiles and ornaments made from placer gold and semi-precious stones
-were associated with sacred world and its powers
-individual chiefs gained and maintained power through success in warfare, polygamy (which connected him through marriage to other elite families), and ownership of a large dugout canoe which allowed sea travel

The Lesser Antilles:

*social organization:

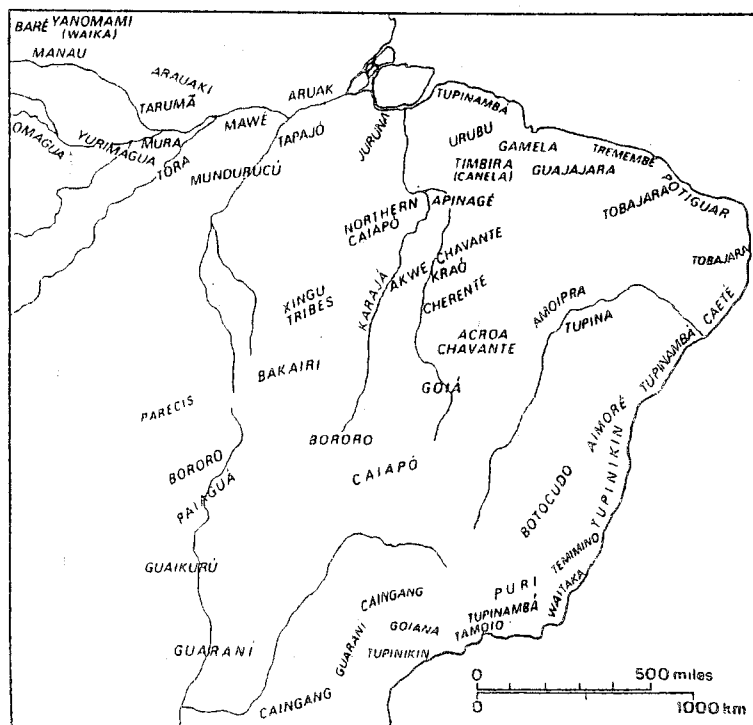
-less complex hierarchical societies with a more egalitarian socio-political organization than in the Greater Antilles; social groupings consisted of 30 to 100 individuals, usually the extended family of the village headman (a "man of importance") living together in a village; the headman practiced polygamy and controlled the labor of his sons-in-law and unmarried sons
-wives of headman lived virilocally, while all others lived matrilocally

*routes to political influence:

-men could gain influence in one of three ways: by directing a large family; by being successful in warfare; or by owning a canoe; the most successful combined more than one of these

*warfare: warriors travelled long-distances in canoes, to other islands of the Lesser Antilles as well as to the South American mainland, to conduct surprise raids in order to acquire booty including captive women who were subsequently incorporated through marriage into the local community

sources: Hemming, John. "The Indians of Brazil in 1500." (pp. 119-46) and Helms, Mary W. "The Indians of the Caribbean and Circum-Caribbean at the end of the fifteenth century." (pp. 37-57) in The Cambridge History of Latin America, Vol. 1: Colonial Latin America. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.



The Indians of the Amazon basin and Brazil, c. 1500