

THE CARIBS OF THE ISLANDS

Even though the Europeans had the metal to make guns and other useful things like machetes, cooking pots and so on, which the Caribs were eager to trade for as they only used precious metals like gold - the Europeans could not better the Carib canoe. For a people living on islands the practical importance of a canoe is obvious, but the Caribs did much more than simply visit among the islands, they also went on long journeys to South America, even reaching and settling near the mouth of the Amazon. They may have also travelled to Florida and the Bahamas but their connections with Venezuela and the Guianas were far stronger.

As a result of the practical importance of canoes for both daily life and connections to South America, it is not surprising that the symbol of the canoe and particularly the relationships of the men who sailed them were among the most important in Carib culture. For example, the crew of a Carib canoe each had designated roles and titles - such as Tiouboutouli Canaoa, or Nhalene, which meant "Captain of a vessel" and "Admiral of a fleet" respectively.

Unfortunately we have few visual records of the design and construction of Carib canoes but they were certainly very much like the large 60 foot canoes that are still made by the Warao and Ye'cuana in Venezuela. It also seems likely that the Caribs, as good practical seafarers, adopted some ideas from European shipping. Perhaps instances of using sails or using planks in the construction of canoes, rather than using a large log to create a dug-out, are a reflection of this borrowing of ideas.

Although the Caribs have at least a 1000 year history in the Caribbean, the arrival of the Europeans in the fifteenth century signalled a period of difficulty and disaster, in which the Caribs nearly disappeared from the islands. But their traditions of cooperation with each other, and the resistance to the outsiders, has meant that they still endure to this day and that their canoes still proudly ply the azure waters of the Caribbean.

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