

THE LAST CACIQUE

by: Will Johnson

Often when working in my yard I have found "thunder stones." I have quite a collection of them.

We used to call them "thunder-stones" when I was a boy. The popular opinion then was that white stones fell from the skies when there was a lightning storm. What we called "thunder-stones" were actually tools made by the Amerindians from the shells of the conch.

In observing these stones and other Amerindian artifacts I have found here in my yard I am reminded of the sad lot of those who first inhabited these islands. The memory of the Kalinago (Caribs) and the Arawaks has long faded.

Here on Saba oral history has been passed down to us in the legend of "Johnny Frau and the Great Injun", the last Cacique on Saba. I have a coral amulet in which a hole was drilled by some Amerindian long long ago. I wear it on a chain around my neck and when people ask I tell them that it belonged to the last Cacique on Saba. How I wish that it was so.

Few on Saba remember or know of the legend of the Great Injun which people in the village of Hell's Gate used to pass on to their children.

Where I live at about two thousand feet above sea-level there is a good view of all the neighbouring islands, as far away as Montserrat. On an exceptionally clear day years ago we even saw for a few hours the hills close to English Harbour on Antigua.

From this spot any enemy canoe could be spotted long before they made landfall. The original inhabitants would have had enough time to either hide, or to make preparations to do battle if the canoe had people coming to our island with bad intentions.

At times I fancy that I hear footsteps in the rustle of the leaves. The spirits of those old warriors of yesteryear are still scanning the far horizon looking and waiting to see if there are any canoes with warriors on their way.

Once when I was off-island a visiting Simmons aunt of mine was offered my house. When I came back I learned that she had moved out after the first night. She said she could not sleep as she was hearing people talking all night under the trees in my back yard. I reassured her that it was only the spirits of the Indians whom I had made contact with in the ghost world and who guarded my house. I had not informed them that I would be off-island. Well that reassured her all right.

On his second voyage in 1493 the fleet of Columbus passed close to Saba. The fleet consisted of 17 vessels and 1500 men. The next landfall after passing Saba was the Salt River on St. Croix. It was there that the native Kalinago took the first recorded stand against the European invader. The ones who observed that fleet from where I now live must have been truly amazed. It would be quite a sight even today. Imagine for people who had never seen a sailing craft before to suddenly see seventeen of these sailing craft passing close to Saba heading West.

Some of the Amerindians to have settled on Saba were the Ciboney whose economy depended on marine resources and on foods gathered and hunted from the land. Evidence of these "Archaic" or pre-ceramic people is strongest in islands such as Antigua, Trinidad and Martinique.

Another indigenous group of Amerindians, who came to the islands, formed a second wave of migration beginning around 500BC. They were the Arawaks of which a branch called the Igneri settled on Saba. Guillaume Coppier a Frenchman from St.Kitts visited Saba in 1629. He first discusses St.Eustatius and then has the following to say about Saba:

" We landed thereafter on the island of Saba, which is also small; there is a very large rock, where very large and palatable lizards are: several sea-turtles come to shore there; their shield is made into finger rings which are enriched with gold and also various costly combs are made of it. A group of "wild people" live there, that are named Igneris; they go with their body completely naked and they have beards, which is different from all Indians, who pull out the hair as soon as it comes. They are idolatrous and they live in cave-like places, living like wild animals."

Our European ancestors used to tell us that on Booby Hill "The Ferrises Cave" and above Palmetto Point (Mary's Point) there lived a small sized Indian people with beards who lived in caves. On the island of Flores in Indonesia there has been much commotion in recent years about a new branch of mankind, now extinct, found there. The "Ferrises" which we were told about seemed remarkably similar to the extinct small race of people on Flores.

The Arawaks were highly skilled navigators, mariners, and pottery makers. These early Caribbean people introduced agriculture into the islands, mainly in the form of Cassava - their staple crop.

From 150 AD and over the next 1200 years they engaged in trading and exchange with other groups in other islands and up and down the Antillean chain, bringing subtle changes to the population structure and its culture.

A final migration from South America brought the Kalinago (called Caribs by the Europeans) into the region around 1450 AD - less than fifty years before the Europeans were to set foot in the Caribbean. The pre-existing Amerindians were overrun by the Kalinago (although much of their culture, language and skills were absorbed and endured in a modified form).

More warlike than their predecessors - or perhaps simply more threatened - the Kalinago vigorously defended their new homeland against any attempt at foreign occupation.

The report of Coppier and the story of "Johnny Frau and the Great Injun", led the University of Leiden, starting in the nineteen seventies, to do research on Saba. This was also done as a follow-up to research done on Saba by Dr. Josselin de Jongh in 1919.

Coincidentally it was also in the nineteen seventies that the Kalinago started returning to Saba. First a few from St.Vincent followed by a number from the Carib reservation in Dominica (Waitukubuli). Some have married into Saban families. One of my young cousins has a Kalinago partner from Salibia. We are already telling their lovely baby son that one day he will become the Carib Chief, like "Indian Warner."

The Europeans changed the face of the Caribbean so much so that if the original inhabitants returned today they would only recognize parts of Dominica.

Among the plants we take for granted today, these are some of the plants introduced into the Caribbean. Sugarcane from India and the Malay peninsula. Also brought in were bamboo, breadfruit, casurinas, coconut palms, citrus, mangoes, tamarind, banana, bougainvillea, hibiscus, oleander, poinsettia, thunburgia, and even Guinea grass.

Research by the University of Leiden, aided by unmentioned locals, have located the old Indian village at Spring Bay. Excavations at Calabash Ridge have indicated that the Kalinago or Ignéri were probably still living here when the first European settlers came to the island. This lends even more credence to the tale of "Johnny Frau and the Great Injun".

Very little is known about their language. Columbus claimed that the language spoken by the Kalinago sounded like Italian. Historians claimed that the women spoke a different language to that of the men. The Kalinago of course captured Arawak women who continued to use their native language among themselves.

After the coming of the Spaniards and other Europeans, the native Amerindians lost ground so rapidly that philologists can find only passing similarities between the language of yesterday and today.

An interesting case in point is Aruba. It is one of the few Caribbean islands whose present inhabitants show strong traces of Amerindian blood.

Until the end of the eighteenth century the inhabitants of Aruba spoke their own patois which was partly rooted in the traditional tongue of the Amerindians who were the sole inhabitants long after European colonization began.

The 19th century explorer A.L. Penart gives a few examples of the old Amerindian Aruban language which became extinct as recently as the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the year 1882 Penart talked with some natives "far advanced in years" who, though they could remember several expressions their fathers and grandfathers used, were no longer able to converse in the language of their ancestors.

Other researchers leave us with some of the words used by the Kalinago which sounded to Columbus like Italian.

<i>English</i>	<i>Kalinago</i>
blood	nitta
hair	neti-koeri
mouth	nieoma
hand	nockaboe
father	baba
woman	liani
love	chisentina
It is I	AO
It is you	Amoro
I am hungry	Lamantina
Mom	Nunu (M) kati (W)
Sea	Barana

Of course hurricanes and hammock are some other words of Amerindian origin. On Saba we call the avocado a "Sabocau" the same as in Trinidad where there were also Ignéri living.

We also know the name of a Kalinago Indian Princess who was in the service of the Governor of Antigua. Her name was Zulmeira.

In another article I will give some details on the Amerindian language of Aruba in former times. I will suffice with one untranslatable formula for removing fish-bones from the throat:

"Vidie pahidie, maranako tubara tehira deburro hadara karara. These were probably good West Indian cusswords directed at Madame Squaw as to how to get that so and so bone out of the chiefs throat.

I want to conclude this article with the story of Johnny Frau and the Great Injun as recorded by the late Richard Austin Johnson who grew up on Hell's Gate hearing this story from his ancestors.

"The early settlers on Saba, in their search for fresh water, discovered a spring on a rocky beach on the East end of the island. Because of this spring the bay became known as Spring Bay.

In order to have drinking water, the settlers would have to bring it on their heads in wooden tubs and kegs, uphill to their village, located about two miles away and fourteen hundred feet above the sea level. Near the Spring there also lived Carib Indians in makeshift huts and caves. The white settlers often had to go without water, because of fear of these fierce Indians, especially one, known as the Great Injun because of his huge size. One of the settlers named Johnny Frau, decided that they had taken enough from this Indian, and also being a giant in size, he went alone, carrying his water keg, in order to entice the Indian to fight with him.

Sure enough the Indian saw him coming down the hill, and thinking this was a fine chance to kill the white man, he hid himself on a ridge which later became known as Fair Play Ridge, and attacked Johnny Frau with a club. A fearful struggle ensued. They fought and battered each other until eventually they reached the sea at Spring Bay. Entering the sea they continued fighting until overcome with exhaustion and loss of blood, both of them drowned. The body of the Great Injun was never found, but Johnny Frau's body was cast up into a pond near the airport, and this spot is known as Johnny Frau's Pond to this day.

For many years afterward the superstitious settlers at Hell's Gate declared that on the night of the anniversary of the discovery of his body, a tiny blue light could be seen moving along the sea edge near the pond. This, they explained was the ghost of Johnny Frau, still searching for the Great Injun.

Some years ago some local fishermen were scared out of their wits when they were fishing along the rocks at night and they saw a light passing along the cliffs. They were convinced it was a UFO until I told them the story of Johnny Frau and the Great Injun.

The Great Injun or the last Cacique would be proud to see that once again there are some Kalinago people, living, working and producing offspring on Amonhana the Kalinago name for Saba. But like Cuba and Aruba, Saba is also said to be of Arawak origin meaning "The Rock." When I was in government I had a flexible policy toward the Kalinago people and told my colleagues in Government to remember that these were the original people of these islands and they should be made to feel welcome as this was once THEIR home.