

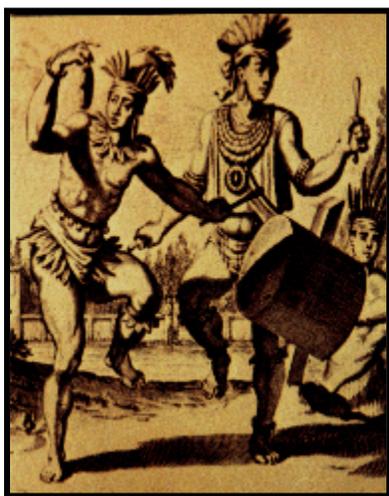
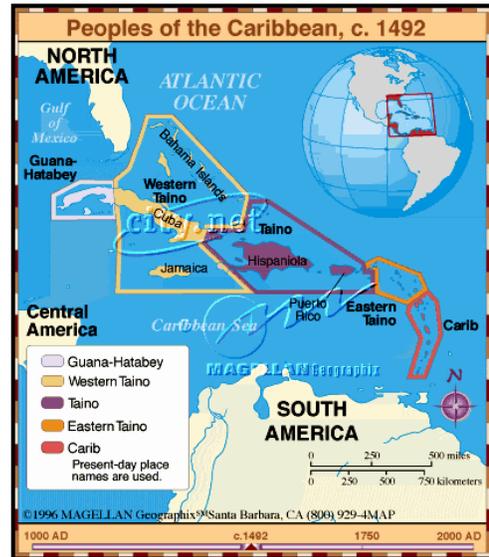
Information Sheet No. 2

The Arawak Indians

The term Arawak is a general term representing the group of Indians who ranged from Venezuela through the Caribbean, Central America and Florida. Arawak Indians are also known as the Taino. The culture of the Arawaks was highly organized. Within each tribe, there was a leader called a cacique. It was a matrilineal society and they practiced polygamy. Many men had 2 or 3 wives, but caciques could have as many as 30. The Arawaks were a polytheistic society and had gods called zemi. In their religious views there was an afterlife where they would be able to see their relatives and friends again.

The Arawak lived circular buildings with poles to provide the primary support system. The buildings were then covered with straw and palm leaves woven together. The houses would be centered around a flat court in the center of the village. The courts would be used for games and various festivals that were held.

The primary crop of the Arawak was called cassava. It is a root crop that poisonous juice could be squeezed from. They also grew corn, squash, beans, sweet potatoes and peanuts. Conch was another major food source for the Arawaks. The conch shell was also used as a tool, musical horns and as figures in religious ceremonies. Conch were thought to have been used to create the large canoes which the Arawak would travel around in. The canoes were five feet in width and could be as long as 70 feet. As a tool the conch was used to scrape, scoop and hammer. It was also used as an eating dish. Along with a functional use, the conch was also used as ornamentation. Bracelets, amulets, buttons, and hairpins were created from the shell.



In 1492, when Columbus first landed, there were approximately 300,000-400,000 Arawaks located throughout the Caribbean. As the Spanish colonized the area, the Arawaks were subjected to European diseases, and were forced into slavery by the Spanish. By 1531 the number of Arawaks in the Caribbean were as low as 600.

Also contributing to the demise of the Arawaks were another Indian tribe called the Caribs. The Caribs were cannibals and would take male and female prisoners when they would go on raids. It is also noted that when a boy was about to become a warrior that the Caribs would rub the blood of an Arawak warrior on them in hopes that the courage and bravery of the Arawak would be transferred to the Carib boy.