Exoticism, Exchange, and Early Indigenous-Colonial Relations in the 15th to 16th Century Caribbean

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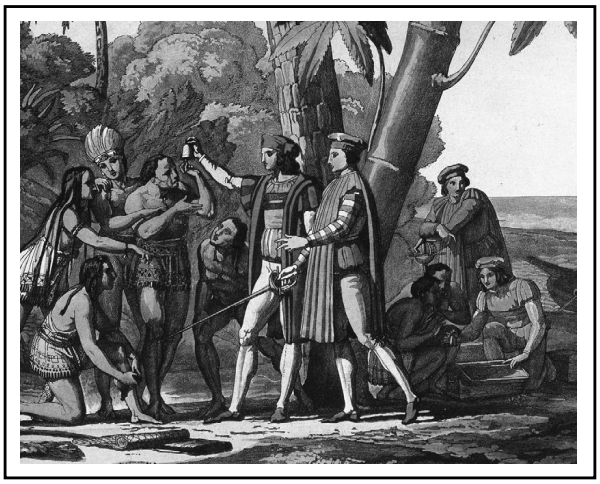
ABSTRACT



The initial interactions between Indigenous groups and European colonists across the Caribbean were largely shaped by pre-existing sociocultural conditions. The central importance of exchange for social construction and the concomitantly high value placed upon foreign material was common to many Native societies. This played in contrast to European understandings of exchange, which was far more focused on economic gain and competitive bargaining. The role assigned to exchange and the foreign in Indigenous and European societies guided their perceptions of each other and respective goals in interaction. Native systems were well entrenched throughout the regional networks of trade and culture in the Caribbean, and so colonists entered into a world fundamentally defined by such systems. European imperial views permitted them to exploit these systems, twisting Indigenous exaltation of intercultural trade into a tool for attempted oppression, subversion, and assimilation. Nevertheless, colonists were unable to undermine core structures, even if they appropriated them for the creation of new hierarchies and dehumanization of Natives. These structures prevailed even as colonization grew more pervasive and degenerative.

BIO

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Introduction

From the first point of contact between the desperate Spaniards and bemused Caribbean Natives on the shores of San Salvador to the expansive settlement projects of subsequent years, material exchange defined Indigenous-colonial relations in the Caribbean. The origins of their intercultural dynamics in the late 15th and early 16th century, however, took form long before Spanish adventurers ever stepped foot in the Americas. These relations were shaped by the high value accorded to and desire for foreign goods in Indigenous Caribbean societies, henceforth entitled 'exoticism'. Relations were further developed through complex processes of economic and political interaction. Here, 'goods' refer to both the material and immaterial, objects and knowledge. While it is essential to avoid generalization about the indescribably diverse peoples that populated the precolonial Caribbean, these systems of interaction and exchange extended from Hispaniola to the Orinoco basin and were widely affecting. In concordance with the desirability of the exotic, they produced remarkably similar precolonial cultural values among various Indigenous groups and typically imbalanced Indigenous-colonial relationships. I argue that exoticism dictated initial relations between the Spaniards and Caribbean Natives, and accelerated colonial material exploitation and political domination. This is visible through the impact of differentiated perceptions of trade, the hierarchizing character of exchange, and alterations to Indigenous cultural practices. Thus, as physical processes of colonization began, the roots of hegemony had already been deeply implanted.

Exchange and the Foreign in Indigenous Value Systems

To adequately examine the nature of Indigenous-colonial associations, their foundation in Indigenous sociocultural and economic systems must be clarified, and the associated value accorded to the foreign. From the first waves of Caribbean migration that expanded upwards from South America around 5000 BCE onwards, vast transregional trading networks began to be established.[1] A diversity of goods, from lapidary ornaments to knowledge systems, were exchanged between innumerable and often distant groups.[2] Intercommunal interaction was frequent and ongoing, and embedded itself in the fabric of nearly all Caribbean polities.[3] Simultaneously, foreign goods gained prestigious value, becoming indicative of authority throughout the Caribbean and lending its holders sociopolitical preeminence.[4] It is unclear whether the economic centrality of exchange endowed foreign objects with value, or whether a preexisting affinity for the foreign among early societies promoted high mobility and the expansion of trade.

1 Antonio L. Curet, "The Earliest Settlers," i*n The Caribbean: A History of the Region and its Peoples, ed. Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 56-65.

2 Corinne L. Hofman et al., "Island Rhythms: The Web of Social Relationships and Interaction Networks in the Lesser Antillean Archipelago between 400 B.C. and A.D. 1492," *Latin American Antiquity* 18, no. 3 (September 2007): 250-259, https://doi.org/10.2307/25478180.

3 Corinne L. Hofman et al., "Stages of Encounters: Migration, Mobility and Interaction in the Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Caribbean," *World Archaeology* 46, no. 4 (August 2014): 595-596, doi:10.1080/00438243.2014.925820.

4 Floris W.M. Keehnen, Corinne L. Hofman, and Andrzej T. Antczak, "Material Encounters and Indigenous Transformations in the Early Colonial Americas," in *Material Encounters and Transformations in the Early Colonial Americas: Archaeological Case Studies,* ed. Corinne L. Hofman and Floris W.M. Keehnen, (Boston: Brill, 2019), 3-5.

Regardless, this exoticism and exchange became inseparable, and likely caused reciprocal amplification. Due to the far reaches of interactive trade, exoticism can then only be understood as pan-Caribbean, rather
than a limited regional phenomenon.

Those that controlled the flow of foreign goods became powerful regional actors, and often *caciques*.[5] Alien jewelry, tools, and esoteric forms of knowledge in the way of information or cultural practices such as dance and folklore could bestow esteem.[6] Political hierarchies were structured through the trade of these goods. Consequently, a community's foreign items were overwhelmingly stored within elite residences.[7] The association of some of these goods with religious symbolism also granted these leaders an air of spiritual authority alongside their temporal one.[8] However, these power structures were not immutable or inflexible. To preserve their alterity and associated renown, goods were persistently exchanged and widely dispersed, thereby creating new elites and displacing old ones.[9]

The intersection of exoticism and trade extended to social organization, with intercommunal ties and resolution of disputes being facilitated through exchange. This entailed material interdependence, as well as integrative social processes such as matrilineal marriage, adoption, large ceremonies, and frequent travel.[10] Even warfare served these ends, by plundering and subsequently adopting alien objects and prisoners of war into conquering societies. All these practices constituted social incorporation, with symbolic articles and people from foreign cultures being absorbed. Incorporation strengthened a community's culture through expansion of practice and identity, but also reinforced exoticism, interdependent communion, and exchange on which the culture was based. This was evidenced in the physical structure of precolonial communities, with a common feature of villages being pavilions designated as welcoming and trading spaces for passing travellers. Although all Caribbean societies possessed idiosyncratic practices, they were seemingly connected, from South America to the Greater Antilles by this

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[5] Annie Cody, "Distribution of Exotic Stone Artifacts Through the Lesser Antilles: Their Implications for Prehistoric Interaction and Exchange," *Proceedings of the International Congress for Caribbean Archaeology* 14 (Bridgetown, 1991): 209-210.

[6] Michael Heckenberger, The Ecology of Power: Culture, Place and Personhood in the Southern Amazon, AD 1000-2000 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 61.

[7] Floris W.M. Keehnen, "Treating 'Trifles': The Indigenous Adoption of European Material Goods in Early Colonial Hispaniola," in Material Encounters and Transformations in the Early Colonial Americas: Archaeological Case Studies, ed. Corinne L. Hofman and Floris W.M. Keehnen (Boston: Brill, 2019), 67-68.

[8] Hofman et al., "Island Rhythms," 258-259.

[9] Heckenberger, The Ecology of Power, 64

[10] Franz Scaramelli and Kay Tarble de Scaramelli, "The Roles of Material Culture in the Colonization of the Orinoco, Venezuela," Journal of Social Archaeology 5, no. 1 (February 2005): 154-155, https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1177/1469605305050152.

[11] Nelly Arvelo-Jiménez and Horacio Biord, "The Impact of Conquest on Contemporary Indigenous Peoples of the Guiana Shield," in Amazon Indians from Prehistory to the Present: Anthropological Perspectives, ed. Anna Roosevelt (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 57-58.

[12] Heckenberger, The Ecology of Power, 57.

[13] William F. Keegan and Corinne L. Hofman, The Caribbean before Columbus (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 109.

definitive sociocultural foundation. Therefore, trade and exoticism not only ensured physical survival through commodities, but social survival through maintenance of friendly relations and cultural preservation.

Contrary Perceptions of Trade

The importance of exotic goods in Caribbean Indigenous societies was central to the divergence of their perceptions of exchange from Spanish colonial viewpoints. Indigenousgroups largely entered trade relationships in pursuit not only of physical sustenance, but social enhancement, through incorporation of foreign articles. [14] The Europeans, however, regarded trade in a purely economic manner, with each side trying to maximize their gains while incurring minimal costs.[15]Crucially, Indigenous uses of slavery tended to be exogenous—through abduction in warfare—and were directed towards humane societal assimilation of foreigners.[16]Early forms of Spanish enslavement or indentured labour, such as the encomienda system, prioritized exploitation of labour for peak efficiency and production.[17]

This difference was ground in principles of communion versus competition. Spaniards continually sought to identify the most worthless items within their own value systems that could be exchanged with Natives in an attempt to exploit Indigenous openness to multifarious objects of trade![18] This effort failed to realize that Indigenous systems fundamentally differed in perception of value, caring little for the functions Europeans had ascribed to objects in favour of the objects' ability to be socially incorporated. Thus, their varying perspectives inculcated imperial notions of inherent Native primitivity in their failure to understand value as it was defined by Europeans.

These demeaning conceptions became particularly acute in the eagerness with which Indigenous peoples accepted gaudy and cheap 'trinkets' of Europeans such as coloured beads or metal pieces.[19]Entire regions were ostensibly purchased with such objects, with Europeans exploiting the Indigenous perception of trade as socially constructed rather than competitive. Rather than primitivity, the appeal of these glass and metal objects derived from Indigenous belief that they could be effectively incorporated.[20]

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[14] Scaramelli and Scaramelli, "The Roles of Material Culture," 150-153.

[15] Mary Jane Berman and Perry L. Gnivecki, "Colonial Encounters in Lucayan Contexts," in Material Encounters and Transformations in the Early Colonial Americas: Archaeological Case Studies, ed. Corinne L. Hofman and Floris W.M. Keehnen (Boston: Brill, 2019), 43-45.

[16] Fernando Santos-Granero, Vital Enemies: Slavery, Predation, and the Amerindian Political Economy of Life (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 47.

[17] Lynne A. Guitar, "Negotiations of Conquest," in The Caribbean: A History of the Region and its Peoples, ed. Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 120-123.

[18] Roberto Valcárcel Rojas, "European Material Culture in Indigenous Sites in Northeastern Cuba," in Material Encounters and Transformations in the Early Colonial Americas: Archaeological Case Studies, ed. Corinne L. Hofman and Floris W.M. Keehnen (Boston: Brill, 2019), 102-103.

[19] Christopher Miller and George Hamell, "A New Perspective on Indian-White Contact: Cultural Symbols and Colonial Trade," The Journal of American History 73, no. 2 (1986): 312-313, https://doi.org/10.2307/1908224.

[20] Ibid., 315-318.

This was often because they resembled Indigenous constructions and symbology but were nevertheless foreign products.[21] These objects were often repurposed for alternate uses, such as implementation into Indigenous tools, fineries, or ritualistic items.[22] This tendency spawned colonial arguments for their evolutionary failure and consequent inability to comprehend complex European practices. This included the refusal to consume rather than adopt domesticated animals as incorporated creatures. [23]

Foreign Goods in Indigenous-European Interaction

The desirability of foreign goods itself was misconstrued by the Europeans as a desire for specifically European goods. In the colonial view, the interdependent exchange encouraged by exoticism was merely a form of dependence, which colonists had adopted upon initiating trade.[24] Strong Indigenous desire for their goods and knowledge was seen as an implicit admission of European superiority, even though many Indigenous groups typically regarding all foreign goods as desirable for their sociocultural purposes. Ornamental stone artifacts from South America, for example, were considered highly valuable among the elites of the Greater Antilles.[25] Both Indigenous groups and colonists therefore viewed possession of European objects and knowledge among Natives as status symbols, but for far different reasons. Indigenous peoples granted this prestige on account of an individual's apparent access to trade and foreign goods, providing them with power and the means to expand their community's social structures. The Spaniards, however, perceived this possession as the mark of an ennobled savage, with close connections to the colonial elite and ability to recognize the depravity of Indigenous culture.[26] Kalinago warfare against the Spanish, an Indigenous opportunity for foreign incorporation by capturing prisoners and looting, was also used by Spaniards to demonize the Kalinago as atavistic monsters.[27]

These notions elevated evolutionary rhetoric against Indigenous peoples, by contending that even they were cognizant of their own inferiority. This cultivated the seeds of Eurocentric acculturation theory, which held that the triumph of European over Indigenous culture was inevitable and inseparable from modernization.[28] This perception of exoticism reflected Spanish goals in trade. While many Natives believed that European exchange could augment socialization and communion, the Spaniards sought to 'civilize' and assimilate Indigenous

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21 Hofman et al., "Island Rhythms," 259-260.
22 Keehnen, "Treating 'Trifles'," 65-67.
23 Virginia DeJohn Anderson, Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 33.
24 Scaramelli and Scaramelli, "The Roles of Material Culture," 158.
25 Cody, "Distribution of Exotic Stone Artifacts," 209-210.
26 Keehnen, "Treating 'Trifles'," 74-75.
27 Miller and Hamell, "A New Perspective," 312.
28 Keehnen, Hofman, and Antczak, "Material Encounters," 5.
29 Miller and Hamell, "A New Perspective," 312.
30 Keehnen, "Treating 'Trifles'," 74-75.

peoples through trade. Hence, colonists characterized Indigenous adoption of these goods as an attempt to liberate themselves from innately primitive cultures and accept Spanish dominion.[29] The giving of Spanish clothing to Natives, a prestigious foreign item in the Indigenous view, was especially regarded as a transformative method of civilization due to its tangible alteration.[30] These distinct perceptions of Indigenous exoticism and trade permitted ideological subordination of Natives and self-glorification by Spaniards, thereby justifying cultural colonization.

Hierarchy in Exchange

The ideological institution of natural Indigenous inferiority in initial Spanish interactions was followed by the extension of this effort to political hierarchies. Political organization in the precolonial Caribbean was often determined by the exotic and trade, with one's access according them with significant prestige. Regional powerbrokers amassed foreign goods and knowledge in order to assert their status in ostentatious public displays, while power continually changed hands through the high mobility of goods, partly to preserve their exotic quality.[31] Despite significant material exchange between Natives and Spanish colonists, European goods were sparse across Indigenous communities.[32] This was largely because most were located in elites' physical residences, a trend displayed in the households of many caciques such as Guacanagarí.[33] The ownership of foreign goods granted elites an authority over specific areas that was often non-hereditary and ultimately transient.[34]

Spanish colonists shattered this complex political system, by exploiting the widely enshrined principle of exoticism. The prevalence of identifiable regional leaders within the economic supply chain simplified colonial appropriation of power and goods, through assassination or coercion.[35] This permitted them to wrest command over Indigenous trade networks and monopolize its foreign goods, both their own and others, in order to institute themselves as high-ranking authorities.[36] Indigenous trade networks based in exoticism thus unwillingly facilitated imperial hegemony. While some Indigenous leaders gained prominence by controlling exchange of European manufactured goods, many were subordinated to Spanish rule.[37] Additionally, Spaniards imposed dependency relationships upon Indigenous polities by controlling access to foreign goods and resources, especially addictive ones such as alcohol.[38] Dependency was deepened by the introduction of differential exchange and debt

31 Neil Lancelot Whitehead, "The Ancient Amerindian Polities of the Amazon, the Orinoco, and the Atlantic Coast," in Amazon Indians from Prehistory to the Present: Anthropological Perspectives, ed. Anna Roosevelt, 33-53 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 39.
32 Rojas, "European Material Culture," 109.
33 Keehnen, "Treating 'Trifles'," 67-68.
34 Heckenberger, The Ecology of Power, 130.
35 Scaramelli and Scaramelli, "The Roles of Material Culture," 139-141.
36 Ibid., 149-151.
37 Whitehead, "The Ancient Amerindian Polities," 41.
38 Scaramelli and Scaramelli, "The Roles of Material Culture," 148-150.
39 Arvelo-Jiménez and Biord, "The Impact of Conquest," 71-72.

mechanisms, thereby intensifying the costs of adopting foreign goods while heightening their appeal.[39]

The impermanence of power was broken by this new order, with colonists maintaining their authority by stagnating the formerly rapid flow of intercommunal trade and exclusively holding its exotic products. Beyond regional dominance, colonists exercised exoticism to deepen local political influence, primarily through intercultural marriage. Many Spanish settlers married elite Indigenous women in order to assume preeminent positions within various Indigenous communities and legitimize land acquisition, through matrilineal policies.[40] While the indigenous population initially embraced these occurrences for the purpose of foreign integration and social expansion, colonists employed it to acquire localized power over Indigenous groups.[41] These marriages were even endorsed by the Spanish Crown, in order to educate Natives in supposedly civilizing Spanish traditions.[42] The significant role of exoticism in precolonial political organization ultimately benefited the arriving colonists of the late 15th century, providing a path towards pervasive methods of political and economic rule and Indigenous subjugation.

Cultural Transformation and Meaning

The value of the exotic as it related to Indigenous-Spanish interaction profoundly affected the character and customs of Indigenous culture. The mass influx of foreign goods expanded the range of social and economic practices, and rejuvenated preexisting traditions in exoticism, trade, and incorporation. However, it did so at the cost of validating Spanish claims to superiority and homogenizing foreign influences in native societies, with the Spaniards monopolizing the exotic through their grip on trade networks.[43] At first, Indigenous peoples usually perceived this influence as a form of "cultural enhancement", a view shared by the Spaniards, but was credited instead to racist theories of acculturation and social Darwinism.[44] This became more pointed as Indigenous societies, despite modifying many goods, began to display markers of European influence. This included infrastructural, agricultural, linguistic, culinary, fashion, and manufacturing practices.[45]

Much of this cultural alteration resulting from implementation of the exotic signified a process of creolization between diverse native groups and the Spaniards. The emergent mixed-race peoples were simultaneously exhibited as

40 Kathleen Deagan, "Colonial Origins and Colonial Transformations in Spanish America," Historical Archaeology 37, no. 4 (2003): 6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25617091.
41 Heckenberger, The Ecology of Power, 57.
42 Deagan, "Colonial Origins," 8.
43 Kathleen Deagan, "Colonial Transformation: Euro-American Cultural Genesis in the Early Spanish-American Colonies," Journal of Anthropological Research 52, no. 2 (1996): 150-151, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3630198.
44 Scaramelli and Scaramelli, "The Roles of Material Culture," 136-153.
45 Keehnen, "Treating 'Trifles'," 65-75.
46 Fernando Ortiz, Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar, trans. Harriet de Onís (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 98-103.

the beginnings of inexorable acculturation processes and deplored for the tainting of Indigenous ancestry.[46] These claims were buttressed by Spanish portrayal of Indigenous goods and culture as detrimental to Natives themselves, positing that trade items such as chocolate and tobacco were corrupting forces, despite using them themselves.[47] Spaniards argued that their goods were far superior, as evidenced in rapid Indigenous incorporation of specific items such as European domestic animals and tools.[48] This imperial campaign built on Indigenous affinity for foreign goods in order to perpetuate unidirectional reliance, economic exploitation, and political command. Thus, exoticism and incorporation of European elements into Indigenous culture were encouraged by the Spanish Crown and settlers, giving rise to new ethnic groups and irreversibly altering Indigenous culture. Although this served some Indigenous cultural objectives, it bore the cost of greatly advancing colonial ones.

Conclusion

The legacies of Spanish settlement in the Caribbean remain devastating to this day, having inflicted countless horrors on Indigenous peoples and placing them at the whims of colonial jurisdiction. Repression was not solely directed by Spanish practices, but inadvertently by Indigenous values in exoticism and exchange. In the early years of the colonization project, from the 15th to 16th century, Spaniards exploited this tradition to institute their authority and degrade Indigenous sovereignty and culture. The impact of exoticism is visible in the two groups' differing perceptions of trade, placement of political elitism in exchange, and Indigenous cultural transformations. The results of these dynamics have remained in place for many generations after Spanish invasion.

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47 Marcy Norton, Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 58-60.

48 Alfred W. Crosby, The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 78-79.

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