

# Traditional Indigenous Styles and Ways of Communication and the Implications for Modern Technology: The Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles

## A. Introduction

The Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles constitute approximately 20 million; inclusive of the Diaspora; inhabiting 71 Islands and 22 Diaspora States.

A combination of complex migrating Indigenous Peoples; from South America, Central America and North America coming from diverse backgrounds, having over the past, employed traditionally modes of communication for the purpose of linking Indigenous peoples' communities within and throughout the over 71 Inhabited Islands.

Linking Island territories separated by the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea required communication through sea travel by dugout canoes. Departing during the first quarter of the year (before the commencement of the hurricane season in July, and returning to the points of departure during the month of December.

Having to deal with the constant traffic of Indigenous Peoples throughout the Caribbean Antilles, the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles created new languages. The most recent, being the Kweyol language, being the predominant indigenous language of the Caribbean Antilles. (Approximately 10 million speakers). The Kweyol language dominates the cultures of the following Caribbean Antillean territories: Haiti, Guadeloupe and Dependencies; Dominica; Martinique and Saint Lucia.

The Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles have employed the following mode of communication:

- (1) Blowing of the conch shell
- (2) Signaling with the (Flanbo) lighted torch;
- (3) Use of Signal Stations (from top of mountains, strategically located);
- (4) Oral traditions/community activities; and
- (5) Courier service.

The blowing of the Conch Shell (a shell of the conch shell fish) is employed now-a-days by fisherpersons to signal their arrival at port. Signaling with the Flanbo (lighted torch) was employed in warfare and peace-time between two Islands. It was frequently employed by the **Bethechilokono** of Saint Lucia to make contact between Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and Saint Lucia and Martinique, during the 1795-1797 liberation struggles. The Signal Stations atop the mountains were used during warfare.

The Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles were structured communities residing on the coast lines of the Islands and accessible to visiting relatives from within or from other Islands. A typical community consisted of a Cabet (a large house) and smaller dwelling houses (adjoupas) surrounding the Cabet. The Cabet was occupied by approximately 250 single males, while the family heads, females and juveniles resided in the single adjoupas unites. The approximate population of an Indigenous Peoples' community was 500 persons.

The communities were headed by Leaders. For the most, females headed the communities of Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles. A practice which continues in Puerto Rico, Saint Lucia and Trinidad & Tobago.

Oral traditions served as the medium of transmission of valuable traditional knowledge from generation to generation. It was and is of cultural significance to the continuance of the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles. Oral traditions of the Indigenous Peoples only allow for dissemination under a traditionally controlled environment within individual communities. Individuals from surrounding communities could only attend by invitation.

The canoe travel evolved into schooner travel (larger boats plying the territorial waters of the Caribbean Antilles). Schooners are less used, as Air travel has become the main means of physical contact among the territories.

Letter writing is also important mode of communication for the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles.

During the early 1950s, most of the territories had telephone land lines within the Capitals and larger towns. Phones were used by the State apparatus; large businesses and the well-to-do. Villages where most Indigenous People resided, were served by a Telephone Exchange Operator, who placed the calls on demand. The Telephone Exchange Operator would then employ a Courier to communicate the message to the intended person. Secrecy was not the order of the day. There was much openness and trust. The business of the community took precedent over the individual.

The early 1960s saw the introduction of national Radio Stations (owned and operated by the Governments) and linked to a Zonal Broadcasting entities. For example, The Leeward Islands Broadcasting Service, comprising of national Radio Stations from the Leeward Islands and the Windward Islands Broadcasting comprising of national Radio Stations from the Windward Islands. National Radio Stations became independent entities in the early 1970's.

By the early 1970's, most Caribbean Antillean territories had national Television Stations serving the Capitals; and broadcasting in the evening (local news and soaps). This has since evolved into Satellite down-streaming and up-streaming Television Stations in the Caribbean Antilles.

At the beginning of the early 1970's the telephone infrastructure was expanded to accommodate most households. Infra-structural expansion continues as I speak. As a consequence thereof, Internet facilities have become more available but not accessible to the majority of the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles.

The average cost of a Telephone call from Saint Lucia to most Caribbean Antillean territories = US\$0.20 per minute. Saint Lucia to the USA or UK =US \$0.35 per minute.

Cost of Internet = US \$0.75 per hour plus US\$0.40 per connection.

It can be deduced that Internet communication is cheaper (whether audio or written formats 1.25US cents per minute) as compared US \$0.35 per minute for telephone.

With the advent of Community Radio Stations in mid 1980, most Caribbean Antillean territories came on-board. Community Radio facilitated live inter-active broadcasts from communities through telephone lines to Master Control for national and regional audiences. The linking of Community Radio Stations within States and by State to State or State through States was the norm during the 1990's.

During the latter part of 1990's, Satellite up-streaming and down-streaming became the norm for National Radio in the Caribbean Antilles.

## Connecting the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles

### Issues

#### Language

The Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles whom are spread throughout 71 Inhabited Islands and 22 Diaspora States, speak at least seven languages; Kweyol, Taino and Papiamentu (indigenous languages); Spanish, English, French and Dutch. Kweyol being the most dynamic indigenous language and culturally acceptable; should be utilized to its fullest extent. Yet there exist a fundamental problem.

While Kweyol is used to transmit information on Radio and Television to the general populations, very few Kweyol speakers can either write or read Kweyol. The development of strategies to employ Kweyol as a medium for the Internet deserves urgent consideration.

### Community Radio and Television

While Community Radio and Television are effective methods of communicating information to the Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples, there are a number of problems needing urgent attention; among them, being:

- (1) In most States where Indigenous Peoples Community Radio and Television Stations exist or existed, the operators have experienced many teething problems associated with the acquisition of Broadcast Licenses and operational cost. Broadcast Licenses are not easy to come by, as the Governments usually set the bar extremely high, making it difficult to attain. Fees are normally set high (US\$3,500.00) per year, which discourages the establishment of such mediums.
- (2) Governments are normally suspect of independent Indigenous Peoples Community Broadcasting Stations that broadcast in the indigenous languages. From 1995, many Indigenous Peoples Community Broadcasting Stations have been forcibly closed by unpopular Governments.
- (3) Since Indigenous Peoples Community Radio Stations are not allowed to broadcast advertisements to earn revenue, such outfits hardly last, due to financial problems.

### Electronic and non-Internet

Given the above, the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles are better served by the employment of multiple electronic and non-Internet communication facilities. The following describes the proposed Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples Communication Mechanism.

## **B. The Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples Communication Mechanism**

Acknowledging that: \*

- (a). Indigenous Peoples are some of the least connected people technology-wise in society;
- (b). The Information Society is critical to the economic and social development of Indigenous Peoples;
- (c). A special effort is required for governments, Indigenous Peoples, private sector and international organizations to work together to raise awareness among policymakers and indigenous interest-holders regarding the benefits of and barriers to the Information Society; and
- (d). Local capacity building and development is crucial to the adoption of these new technologies within the Indigenous Peoples' communities.

**The Goal is to develop a regional representative forum of indigenous connectivity interest-holders and partners within and without the Caribbean Antilles. \*\***

**The Objectives are to:**

- (a). Increase awareness, share best practices and identify particular indigenous barriers and challenges to the information society; and

- (b). Identify key challenges, solutions and priorities to overcome the digital divide among the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles and the Diaspora.

\* \*\* Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; Information Note on the Global Forum on Indigenous Peoples and the Information Society; 01 October 2003.

## **Identification of the Roles and Responsibility of the Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples Communication Mechanism**

### **I. Objective**

1. Facilitate, support and promote the exchange and dissemination of relevant information, through the establishment of links with networks and other existing information mechanisms, particularly to support initiatives related to the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles.
2. Promote the respect, preservation and maintenance of knowledge, innovations and practices of the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles in the development of the network.

### **II. Characteristics**

1. Support initiatives of the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles in the use of communication technologies adapted to their needs, depending on available resources.
2. Facilitate the communication among the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles and, other relevant organizations.
3. Facilitate access by the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles to scientific and technical information and of information on the preservation and maintenance of traditional knowledge innovations and practices.

### **III. Functions**

1. To assist the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles to access information.
2. To facilitate communication through various mechanisms, including traditional and electronic mechanisms to be used at the international, regional and national levels.
3. To establish mechanisms, through the use of, inter alia, electronic mail lists and newsgroups, to discuss and assist in the distribution of such technologies for use by Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles.
4. Collaborate with, and if necessary establish, communication mechanisms such as thematic Internet mail lists and newsgroups.

### **IV. Elements for a work programme**

#### **First step**

1. The Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples Communication Mechanism will aid the orderly movement of information and expedite communication at all levels:
  - (a) Evaluate conditions, needs and priorities of the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles to information access and the establishment of a network;
  - (b) Provide links to guidance on the creation of a distributed, interoperable network;

- (c) Create links with identified networks; and

**Permanent activities**

1. Promote the development of a regional Master Control and national links, subject to available resources.
2. Promote the use of common traditional formats, protocols and standards.
3. Integrate traditional and new information technologies.

**Expected results and capacity-building**

1. Build capacity among the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles to understand and participate in the emerging Information Communication Technologies.
2. Identify assessment processes to evaluate the effectiveness of the Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples Communication Mechanism and prepare periodic reviews.

**Development and Establishment of the Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples Communication Mechanisms**

**I. Mechanism**

**Electronic mechanism**

The Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples Communication Mechanism shall develop partnerships with key national and regional organizations based electronic networks and use these networks to facilitate the exchange of information among participating territories of the Communication Mechanism. The Communication Mechanism will promote the development of an information portal for dissemination of information on a regional scale, through:

- (a) Electronic forums;
- (b) Internet chat;
- (c) Internet voice;
- (d) Web cam;
- (e) Video-conferencing.

**Electronic non-Internet**

Recognizing that the Internet is a useful mechanism to disseminate information, many regions have inequitable access to new information technologies, primarily those technologies that are Internet-based. The following modes of communication shall also be employed to disseminate information to the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles. Local radio/television stations as a potential tool for communication with the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles:

- (a) Radio;
- (b) Television;
- (c) Fax;
- (d) Telephone;

- (e) Electronic newsletter;
- (f) CD-ROM;
- (g) Teleconferencing;
- (h) Video/digital cassettes;
- (i) Letter video.

**Traditional**

Traditional communication tools do have tremendous potential for use by the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles, to disseminate information available in other networks at the level:

- (a) Oral;
- (b) Meetings;
- (c) Print;
- (d) Folk media;
- (e) Graphic arts; and
- (f) Folklore.

**II. Development of the Communication Mechanism**

The Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples Communication Mechanism shall do, but not limited to the following:

1. Foster sustainability through mutual support and exchange of expertise, and promote capacity-building activities.
2. Promote fast-bandwidth use among participating territories and adopt appropriate technologies to areas with inequitable access to technologies.
3. Accommodate multi-language use.
4. Provide awareness for:
  - (a) E-Health and E-Education (high tech health education delivery);
  - (b) Indigenous Peoples Histories on line;
  - (c) The adaptation and amalgamation of traditional Indigenous Peoples' styles and ways of communication with emerging information technologies;
  - (d) Issues of traditional knowledge and intellectual property protection and the internet;
  - (e) Indigenous Peoples' culture and digital cultural development;
  - (f) On-line trading; and
  - (g) Territorial management and modern technologies.

**About the Author**

Professions

Anthropologist, Communications Consultant, Cultural Administrator, Human Rights Defender/Reporter and Socio-linguist.

Academic Qualifications

Masters Degree and Post-graduate Doctorate Degree; Universite des Antilles et de la Guyane, Schoelcher Campus, Martinique [1994 and 1996].

Certificate in Human Rights Reporting; United Nations Staff College and the International Training Centre/ILO [1999].

Certificate of Recognition in International Human Rights Law; Indiana University School of Law at Indianapolis, USA [2001]

Experience

Researcher in the Cultures, Geography and History of the Americas; since 1988.

Member of several International Research Institutions.

Chairperson of THE ALDET CENTRE-SAINT LUCIA; 1990 to the present.

Communications Consultant on the Kweyol Culture (Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples); 1990 to the present.

Expert on Indigenous Peoples Issues; 2000 to the present.

Chairperson of the International Centre for Multiracial and Multicultural Studies and Policy Development; 2002 to the present.

Consultant to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; Government of Saint Lucia, National Biological Diversity Project Traditional Knowledge; 2002 to the present.

Chairperson of the Caribbean Antilles Indigenous Peoples Caucus from May 2003.

Facilitator of the First Indigenous People [Bethéchilokono] of Saint Lucia [Hiwanaru] Consultation under Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity; July 2003.

Chairperson of the Indigenous People [Bethéchilokono] of Saint Lucia Governing Council (BGC) from July 2003.

Initiated “Kweyol Language” (Language of the Indigenous People) broadcast on Television in 1985.

Established and operated a “Kweyol Language” Radio Station in Saint Lucia from November 1990 to November 1995.

Executed daily Community Radio Links between Saint Lucia and Martinique in “Kweyol”, during the period November 1990 to July 1997.

Established the use of weekly Community Radio Links between Saint Lucia and French Guyana, Guadeloupe and Haiti, in “Kweyol” during the period January to November 1995.

Organized the Trans-Islands (Dominica, Martinique and Saint Lucia; approximate population 750,000) Video Conferencing Project for the 2000 Emancipation Day Programme. The 12 hour programme, involving academics, activists, community leaders, groups and individuals; conducted in “Kweyol, was broadcasted simultaneously on the National Television Stations of Martinique and Saint Lucia.

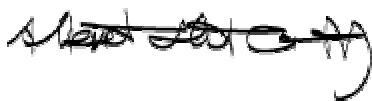
Currently provides weekly interviews to local Radio and Television Stations on Indigenous Peoples’ issues. Has since 2000, used the Internet as a Clearing House, for Conferencing and as a Link among the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles; and between the Indigenous Peoples of the Caribbean Antilles and the world wide community.

Initiated and participated in the following projects

The Mass Media in National Development; 1987-1990 (Saint Lucia).

Use of Kweyol in Radio and Television Broadcasting: A Comparative Study of Saint Lucia and Dominica.

Has operated as a functional member of GROUP for the ADVANCEMENT of COMMUNICATION in the Americas; and Group d’Edutes et de Recherches En Espace Creolophone GEREK, from 1985 to the present.



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