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THE SEARCH FOR HISTORY IN THE NATIVE CARIBBEAN AND
SOUTH AMERICA

Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650. NOBLE D. COOK. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 248 pp. (Cloth US\$ 54.95, Paper US\$ 15.95)

An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians. FRAY RAMÓN PANÉ. Edited by José J. Arrom, translated by Susan C. Griswold. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. 72 pp. (Cloth US\$ 39.95, Paper US\$ 12.95)

Some Recoveries in Guiana Indian Ethnohistory. GERRIT BOS. Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1998. 361 pp. (Paper NLG 85.00)

Each of these three volumes reflects a particular approach to the history of the Native Caribbean and South America, but despite their distinct methodologies and approaches they share a rather restricted view of the historiographical possibilities for knowing that past. None makes use of native testimony, nor do they consider ethnographic materials on native historicity. As such they represent a style of historiographical reasoning that has largely been supplanted by a broad range of archaeological, textual, and ethnographic works which seek to properly integrate these kinds of materials to reveal not just a history of others but others' histories.

In Cook's *Born to Die* we find a well-organized and clearly written summary of the major documentary evidence of the impact of epidemic disease on native demography in those areas of initial contact between European and indigenous Americans. However, such materials should already be reasonably familiar to both scholars and a wider audience not only through the publications of Cook himself, but also through those of Alfred Crosby, John Hemming, and Linda Newson. This is not to suggest that such a re-telling might not be useful for pedagogical purposes, but it is evident that no new theoretical or empirical departures are to be expected. Rather, this volume reads as a fine summary of the work of a number of scholars committed to demonstrating the significance of epidemics in enabling the colonization of South America and the Caribbean.

However, in a wider context of contemplating the construction of indigenous history, the “disease” model has some drawbacks. For example, it can all too easily appear as if the only determining fact of the colonial encounter was the demographic impact it had on native populations. Certainly no one would want to minimize the disastrous consequences of the spread of infectious disease on those populations, but the effect of Cook’s presentation is to make it appear as if this was the only factor at play. It is notable, for example, that he does not consider the possibility of migration away from the centers of initial contact as a factor in the reports of population decline in a given locale.

In a similar vein to the recent best-seller by Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, the very title of the work, *Born to Die*, implies an anti-historical inevitability to the fate of native populations that functions to ethically absolve the process of colonial occupation. Although Cook in no way minimizes the brutalities of colonial invasion and occupation, this is not the same as uncovering the copious evidence of native agency and response to such crises. In addition there is a marked tendency to project the often uncertain data on disease from one region into others, as in the discussion of the Venezuelan littoral (p. 50). Certainly there is no reason to suppose that there was no effect from epidemics but, as always with this notion of “history as higher-mathematics,” to use David Henige’s phrase, such speculation is apt to become accepted as proven through a constant repetition, not the evidence of historical sources. Disease was a constant aspect of native and colonial interactions and the effects of such diseases on the concentrated populations of the Caribbean islands, coastal Brazil and the Andes was significant. Missionary evangelism beginning in earnest in the latter part of the sixteenth century only served to enhance this effect through the conscious policy of re-settling native converts into missionary settlements. However, this represents only a partial historical understanding. Cook and others have played a major role in ensuring our awareness of the significance of disease in native and colonial history, but this is not in itself to have understood that history. Indeed Cook’s account is otherwise steeped in rather suspect ethnology, especially with regard to the Caribbean, where once again (p. 20) he raises the specter of “cannibalistic Caribs” and “docile Taino (Arawaks).” This is justified by reliance on the report of de Cuneo from Columbus’s second voyage which for Cook unaccountably “elicits a greater level of confidence than most.” Such reports, though never achieving the subsequent notoriety of Pané’s *Account* (discussed below), attempted to define and locate political authority, cultural proclivity, and military ability, as a prelude to the conquest and enslavement of *caribe* populations, not as some dispassionate ethnological exercise. Cuneo portrays the Caribbean as riven by a fundamental cultural dualism in which the cannibalistic and warlike *caribe* Indians threaten to overwhelm Spain’s natural allies, the *aruaca* or *guatiao* Indians. This portrayal then both licenses the legal enslavement of vast numbers of native peoples and allows the Spanish Crown to evade moral responsibility for the destruction of Hispaniola by allusion to the depredations of the *caribe*.

An inability to critically read the wider ethnological information thus elicits uncertainty as to the use of documentary materials more generally by Cook and other historical demographers. Given also the tenuous line of inference that underpins most assessments of epidemic disease and population numbers in the Americas, as Cook certainly acknowledges (p. 19), it is likely that more precise or accurate understanding of disease demography is actually unachievable.

Ramón Pané's *An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians* was commissioned by Christopher Columbus in 1493, and despite its brevity is of singular significance to historians and anthropologists of the Caribbean. This is not just because of the descriptions it gives of the natives of Hispaniola, but also for the way in which its many linguistic and textual transformations through the centuries have made it a continuing vehicle for historiographical and anthropological debate.

In one sense it is not difficult to see why this should be so, for the *Account* itself is actually rather confusing if not incoherent, unfinished, and often enigmatic in its choice of ethnographic subject matter. Nonetheless, it remains the first and only extended account of the myth, ritual, and cosmology of the native people on Hispaniola. Moreover, as the *Account* was personally commissioned by Christopher Columbus it is also infused with the aura of that name. This close association of the *Account* with the tribulations of the Columbus family is also pertinent to understanding the form in which the *Account* is presented here, since the text survived only in Italian translation, having been hastily incorporated wholesale into the biographical apology for his father that Ferdinand Columbus produced as part of his legal efforts to regain family possession and titles on the island.

However, despite the uniqueness of the *Account* as a document of initial contact with the indigenous population, the fact that the native population of Hispaniola had all but disappeared by the 1530s meant the *Account* was in its own time a historical record of vanished native cultures. These aspects of Pané's *Account* also speak to us in a very contemporary way for they highlight the connections between the anthropological gaze and colonial desire, between the professional practice of anthropology and its cultural meaning. The need for an ethnography of Hispaniola stemmed not from an abstract interest in human variety but a pragmatic interest in the control and conversion of the native population and it is for this reason that Pané presumably focuses as much as he does on the cosmological and ritual practices of the Hispaniolan elite.

However, the nature of indigenous culture and society in 1492 has remained a matter of dispute among historians and anthropologists. In particular there is profound disagreement on such issues as the very existence of a discrete "taíno" culture, the identity of the *caribe*, and the nature of their cultural and social integration with the peoples of Hispaniola, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Thus it must be noted that the term "taíno" is a purely nineteenth-century invention by the antiquarian C.S. Rafinesque. It derives from the phrase, recorded in the contemporary documentation, *ni-taino*, meaning "my-lord." There is no evidence that this phrase was ever used by native people to designate their own ethnic identity or

that of others. In fact it was the term *guatiao* that was used to generically indicate “allies” or “friends” and which appears in the contemporary Spanish records.

Arrom is no stranger to these controversies and he has chosen a path through them that is reflected in his introduction and annotation of Pané’s *Account*. This is not the first time that the *Account* has been translated into English, or presented along with the redacted versions in Bartolomé de Las Casas’s *Apologética Historia* (Madrid, 1909) and Pietro Martire d’Anghiera’s *Décadas* (Seville, 1511), but unlike these former works, the translation offered here is not a new translation of the Italian original, but rather of Arrom’s 1987 Spanish language version. In that Spanish edition Arrom essentially took up the linguistic and etymological debate that had been initiated by E.G. Bourne’s translation and annotation (1906). Arrom demonstrated the fallacy of a number of Bourne’s interpretations and went on to provide a series of new identifications and interpretations of the names and words found in Pané’s *Account*.

This was a useful exercise since the complexities of this document’s orthography are intricate. Pané transcribed the native terms he collected, not in his natal tongue (Catalan) but in Castilian. This version was then translated into Italian for inclusion in a Venetian publication of Ferdinand Columbus’s biography of his father. As Arrom acknowledges, this makes reconstruction of the ethnographic and orthographic information very problematic indeed. Bourne (1906:316) even suggested, in the face of these linguistic transformations of the original, that the Latin version of Martire d’Anghiera, and the Spanish abstract made by Las Casas, may be closer to Pané’s Spanish original than the Italian translation made by Alfonso de Ulloa.

However, beyond matters of orthography the hermeneutic approach that Arrom espouses is very limited and takes no account of the explosion over the last decade of interest in these testimonies of culture contact. This undermines the usefulness of this edition in three key ways. First, it is critical that we not only read the *Account* as a text, but also as a text with a context to its production. For example, this might lead to a more critical assessment of how the *Account* functioned in the context of demonstrating Columbus family claims to Hispaniola. In this way one may come to see the *Account*’s lapses and lacunae as a product of this context of production, and not simply of the ethnographic shortcomings of Pané himself – even if this remains a most relevant consideration.

Second, the field of anthropological and historical linguistics has recently undergone a shift in theoretical perspectives such that the basic language classifications of twenty years ago are no longer universally accepted as valid, instead often being seen as descriptive of little more than the word lists that were used to construct them. There is now a far greater interest in the careful discrimination of speech-communities, rather than formal linguistic structures, and this means that orthographic analogies are at best suggestive and at worst misleading when used to supply hypothetical etymologies. This view of linguistic practice and plurality also has profound implications for a notion of “taíno” culture, such as it is projected by Arrom, though not by Pané who never uses the term. The notion of

the “taino” may have importance for Antilleanists, but this does not obviate the question of its ethnological accuracy for designating past populations.

Third, a quite considerable literature has developed in the last few years concerning both the native population of the Caribbean and the history of native society and culture in South America more generally. These new analyses and the kinds of data on which they are based might now be fruitfully used for a broader reading of Pané’s *Account* and its “implicit understandings,” as well as the more overt ethnological items, with which Arrom chiefly deals. Moreover, much more could be made of the nature of Pané’s ethnographic experience, its wider implications for a reading of his *Account*, and the context of other contemporary ethnological writings. In this manner the significance of the materials Pané presents, the forms of representation he chooses, and the argumentation by which they are interpreted, as well as the lacunae, necessarily become integral to the textual commentary.

For this edition Arrom has chosen a very limited approach – to try to reconstruct and/or make systematic the *original* Spanish manuscript of Pané, now lost. This project originates with the nineteenth-century Cuban intellectual Antonio Bachiller y Morales, as Arrom acknowledges (p. 83), and is entwined with the laudable ambitions of Antilleanist scholars to give due weight and significance to the Amerindian heritage of the Caribbean through a serious scholarly attempt to reconstitute its cultural and linguistic forms. Unfortunately this is apt to lead to the erasure of significant ethnological information, as is the case with Arrom’s reconstruction of the term *naboria* (p. 36). Arguably the term *giahuuauariù*, as given in the Italian translation of Pané’s *Account* (note 138), is actually cognate with *inharou* / *oubéerou*, native terms for a female concubine.

It should be clear, then, that Arrom’s translated text is actually a mix of the Italian translation made by Ulloa, the “epitome” made by Martire d’Anghiera, and the descriptions given by Las Casas in the *Apologetica Historia*. This has been done due to the possible shortcomings in Pané’s linguistic and literary abilities, and with the presumption that the materials from Martire and Las Casas should be given ethnological and linguistic priority (note 82) over Pané’s own descriptions. While this procedure certainly makes the text more accessible, it is fraught with potential error. Thus Martire d’Anghiera, unlike Las Casas, never went to the Indies, much less Hispaniola, and Pané himself certainly shows an admirable degree of that reflexivity and awareness that observation is born of expectation as much as experience. In point of fact Pané *is* ethnographically reflexive on precisely the issues of his lack of a systematic portrayal of native culture (pp. 10, 12, 17, 20, 22, 42), as he is no less frank about missing information that he failed to collect (pp. 18-19). In this way the text itself may be said to implicitly illustrate the context for Pané’s ethnography. Through a close reading of his *Account* we may be able to perceive some of the nuances of the varying political interests and ritual proclivities of the native population. This is particularly so in the passages that discuss the conversion of the lord Guarionex (pp. 38-41).

Equally in need of further interpretation and commentary are the descriptions of the *zemi* cult and its attendant ritual, since only the putative etymologies and

translations of the names of *zemis* are discussed here by Arrom. This precludes consideration of other aspects of the descriptions in Pané's *Account* that would be considered central by historical anthropologists, such as the prophecy of the Spaniards' arrival by a *zemi* (p. 35), or the elite nature of *zemi* worship. The relative scarcity of *zemi* worship outside Hispaniola, which Las Casas emphasizes (pp. 65 ff), also seems to directly contradict the idea of a unitary, or even very widespread, "taíno" culture, as described by the *Account*. Indeed, both Pané and Las Casas seem to imply that their observations related rather more to the practices of the rulers than the ruled. These themes will therefore need to be explored further before a more adequate interpretation of Pané's *Account* can be achieved.

Bos's *Some Recoveries in Guiana Indian Ethnohistory* is not a high profile, theoretically committed work in the way that the volumes by Arrom and Cook are, but his engagement and patient fascination with the minutiae of the historiography of the region is something of a welcome relief. The idea of "antiquarian" seems to best sum up Bos's approach to a number of historical sites and issues. These include the history of the Pirara portage (also recently discussed by Peter Rivière [1995]), the evidence for the existence of certain elusive ethnicities (such as the Wai-wai and the Paragotos), a digest and discussion of an important document of native testimony from the period of Moravian evangelism, and the "mythical tribes" or monstrous races of native imagination. However, Bos's methodology is eclectic and untroubled by wider questions of historical representation, so although he provides an excellent and intricate discussion of source materials (precisely what is lacking in the Arrom and Cook volumes), he does not address the wider discursive properties of the documentary materials he discusses. In particular his discussion of the "mythical tribes" could have led to important conclusions about the nature of native mythical and historical consciousness and its interaction with European notions of alterity. Nonetheless, this volume will delight those with an interest in the complexities of Guiana historiography and the author is to be commended for his singular dedication to such questions.

These three volumes make it clear that much still needs to be done in order to supplant previous ways of knowing the past – that we need to go beyond recapitulations of the colonial ethnology, enumeration, and extinction of native peoples.

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