

DEFINING THE CARIBBEAN AREA AND IDENTITY

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Abstract: In examining Caribbean identity, it is essential to examine the demarcation of the area, delimit the boundaries, assess how local people have defined or redefined themselves in space and time, and how this is influenced by economics and politics. Obviously the key is the geographic proximity of the Caribbean Sea and its history, which result in many similarities in time, but there is variation, and there are differences. Two significant researchers who investigated the most important common elements like colonization, plantation economy and slavery, Charles Wagley and Sidney Mintz cultural anthropologists, conducted their fieldwork in Brazil, Puerto Rico, Haiti and Jamaica. In defining the “Caribbean” within Plantation America cultural sphere, Charles Wagley took into account the geography, the environment, linguistics, the modes of production, the local histories. Both anthropologists made sociocultural, ethnographic and demographic analyses, comparing the colonial structures in the plantations to delimit the culturally identical area, which, however, today is not followed by geopolitical boundaries, nor is the locals' perceptions of their own interpretation about the Caribbean area.

Keywords: Caribbean Identity, Comparative Approach, Cultural Sphere, Individual Identity Perception, Caribbean Community.

Identity is the “sameness”, the intention of belonging to a community, or a group to identify ourselves. People sharing a particular national, racial, ethnic, social, political, religious or cultural identity. This evolution is a long process, it has a constant inner core, but the whole progression is always changing, it is not a permanent one, it redefines itself in time and in space (Hall, 1995: 598). However, the connection between the different groups is very complex, blurred. Regarding the difference between political and cultural identity, the latter is often related to ethno-cultural identity (for example, Afro-Caribbean identity), while political identity connects with the interests of the nations. We can mention the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) by the initiative of the English-speaking islands which organisation tries to revive Afro-Caribbean identity as “Caribbean” in the region¹.

¹ The international organisation, Caribbean Community (CARICOM) was founded in 1973 with the participation of 20 countries, 15 members and 5 associated members. Members: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint-Lucia, Saint Vincent and Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago. Associated members: Bermudas, Turk and Caicos, Anguilla, Cayman Islands, Virgin Islands (Br.). Observers: Columbia, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Aruba, Sint Maarten, Curaçao.

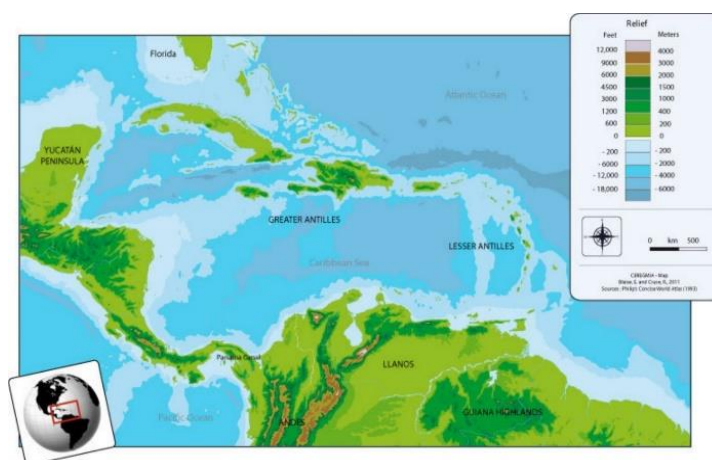
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Outlining, reading about the “Caribbean area”, while in the twentieth century “West Indies” or “Antilles” were used, the definition of the region has changed during the centuries. Nowadays West-Indies means just the English-speaking islands, the same as “English Antilles” (Horváth, 2014: 23). We can also find other expressions in the literature as “Great Caribbean Basin,” “American Mediterranean,” or “Caribbean Mare Nostrum,” which signifies a larger area with the Caribbean Islands, the Gulf of Mexico, the eastern part of Central America, the north shores of Venezuela and Colombia in South America. The exception is the Guianas, which are not part of this definition.



1. picture: The Great Caribbean Basin

Geographical literature tries to link physically the Caribbean Area to the Caribbean Sea. In this way, the Caribbean area refers to the nearly 7.000 islands (divided into Greater and Lesser Antilles) surrounded by the Caribbean Sea, southeast of the Gulf of Mexico, east of Central America and Mexico, and north of South America. The exceptions are the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands (Lucayan Archipelago) in the Atlantic Ocean, which do not have coastlines on the Caribbean Sea, but are accepted as part of the Caribbean according to the *Caribbean Atlas Project*. On the other hand, the interpretation of the “continental Caribbean” outside the “insular Caribbean”, together with the Central and South American countries, which may have Caribbean coastlines, is unclear. One example of this region is Colombia, where three regions (Caribbean, Pacific, and Andean) are known to be distinguished. The Caribbean area includes the northern coast of Colombia and the San Andrés Islands near Nicaragua. The total land of the Caribbean is 132.288 km², which is about a quarter of Colombia's total area with approximately nine million people who speak a type of Caribbean-Spanish dialect and have several Caribbean elements in their culture. According to geographer Romain Cruse, the definition of a wider area beyond the Caribbean Islands as “Caribbean” is based more on economic identification than geomorphologic principles.



2. picture: The Caribbean Sea

Cultural anthropologists have distinguished the Caribbean area from other regions by comparative study and cultural spheres². Charles Wagley³ leading pioneer in Brazilian anthropology presented his theory about the subdivision of the New World at one of the first social science meetings in 1956 in Seattle (Wagley, 1957: 3-13), where he specified three cultural spheres of the Americas: Euro-America, Indo-America, and Plantation-America⁴. Wagley claims that the Plantation American Cultural Sphere extends spatially

² The term of cultural sphere refers to a geographical area with relatively homogeneous human culture.

³ He served as Professor of Anthropology, Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology and director of the Institute of Latin American Studies at Columbia University. After he completed his dissertation at Columbia University in 1942 (entitled *Economics of a Guatemalan Village*), he began exploring other fieldsites in Brazil with Claude Lévi-Strauss. He was a staff member of the Institute of Inter-American Affairs, Brazilian Field Party and held several positions, including directorships, with various programs to the Brazilian-American Public Health Service. He worked with the Guggenheim Foundation, the Social Science Research Council and was the Graduate Research Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. During World War II, the United States government and the Brazilian public health agency, SESP, implemented health education programs in the Amazon region, thus Wagley's team visited a small riverine community called Gurupa several times. His major works: *Amazon Town*; *The Religion of an Amazon Community* (by Eduardo Galvão); *Welcome of Tears*; *The Tapirape Indians of Central Brazil*.

⁴ Euro-America covers the northern and southern areas of the hemisphere and is predominantly Caucasoid ethnically and European culturally. Indo-America, „the region from Mexico to northern Chile, along the Andean Cordilleras”, is populated by Indians and mestizos and is the area in which the Amerindian past has contributed the most to contemporary cultures.

from about midway up the coast of Brazil (in Bahia) into the Guianas, along the Caribbean coast (Venezuela, Colombia, Central America), throughout the Caribbean islands, over the United States. The investigated factors of the three subdivisions are: the nature of the physical environment, the density of the aboriginal population, the sources of post-Columbian immigration, the form of European occupation since 1500 A.C., and the process of historical events as they unfolded in New World. These factors in these different combinations have resulted in a somewhat distinctive type of society coming to characterize each of the cultural sphere. The basic features of the Plantation America Cultural Sphere are 1. The plantation system and monocrop cultivation; 2. Rigid class lines; 3. Multi-racial societies; 4. Weak community structure; 5. Afro-American peasantry; 6. Prevalence of the matrifocal family. Wagley identified many secondary characteristics which derive often from similarities in environment, from the common historical background, and from the presence of a large population of African origin. The common secondary characteristics of Plantation America are 1. Similarity of food crops (except for southern United States); 2. The system of “slash-and-burn” as horticulture; 3. The local markets where the selling is done mostly by women (women marketeers); 4. Commonalities in the cuisine; 5. Basic features in musical patterning and dance; 6. African derived folklore; 7. Afro-American religious cults, African-derived elements have been fused with Christianity (candomblé in Brazil, vodun in Haiti, xangó in Trinidad, santería in Cuba⁵); 8. A series of traditions and values. Wagley’s opinion is that the innumerable “variables” are coming from different religions traditions, different backgrounds (English, French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese), and differences between the islands and the mainland.

A similar cultural comparison was also made by the American anthropologist Sidney Mintz⁶ who is best known for his studies of the Caribbean, creolization, and the anthropology of food. In his essay of 1966 (1966: 912-37), he specifies “*Caribbean*” as *Socio-cultural Area*, which includes: the Caribbean islands between the Yucatan Peninsula and the north coast of South America. He also mentions examples from Guyana, but not from Brazil. The three Guianas are separated from Brazil by the vast forest, so the Caribbean definition does not concern Brazil anymore because of the physical separation from the other Caribbean countries and Caribbean Sea.

According to Sidney Mintz, the Caribbean regional commonality derives from the similar social-historical influences. These are 1. Lowland, subtropical, insular ecology; 2.

⁵ The Hungarian ethnographer, Mária Dornbach does research on Santería in Cuba.

⁶ Sidney Mintz received his PhD at Columbia University in 1951 and conducted his primary fieldwork among sugar-cane workers in Puerto Rico. Later expanding his ethnographic research to Haiti and Jamaica, he produced historical and ethnographic studies of slavery and global capitalism, cultural hybridity, Caribbean peasants, and the political economy of food commodities. He was one of the first scholars to anticipate “globalization studies”. He taught at Yale University before helping to found the Anthropology Department at Johns Hopkins University. His main work: *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*.

The rapid extirpation of indigenous populations; 3. European overseas agricultural capitalism, based primarily on sugar-cane, African slaves, and the plantation system; 4. Insular social structures: the local community organization was slight, national class groupings took on a bipolar form, sustained by overseas domination, sharply differentiated access to land, wealth, and political power; 5. The interplay of the plantation system and the small-scale yeoman agriculture (transformation of the system of plantation); 6. Migration of massive new “foreign” populations into the lower sectors; 7. The prevailing absence of any ideology of national identity that could serve as a goal for mass acculturation; 8. The persistence of colonialism, longer than in any other area outside Western Europe; 9. A high degree of individualization in the Caribbean social organization. The groups with common interest are rare, the rural communities and local institutions are weak and fragile, and nothing serves to interrelate local people socially.

In his article of 1994 (1996: 289-311), Sidney Mintz revised the term “cultural area” and he suggested using the expression of “societal area” instead of that, and he introduced the definition of the “Caribbean oikoumene”. In its original form, “oikoumene” was used to refer to the inhabited world as the Greeks defined it, a great historic unit with certain uniqueness. According to him, any cultural uniformity or commonality of the Caribbean region disappeared almost entirely by 1650 with the extirpation of the indigenous Caribbeans. From the first half of the sixteenth century to the second half of the nineteenth, one-third of the population was African slave from different African tribes in the Caribbean region⁷. Between 1700 and 1870 more than 4 million African slaves arrived in the Caribbean region⁸. In numbers: 912.000 slaves were transported to the Spanish colonies, 1.556.000 to the British colonies, 1.111.000 to the French colonies, 377.000 to the Dutch colonies, and 57.000 to the Danish colonies.

After the mid-nineteenth century, another wave of migrants, especially Asians, reached the Caribbean shores, to work in the economic system. Between 1838 (when the British West Indian slave population was liberated) and 1886 (when Cuba freed its slaves) the Caribbean area experienced labour shortages in the sugar industry, thus many laborers were imported from Portugal, the Canary Islands, Madeira, and other parts of Europe. By the mid-nineteenth century 135.000 Chinese and 500.000 Indians arrived in Trinidad, Cuba, Jamaica, Dutch Guiana (Suriname) and British Guiana. Between 1912 and 1924, almost 250.000 Jamaicans and Haitians were imported to Cuba. New banana plantations in Central America, and the building of the Panama Canal, created more demand on labour on the mainland, which West Indians were to fill. By 1939, Dutch Guiana had received 33.000 Javanese. Indians shipped to the British islands had begun to drift into the French Antilles and into Dutch Guiana as well. In this way the population was heterogeneous, and the transplanted peoples of the Caribbean had to be homogenized in some way to meet the economic demands (Mintz, 1996: 297). The Caribbean area became

⁷ Between 1501 (when the first slave was transported to Hispaniola) and 1886 (when Cuba freed its slaves), the plantations depended on slave labor in the Caribbean area.

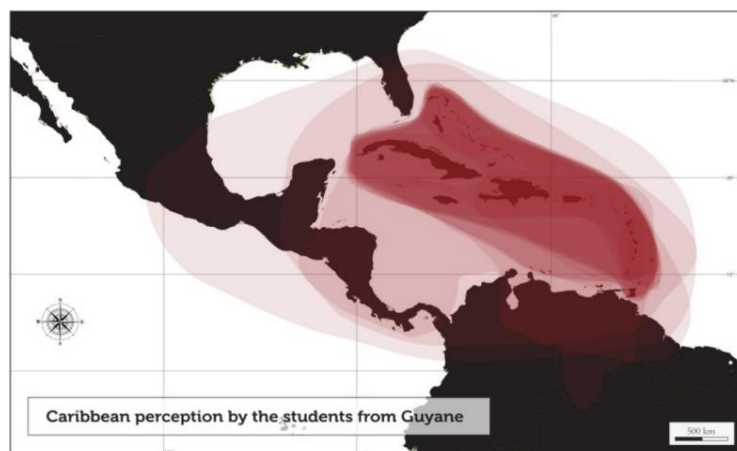
⁸ In Brazil this number was more than 2 million between 1781 and 1855.

an artificially created, Europeanised economic region. However, this process was not complete.

Nowadays asking local people about their “Caribbean” and Caribbean borders, we can hear very different opinions. In the Caribbean Atlas Project⁹, geographer Romain Cruse demonstrated maps, which were made by students from various regional universities, presenting how the Caribbean world is perceived and experienced by local residents in the present era. The Caribbean, as it is felt and experienced by those students, is primarily the islands. The mainland from Venezuela to the United States is drawn by a dotted line, the boundaries of this zone are quite blurred. In rare cases, the boundary of the perceived Caribbean is extended to the coasts of Central America, Colombia and Venezuela (“continental Caribbean”), and most of the time the students from Cartagena, on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, see themselves as belonging to the Caribbean space.

The two independent Guianas (Suriname - Dutch Guiana and Guyana - British Guiana), as well as Belize, are quite frequently included in the perceived Caribbean space, but the French-speaking French Guiana⁷ is virtually never included in the Caribbean space as it is perceived by these students. In addition, the majority of the students who was born and educated in Martinique, Guadeloupe, do not consider themselves “Caribbean”. They are outsiders in both their national and regional contexts. They have reformed their special new identity called “Antillaise”. Furthermore, the Spanish-speaking Cuban students simply don’t adjudge the Guianas, which are linguistically and culturally remote spaces for them, in “their” Caribbean. However, the Bahamas in the Atlantic Ocean are almost always included in the perceived Caribbean.

⁹ The Caribbean Atlas Project is the result of cooperation between the main Universities in the Caribbean region: University of the West Indies (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago), University of Curaçao, University Anton de Kom (Suriname), State University of Haiti and University of Havana. This project is co-headed by Romain Cruse, Lecturer at the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane (UAG) and the University of the West Indies (St Augustine) and Kevon Rhiney, Lecturer at the University of the West Indies (Mona, Jamaica).



3. picture: The Caribbean area according to the students of French Guiana

It can be concluded that the perceptions of identity are different and do not identify with the geographical definition. It would have been particularly interesting to ask students what aspects they used to draw their own map. Over the study of geography, it is assumed that they also took into account a method based on cultural similarity within geographical proximity, which derives from the historical equivalents. However, the differences that the anthropologists have identified, can be attributed to a number of reasons, such as migration, resettlement, variant development, economic disparities, languages, etc. In spite of this, in connection with the Caribbean Atlas Project, geographer Romain Cruse pays attention to the importance of the regional actors, since they are the only ones who can define their own identity, the borders of the Caribbean, and interpret it from their own perspective. Therefore, in the narrower sense, “Caribbean” can be used primarily for the islands between the Florida Peninsula and the coast of Venezuela, the Greater and Lesser Antilles on the Caribbean Sea, and secondly, the mainland.

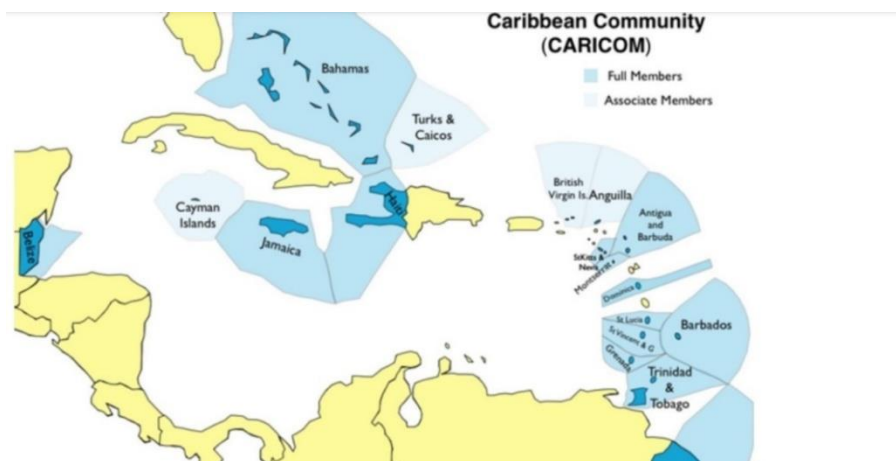
Norman Girvan, Jamaican professor, Secretary General of the Association of Caribbean States also said that the demarcation of the boundaries is based on languages, economy, history, culture, geopolitics, etc. (2005: 304-318). Its difficulty is that the very notion of Caribbean was not only invented but has been continuously reinterpreted in response both to external influences and to internal currents (Girvan, 2000: 34). The islands on the Caribbean Sea have always been included in definitions of the region, but political factors have contributed to the inclusion of other geographic localities that we call the “Great Caribbean Basin”, “American Mediterranean” or “Caribbean Mare Nostrum”.

The elaboration of the definition of “American Mediterranean” was published in the book of Nicolas John Spykman, an American political scientist (1942: 9), in which he emphasises the political and strategic role of the “Great Caribbean Basin” from the point

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of view of the United States, and was linked to United States' expansionism of the nineteenth and twentieth-century. All of this highlights the fact that Central America and the Caribbean area are virtually conceived as an integral part of US territory, and that it is of paramount importance for maintaining and enforcing American hegemony in maintaining the "Greater Caribbean Basin" geopolitical ideology, influencing public awareness and identity.

While historians, sociologists, geopolitical analysts, politicians generally believed in the idea of the "Caribbean" as a region, this concept does not always match how the majority of Caribbean nations identify themselves (Rivke, 2019). Regionalism finds itself at odds with uniqueness, as certain islands or countries may prefer to stress their - usually cultural - individuality, a position for which ample evidence is always to be found, for instance, the French islands (Guadeloupe, Martinique) that do not consider themselves "Caribbean". Other nations may emphasize their allegiance with other regions, for instance, South America in the case of the Guyanas or Latin America in the case of the Spanish-speaking countries, like Cuba. An outstanding example of the integration efforts is the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), founded by English-speaking countries, designed to increase the political and economic role of the founding member states in the region and counterbalance the asymmetry with the Spanish-speaking countries.



4. picture: The countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)

As the English-speaking countries needed more supporters for the political and economic reinforcements, they have made the initial steps towards building relations with the Spanish-speaking countries, and it seems that the initiative is reciprocal (Erisman, 1994: 1-21). For example, after half a century of separation, Cuba signed a Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement with the Caribbean Community in 2017 to foster closer relations (Caricom online).

CARICOM



5. picture: The members, associated members, and observers of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)

These divergent political-economic intentions thus seek to steer public awareness in different directions that affect the perception of local identity, while a comparative study of cultural anthropologists points to the existence of a long-standing common “Caribbean core” that even though is artificial, according to Mintz, it is just as real and perceived nowadays. For this reason, when examining “Caribbean”, especially in the Caribbean islands, it is very important to investigate on the spot, drawing on the oldest identity experiences of local actors, to understand its essence.

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