

Christopher Columbus and the Arawak Indians

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The question regarding human rights in historical discourse attracts much attention, especially considering the atrocities of expansionist agendas during the Middle Ages. In particular, the influence of Columbus and his voyage to the Bahamas in 1492 is immeasurable in terms of the unprecedented interference into the lives of indigenous people. Therefore, the issue of human rights, which was severely neglected prior to the constitutionalization and framing of the first legal declarations of human rights, should be raised while reviewing the conducted impact of Columbus' voyage on indigenous populations. The crucial point in the review is that the accomplishments of Columbus are commemorated and praised to an extent, which led to the creation of Columbus Day that is celebrated on the second Monday of October every year. While Columbus in the modern context is associated with great adventures, entrepreneurial skills, and the era of great discoveries, the opposite side of his voyages is the first-ever documented genocide of an indigenous ethnic group.

Ironically, Columbus never set foot on the North American continent, eventually leading to the fact that under no circumstances should the atrocities in relation to the indigenous Arawak Indians be forgotten. Keeping in mind the fact that Columbus was in agreement with the Spanish Crown to keep approximately 10% of the gold he withdrew from the voyage, Columbus was free to kill any number of indigenous Arawak Indians to accomplish this ambitious objective. Although the details of these terrifying events are generally concealed, a proper reconsideration of the historical discourse on Columbus' voyage to the Bahamas is required to represent the background of the genocide, increasing awareness regarding the human rights of

the indigenous populations in the Middle Ages, and the expansion of the “*economienda*” system that sidestepped slavery.

Historical Background

Conventional historiography often puts emphasis on the narrative concerning Columbus as an Italian navigator who aimed to expand the knowledge of the world and its geographical borders. In the vast majority of circumstances, Columbus is believed to be a person with no explicit agenda during his voyages (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). Considering this particular notion, it would be reasonable to step back to the historical specifications of Columbus’ voyages, which were happening simultaneously with extremely violent European expansionism. The goal of the Spanish Crown was to accumulate wealth, whereas the decision to head west was among the possible alternatives for the accumulation of gold and land. Therefore, conventional myths regarding the role of Columbus as the seeker for new trade routes and geographical discoveries do not correlate with the expansionist trends of the Spanish Crown, coupled with the Roman Catholic Church (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). More precisely, by the time Columbus set sail for his second voyage, his crew was set both technologically and legally for a full-scale genocide of indigenous populations by all means.

When Columbus’ ship, which was called the *Santa Maria*, reached the coast of the Bahamas, the indigenous people greeted the invaders with gifts and unprecedented hospitality. The Arawak Indians were much like the Native Americans on the mainland, who were remarkable for their hospitality, strong beliefs in sharing, and an emphasis on peaceful harmony. With regards to the earlier identified motives of Columbus’ crew, which was decently depicted in Columbus’ log, the demand of Columbus to obtain information about gold was the most

preferential (Jefferson, 2018). The Arawak Indians, who were living in the village communes of the agricultural type, had no iron, work animals, or even horses. What is most crucial in the unveiled circumstances is that most of the Arawak Indians wore tiny ornamental pieces in the ears, which were decorated with gold (Jefferson, 2018). Starting from this particular point, the relations between Columbus' crew and the Arawak Indians deteriorated due to the immense pressure on the Indian populations concerning the ways in which the gold could be discovered. Since the Columbus' logs point out that the crew failed to identify the locations of the gold mines, most Arawak men, women, and children were loaded onto Spanish ships to be transported to Spain as slaves. Having briefly considered the historical background of Columbus' voyages in relation to Arawak Indian populations, one may also point out the necessity to analyze the aspect of human rights concerning the conducted atrocities.

Human Rights in the Middle Ages: Atrocities, Genocide, Forced Relocation

One of the most remarkable features of Columbus' voyages was the demand for gold and free labor, which could become a potent source of income for the Spanish Crown. As it was earlier identified, Columbus was in share with the Spanish Crown, which ultimately led to the intensification of pressure on indigenous populations. While the vast majority of Arawak Indians, who were loaded onto Spanish ships, died en route, the others were sold in Spain as slaves. The reaction of Columbus may be directly traced from the log: "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold" (Jefferson, 2018) Having reviewed the aspect of forced relocation, another aspect of human rights stand out, which focuses on the atrocities of Spanish intruders. The Arawaks realized the urgent necessity to consolidate their forces against Columbus' voyages, yet the development of the indigenous Indian populations

was insufficient to resist the armor, guns, and horses of the Spanish Crown (Deb, 2017). The system established in the Bahamas and Haiti relied upon the “*economienda*” organization, which was similar to slavery. Consequently, most Arawak Indians were forced to kill their own infants in order to save them from Spaniards. The unveiled above characteristics correlate with modern interpretations of genocide and military atrocities, meaning that the study on human rights of the Middle Ages should be conducted to review even more victims of the expansionist period of western civilization.

“*Economienda*” System

In the context of human rights, the system that was imposed by Spaniards in the Bahamas and Haiti was close to slavery. Under the leadership of Columbus himself, all Arawak Indians were forced into the system of forced labor, which was designed to mine gold and produce cotton by the Arawak Indians. When the situation regarding gold was unfavorable for the voyage, Columbus insisted on hunting Indians for sport and dog food (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). Also, women and girls as young as nine were used as sex slaves for the members of Columbus’ crew. According to modern estimations and projections, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti were dead because of the closely regulated genocide system against the Arawaks, which took forms of murder, mutilation, or suicide (Jefferson, 2018). Subsequently, the recollection of both Columbus’ logs and other historiographical sources serves to be a decent source for reassessing the impact of Columbus’ voyages.

Having failed to reach the North American continent, coupled with the failure to secure gold supplies, Columbus may only be associated with severe violations of human rights, including atrocities, genocide, and forced relocation. With regards to the outcomes, public

opinion concerning the agenda of Columbus' voyages should be reconsidered to raise awareness of the human rights issues in the Middle Ages. The last point to mention is that the report of 1650 shows that none of the original Arawaks or their descendants were left on the Bahamas or Haiti (Jefferson, 2018). Consequently, the only noticeable outcome of Columbus' voyages was the intentional genocide of the Arawak Indians through a series of systematic oppressive operations in the time frame of 1492-1515.

Final Remarks

Having identified the idealistic representation of Columbus' role in the historiography of geographical discoveries, the aspect of human rights in relation to Arawak Indians stands out as the element that was violated by atrocities, genocide, and forced relocation. Having neglected the human rights of indigenous populations, Columbus, who was in agreement with the Spanish Crown regarding the profit from discovered gold, was a person responsible for the degradation of the entire ethnic group. If only such incidents took place in the modern era, Columbus, the Spanish Crown, and the Roman Catholic Church would be on trial. Yet, Columbus nowadays is still portrayed as a leader of geographic discoveries with no clear agenda except for enlarging the knowledge about the borders of the world. A close review of the systematic genocide of the Arawak Indians points out a relevant implication on existing historiographic approaches, which is the depiction of expansionism, Columbus' voyages, and the human rights aspect of the structural genocide of indigenous populations, including the Arawak Indians.

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