

# An Indian Side of the Christopher Columbus Story

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There are two sides to every story. The story of proclaimed hero Christopher Columbus, who historians say discovered America, is no exception. Here I dwell not on his glorified voyages but on the atrocities inflicted upon Native Americans during his voyages and conquests throughout the New World.

How many people are familiar with the story of Anacaona? What happened to her and her people, the Arawak Indians, when they resisted the invasion and conquest of their island (Hispaniola) by Columbus would shock Americans. Anacaona, her family and friends, had welcomed Columbus. His brutal war of extermination was suppressed and deleted from the literature by official Spanish censors. All of the First People were soon enslaved, tortured, or persecuted. "The greatest extermination of a people in the history of the world, and few people know about it," says Professor Walter Fox Tree, whose play about her is dedicated to 100 million Native Nations people.

Columbus  
by Jimmie Durham, Cherokee

... Greenrock Woman was the name  
Of that old lady who walked right up  
And spat in Columbus' face. We  
Must remember that, and remember  
Laughing Otter the Taino who tried to  
stop  
Columbus and was taken away as a slave.  
We never saw him again.

In school I learned of heroic discoveries  
Made by liars and crooks. The courage  
Of millions of sweet and true people  
Was not commemorated.

Let us then declare a holiday  
For ourselves, and make a parade that  
begins  
With Columbus' victims and continues  
Even to our grandchildren who will be  
named  
In their honor . . .

The first Europeans were welcomed by natives with gifts of food and tokens of honor until the moment came when these same gifts, and more, were demanded as perpetual homage. Europeans brought nothing that would benefit those who already occupied the lands. Moreover, the ideas and institutions which motivated them were never designed to help native peoples. The philosophy and economics of colonization were designed to benefit only the conquerors. It was no more than international plundering. On a thousand frontiers the Europeans used the technology of superior ships and superior guns to gain territorial beachheads. They then imposed on the indigenous societies a brutal form of servitude understood by the conquerors but totally alien to most natives.

The two American continents contained many separate and distinct groups of Native people in 1492. In North America alone, at least 600 different tribes coexisted, speaking 200 different languages and following ways of life that were as richly diverse as the many geographic regions they occupied.

Isolated from the Eastern Hemisphere, Native America was unprepared for the massive invasion that Columbus began. No Indian nation was even remotely aware of the vastness of the two continents. A few hundred miles away would have been a very long journey for even the most well-traveled. There was nothing approaching a sentiment of racial solidarity. Almost every Indian tribe called itself "We the People." Wherever Europeans appeared for a century or more after 1492, the first thought of the Indians was "Men from

the Sky"; and the second was, "Heaven-sent allies against our enemies." The tribes had no defensive posture because they saw no need for one.

The whites did not have to divide and conquer because so many native leaders assumed that the strangers spoke the truth. Europeans had only to overcome the tribes one by one and they found plenty of native assistance for the task. A lack of iron, gunpowder, ships, and horses was not nearly as important a handicap for Indians as was their own willingness to welcome Columbus and his followers as friends and benefactors rather than uniting against this horde of invaders, bent upon conquest, and driving them from the lands.



Christopher Columbus was a Catholic who felt he must convert Asian heathens to Christianity, but in the end the "heathens" he met, Native American people, were much more likely to be killed or enslaved than to be truly converted in the Christian sense.

In 1492, a loan of over \$7,000 enabled him to obtain three caravels (small ships) and a royal letter of passport from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. In return for bringing back gold and spices, they promised Columbus 10 percent of the profits, a personal governorship over new-found lands, and the fame that would go with the title Admiral of the Ocean Sea.

When he finally approached land, Columbus was met by the Arawaks who swam out to greet him. The Arawaks lived in village communes and had long before developed keen agricultural skills. They cultivated corn, yams, and cassava. They had no iron, but they wore tiny gold ornaments in their ears. This led Columbus to take some of them aboard ship as prisoners. He insisted that they guide him to the source of their gold. He then sailed to Cuba and later to Hispaniola.

Columbus built the first military base in the Western Hemisphere. He left thirty-nine crew members with instructions to find and store gold. He took more Indian prisoners and put them aboard two remaining ships (the *Santa Maria* was shipwrecked).

Even though Columbus had time and again asserted that the Arawaks were the most kindly, peaceful and generous people in the world, during his second trip he and his brother collected 1500 of them for shipment back to Spain as slaves. His four available ships, however, could only carry 500. Columbus allowed Spanish settlers and officers to help themselves to those that remained. After this selection process, those few Indians left were told to flee. Mothers were forced to abandon infants in their desperate fear. Many of those slaves shipped to Spain died en route.

In the province of Cicao, on Hispaniola, Columbus and his officers ordered all Arawaks fourteen years or older to collect a certain quantity of gold every three months. When they succeeded they were given copper tokens to hang around their necks. Indians who had not reached their quota of gold and were found without these copper tokens often had their hands cut off. Many bled to death as a result.

When it became clear that there was no gold left, the Indians were used as slave labor and died by the thousands. By 1515, there were no more than 50,000 Arawak Indians left. A report in 1650 showed that none of the original Arawaks or their descendants were left on the island.



Columbus had promised "mountains of gold" to his backers and his effort to squeeze this wealth out of the simple native society of the island caused death to half of its population between 1492 and 1500—estimates vary from 125,000 to 500,000. Within two generations the entire Indian society was wiped out. None of its people were converted to Christianity. There is not one recorded moment of joy, of love, or a smile.

The "Indian" is an idea invented by the white man to distinguish him from the European. He is depicted as the person on the shore, outside of the boat. In actuality, the Americas are filled with groups of people as different from each other as they are different from the Chinese people. There are hundreds of religions, cultures, languages, and ways of life among the Native peoples of the Americas. The land was a model of diversity long before the arrival of Columbus.

Europeans did not choose to see this diversity. They created the concept of one Indian nation to make what they saw as an entity with which they could deal. From that time until now, the white man has, in fact, molded the Indian in an image which has always been most expeditious and most profitable for the white man himself.

There came a new force, and it was this force which decided what was going to happen to America's original inhabitants. If others didn't agree, this force used the sword, chopped off heads, and asked if there was anyone else who disagreed. For American Indians, this force has always appeared as a single individual. "One man, one sword, one vote." From the time of Columbus to the present the white society has done little to change that view.

2. John Mohawk, "Looking for Columbus," *Native Nations* 1:2 (February 1991).

Afterwards they came swimming to the ships' boats . . . and brought us parrots and cotton thread in balls, and spears and many other things, and we exchanged for them other things, such as small glass beads and hawks' bells, which we gave to them. . . . They were very well built, with very handsome bodies and very good faces. . . .

They do not bear arms or know them, for I showed to them swords and they took them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance. . . . They are all generally fairly tall, good looking, and well proportioned. . . . They should be good servants and of quick intelligence, since I see they very soon say all that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians.

The people also are very gentle. . . . All that they do possess, they give for anything which is given to them.

—Excerpts from entries in Christopher Columbus' journal for the month of October 1492

1. Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale, *Books Without Bias: Through Indian Eyes* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ovale Press, 1987).