

## Conclusion

Dr. Edward Cullen, in proposing a canal route through eastern Panamá in 1853, provided a thumbnail portrait of the Indians of the Darién. He wished to allay his potential investors' fear of the region's unconquered, perhaps hostile Indians. Aware of the problem that the Indians created for him, Cullen worked diligently to explain why a tribe which had fought the Spanish for several centuries would allow Anglo-American crews to enter their lands to survey, construct, and maintain an interoceanic canal. <sup>1</sup>

A nation of Indians that had outlasted the Spanish empire required classification and explanation, and Cullen deftly argued that their hostility did not extend to all Europeans, noting that they had welcomed the anti-Spanish buccaneers and the Scottish colony. Cullen wrote:

the Atlantic coast of the Darién is inhabited by the Tule or San Blas Indians, a fine, handsome, athletic race .... They live very peaceably together, are honest, cleanly, and industrious .... They are very independent, and were never subdued by the Spaniards, to whom they bear great animosity; to English and Americans they are very friendly, but do not allow them to land on the coast .... Their government is purely patriarchal, — the oldest and most experienced man in each settlement being accounted chief by general consent, and universally looked up to and obeyed as such .... They place great faith in the divining powers of their priests and Leles, who advise them in all important matters. <sup>1</sup>

Although some of his other statements were proven to be entirely erroneous, <sup>2</sup> Dr. Cullen's claim that the Darién's Indians had not been subdued was partially correct.

Before his departure from the isthmus in 1751, presidente Alsedo was actually considering a large-scale military operation against the Tule. <sup>3</sup> However, Alsedo's implacable hostility toward several *oidores*, men whom he judged to be involved in the contraband trade, led to a *pesquisa* investigation that forced his recall. The planned operation against the Darién's Indians had to be shelved. <sup>4</sup> An amphibious military expedition against the Indians followed a decade later in 1761, and although several leaders did sign treaties with the authorities, the operation unsurprisingly failed to subdue the Indians. <sup>5</sup> In 1785-86 several strategic forts were constructed in the Darién, but these impressive new structures notwithstanding, the well-coordinated Spanish invasion commanded by the Archbishop-Viceroy of New Granada that followed their construction ended inconclusively. These maneuvers were nonetheless declared a victory because, in a very familiar pattern, individual chieftains had submitted to Spanish authority. Spanish officials had failed to learn the lesson that acquiring the submission of the Darién's chieftains was not enough. Tribalization of Indian leaders was not the same thing as subduing or conquering the Darién's Indian population. <sup>6</sup>

Contrary to Dr. Cullen's formulation, the Darién's Tule Indians had not retained their autonomy through a policy of concerted hostility to or distancing from an encroaching outside world. Quite to the contrary, this book has described how Tule interaction with Spanish administrators, local officials, and European intruders led to the evolution of a colonial form of indigenous leadership that Tule men such as Corbette, Diego, Juan Sanni, and Juan de Dios used to their advantage. Rather than stand as a familiar chapter in the story of European conquest, contest, and consolidation in the Americas, recognition of the contributions of the region's Tule actors provides a more complete picture of the history of eastern Panamá from 1640 to 1750.

---

### Notes:

**Note 1:** Dr. E. Cullen, *Isthmus of Darién Ship Canal: with a full history of the Scotch colony of Darién several maps, views of the country, and original documents*, 2d ed. (London: Effingham Wilson, 1853), pp. 65-69. [Back.](#)

**Note 2:** D. McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977), pp. 22-23. [Back.](#)

**Note 3:** Alsedo began planning the operation in 1749. See A. Tello Burgos, "Gobierno de Dionisio de Alsedo y Herrera en el Istmo de Panamá (1744-1749)," *Boletín de la Academia Panameña de la historia* 3, nos. 25-26 (1981): 147-148. [Back.](#)

**Note 4:** For the nature of Alsedo's departure, see Tello Burgos, "Gobierno de Alsedo," pp. 150-152. [Back.](#)

**Note 5:** This expedition is described by J. M. Zapatero López-Anaya, "Expediciones españolas al Darién: La del ingeniero militar don Antonio de Arevalo en 1761," *Revista de Historia Militar* 9, no. 19 (1965): 49-79. The documents related to this expedition are in Archivo General de Indias (AGI) Panamá 306. [Back.](#)

**Note 2:** For this expedition, see M. Luengo Muñoz, "Genesis de las expediciones militares al Darién en 1785-6," *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 18 (1961): 333-416; and A. J. Kuethe, *Military Reform and Society in New Granada, 1773-1809* (Coral Gables: University of Florida Press, 1978), esp. pp. 130-144. The documents related to this expedition are in AGI Panamá 307. [Back.](#)

[The Door of the Seas and Key to the Universe](#)