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Caribbean Archaeology And Taino Survival

Abstract

Caribbean archaeologists tend to uncritically accept Las Casas' claim that by the mid 16th century the Native people of the Spanish speaking Caribbean were extinct. However, recent studies in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic are revealing that the story of Taino extinction is simply not true. Ethnographic, ethnoarchaeological, linguistic, DNA and historical studies are demonstrating multidisciplinary evidence for Taino cultural and biological survival. It appears that the myth of Taino extinction was created as a colonial strategy to disempower the Native people and as a way to legitimate the importation of slaves from Africa. This myth has then been transformed in various ways for national and class interests. Ironically, the Taino culture that survives may be considered the strongest and most deeply planted "roots" of the contemporary Afro-Mestizo Criollo Caribbean identity. It is therefore not surprising to find a growing movement of Taino identity reclamation and cultural revitalization in the Caribbean and diaspora. It behooves all archaeologists working in the Caribbean to understand the complexity of contemporary identity issues including racism, nationalism and the politics of ethnicity, as well as share their findings with the people who are proving to have Taino ancestry and cultural heritage. In this way, Caribbean archaeology may become more relevant to the people of the Caribbean.

Contents

Many Caribbean archaeologists accept the historical claim that by the mid 16th century the Native people of the Spanish speaking Caribbean were extinct. However, recent studies are revealing that the story of Taino extinction is simply not true. It appears that the myth was created as a colonial strategy to discount their survival and as a way to legitimate the importation of slaves from Africa. This myth has then been transformed in various ways for national and class interests. Ironically, the Taino culture that survives may be considered the strongest and most deeply planted roots of contemporary Afro-Mestizo Criollo Caribbean identity. Ethnographic, ethnoarchaeological, linguistic, historical and DNA studies are demonstrating multidisciplinary evidence for Taino cultural and biological survival. It is not surprising therefore to find a nascent movement of Taino identity reclamation and cultural revitalization in the Caribbean and diaspora.

In the Dominican Republic there are strong cultural forms of Taino origin practiced in daily life, especially in the countryside. At the same time, these traditional cultural practices are seen as unprogressive and individuals are often ashamed by these cultural displays. Meanwhile, Taino archaeological heritage is plundered and vandalized, history and culture are topics of interest mostly for the upper class, and there are scant resources available for communities to encourage traditional cultural activities. Development towards a Western economy means movement away from traditional Dominican culture and Taino heritage.

Early Spanish colonization in the Caribbean has been relatively well documented, and it is not surprising that textual evidence has driven interpretations about the Taino in academic literature. However, even with the wealth of textual sources, interpreting Spanish historical accounts is a difficult endeavor. Beyond issues of intentional misrepresentation, and selective accounting, Spanish texts are fraught with cultural bias that clouds the distinction between accuracy and invention. There are also compounded biases that arise from processes of transcription and translation. Finally, Spanish texts need to be interpreted within their social context as part of a larger discourse of Spanish colonial policy, not merely as objective descriptions of ethnographic reality. Thus, when used as historical evidence, texts should be carefully evaluated against other texts and against archaeological, linguistic, geographical, and any other evidence available for their consistency and veracity. They need to be situated according to the social and political positions of their authors, translators, as well



as their intended audiences. Without substantiation, material is often lifted from books to serve convenient stories and theories of contemporary researchers. Examples include assumptions made about Taíno social class hierarchy, cannibalism, resistance, and the supposed extinction of the Taíno.

Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons shows that during the period of early Spanish colonization a process of transculturation began whereby Taínos mixed within the Spanish population, together with African slaves, giving rise to a new Creole culture. This is substantiated historically by census records of 1514, which show forty per cent of Spanish men on the island had Indian wives or concubines. Interaction between Africans and Indians is documented in plantation records and in descriptions of runaway slave communities. Further ethnohistorian Lynne Guitar demonstrates the historical marginalization of the Taíno beginning in the 16th century. While being declared extinct in official documents—for the purpose of legitimating colonial control and rationalizing the importation of African slaves—Guitar finds references to Indians in wills and legal proceedings, demonstrating their survival on the margins of colonial society.

Over the years, a poor, but landed, peasantry developed from the original group of Indians, Africans and Europeans, who continued to share bloodlines and culture, developing their own communities in the countryside. As these communities were engaged in a struggle to live on the land, they used their repertoire of cultural knowledge to best survive. Naturally, they relied on their Taíno heritage, which represented many generations of knowledge, tradition, and oral history.

Today, Caribbean people base their identification with their Taíno roots on kin ties to ancestors, oral traditions passed on through time, a bond with a fixed geographic homeland, and the collection of cultural traits that symbolize their Taíno history. While many facets of contemporary Taíno culture are also tied to their the nation's particular history and with the combined heritage from African and European culture, many salient themes from the common Taíno past can be said to constitute a distinctive Taíno identity.

Anthropologist James Clifford points out that defining Native American ethnic identity is not as simple as the presence or absence of feather headdresses or shovel shaped incisors. The ethnicity of people with multiple ancestries should be understood in their own terms. As anthropologists we should be informed to answer the question of why one drop of African blood makes a person Black; while a higher standard is used to determine whether a person is an Indian. The concept of race is challenged by the children of parents who come from two different groups. What race are they? Many colonizing including the Spanish, created complex systems to define the various mixes of African, European and Indian. Not only could these terms not be standardized, they were not reliably identified. The fact that the definitions of group inclusion change according to contemporary politics ought to suggest we discard the concept of race entirely. Unfortunately, race, class and power have been intricately interwoven through the venture of European colonial expansion in the Americas, and still remain firmly in place. So it may be that a majority of people who identify themselves as Taíno in fact have a variety of biological ancestries including African and European. Where is the arbitrary line drawn to determine how much Native American blood is needed to be considered Taíno?

While race is a social construct, biological and DNA studies do provide evidence of continuity between populations. Some anthropometric studies have been undertaken, notably in Eastern Cuba. More recent DNA studies by Puerto Rican biologist Juan Martínez Cruzado and Dominican physical anthropologist Fernando Luna Calderon have proven to be even more provocative, suggesting high percentages of Indigenous bloodlines in both Puerto Rican and Dominican populations.

Taíno heritage can be found in the Dominican Republic in an extraordinary number of cultural

categories, including linguistic features; agricultural practices; medicinal knowledge; crafts, tools, and technologies; folklore and religion. The survival of Taino culture has been documented in the work of Bernardo Vega and Garcia Arévalo. Recent work in this area has expanded on these earlier studies. Proceedings from a conference on Taino survival which was presented at this museum last summer have been published on the internet.

The practice of Taino cultural forms reveal both deep knowledge and oral tradition, and imply a strong continuity from past to present. Our conclusion is that there is significant cultural heritage of Taino origin that has persisted to this day and encourage everyone to go to the countryside and see how casabe bread is still made at the traditional household level.

Who are the people in the Caribbean who self identify as Native Americans? There is a Carib Indian reserve on the island of Dominica, and other settlements on nearby St. Vincent and the Grenadines. There are also communities in eastern Cuba and in Puerto Rico with strong Taino identity. Trinidad is well known for their Carib community in Arima. Self-identifying Tainos and Caribs are also found on Saint Lucia, Jamaica, and Haiti. On the Central American and South American coast there are groups including the Garifuna who identify with their indigenous Caribbean heritage. In other parts of the Caribbean, notably in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dutch Antilles islands of Bonaire and Curacao, there is a growing consciousness of the indigenous component of their cultural and biological makeup.

Today, a cursory look on the internet will reveal many contemporary Taino and Carib groups and organizations. A website called the Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink has an extensive list of these groups. While some groups are more interested in celebrating their culture, others are attempting to organize a Taino political entity or tribe, and have represented Taino interests in larger bodies like the United Nations. Taino associations have spoken for Taino people at exhibits at prominent museums including the Smithsonian's Museum of the American Indian. Others have successfully lobbied to remove the word extinct from the description of the Taino Indians in Webster's dictionary. Recently, a Taino group in Cuba helped repatriate and ceremonially rebury pre-Columbian Cuban bones previously housed in the Smithsonian. At the same time, there are many individuals and families who live in traditional ways in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Cuba (and diaspora) who may not choose to identify as Taino but will admit that their identification with their national origins includes their Taino ancestors and cultural traditions.

The history studied and taught in the Caribbean tends to focus on the past of the colonizer while Indigenous, African, and Creole culture has been deemed less important for national identity. St. Lucian Eric Branford sums it well in the proceedings of an earlier International Caribbean Archaeology Congress by saying, It is a perfectly correct assertion that the record of Caribbean life... -- its history and archaeology -- is not taught in the Caribbean itself but chiefly in Europe and the Americas.

In the past century, even with most Caribbean colonies becoming independent nations, an economic dependence on the West has given most Caribbean countries Third World status whereby history and archaeology are simply not high priority endeavors.

Many Archaeologists have demonstrated the dynamic role that archaeological and historical practice can play in the development of historical consciousness by providing places for the discussion and negotiation of identity. A greater emphasis on training local archaeologists, on public education, site protection, and local involvement, in general, ought to be made. Too often the focus of archaeological field seasons is on maximizing time spent on excavation. Concerted efforts at public education and involvement beyond the field season ought to be prioritized.





Puerto Rican historian Sued Badillo suggests that archaeologists cannot continue to turn their backs on cultural debates, to the formation of identities, or to the political aspirations of the Caribbean people. Doing so would not only marginalize their work and make them foreign, but would perpetuate racist models and reference points to the past...

How should archaeologists respond? We believe: 1) We should rigorously check our historical references and our contemporary assumptions; 2) We should work across disciplines; and 3) We should share our knowledge with the Caribbean, and listen as the Caribbean shares its knowledge with us.

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