

## **Taíno Spirituality Today** (rough draft)

--Jorge Estevez

I remember standing on a New York City street corner with my friends, hanging out way past midnight just like all the other teenagers, when suddenly I got that strange familiar feeling and I knew I had to rush home. As I ran up the stairs to our sixth-floor apartment, I could feel it getting stronger, that nagging sensation of needing to be home. This upset me because I knew why I felt this way, why I always felt this way around this time, and that my mother, with her Taíno ways, was the cause. As I opened the door of our apartment, I could see that the house was dark except for a flickering light in the center of our kitchen table. That light is my mother's way of summoning us. Since I was a small child, I have watched her do the summoning ritual many times. She makes a wick out of cotton and ties it onto two small sticks in the shape of a cross and floats it on top of a glass or cup full of water and oil. She lights the wick and raises it to the North, South, East, and West while saying a prayer in her head. Then she places the light in the center of the table, knowing that, once this is done, the person the prayer was intended for would want to rush home. There is, however, something else-- wherever the wick of the candle falls, it indicates the direction the person had headed in. If it falls to the East, the person had headed in that direction or was still there, and so on.

The four cardinal directions are very important in Taíno rituals, no matter where we are. My family comes from a village called Jaibón in the mountainous Cibao region of the Dominican Republic. We immigrated to the United States about 35 years ago, bringing many of our native Taíno beliefs and rituals with us. Throughout my life I have

listened intently to my mother, Doña Luz Patria Estevez, and to my grandmother, Doña Olympia. I have asked them questions and observed them, and carefully recorded in my head all that I saw and heard from them as well as from all the women I saw and heard during family get-togethers, when they cook and speak of the customs of our *campo*, the countryside. Why have I paid so much attention to them? Because they make me feel proud of where we come from and who we are. All that I know about Taíno spirituality comes from those cherished women, and now from other people whom I have met from my homeland and the other Caribbean islands in the course of my work for the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

It seems that the more I look for Taíno spirituality, the more I find. The examples are everywhere, from the countryside and the mountain communities of our islands to the streets of Santo Domingo, Old San Juan and New York City. Taíno spirituality is especially revealed in nature. For example, my mother told me that owls are bad omens--to hear them at night is a bad sign, and if an owl rests on your *bohio* (home) at night, it is a sign that death will soon follow. In most Native American traditions, the owl is seen as a creature that delivers bad omens, whereas Europeans usually see the owl as a sign of wisdom. Mother also talks about the spirits that roam the mountains at night, and the lights of the *cocuyos* (fireflies) that are their eyes. If you encounter these beings, you have to yell and curse at them so they will leave you alone. I can't remember how many times I awoke to the sound of my mother loudly telling some spirit where it would end up if it did not leave our house! She told us about the good animals, too. For example, if you encounter a *yaguasa* (a type of duck) on the road in the middle of the night, you have to change directions because the *yaguasa* warns you of bad

things ahead. Then there are the stories of family members who could change into any animal they wanted to, like my mother's uncle Choro who could conjure up this power by singing certain songs. Singing was important in most of the Classic Taíno rituals. Samuel Wilson, in his study of *Hispaniola: Caribbean Chiefdoms in the Age of Columbus*, notes that a song was one of the most valued of all Taíno gifts. My mother tells me that chewing on the bones of a certain animal at a specific time of the night can make you invisible, and at one time people would put *guamos* (conch shells) in a circle around the grave of a deceased person, although she doesn't remember why this was done. My mother insists, though she doesn't know the reason behind this belief either, that the shell of the *hicotea* (fresh water turtle) brings bad luck if kept in the house, but is quick to point out that the bottom of the shell was traditionally used to spread the yuca flour when making casabe bread. The conflicting good/bad beliefs about the *hicotea* baffled me. It wasn't until I was much older and read the Taíno creation stories preserved by Fray Ramón Pané that I understood, for the stories make it clear that my ancestors had taboos against eating the flesh of fresh water turtles because it was believed they were a maternal ancestor. Although my mother did not know the *hicotea* creation story, she unknowingly perpetuated the taboo while remembering that the turtle had nurturing qualities.

Among the other Taíno women who have added immensely to my spiritual knowledge is Magda Martas, a friend from Puerto Rico. Magda reminded me that *yayamas* (pineapples), which are native to Puerto Rico, are sometimes left out to absorb malevolent spirits that might otherwise enter the home at night. *Auyamas* (squashes) and *higueros* (gourds) are used in this same fashion and then disposed of

in rivers in the morning. Doña Angélica Vargas, who comes from Canóbanas, Puerto Rico, explained that when four or more *guaraguao* (hawks) fly together, it means that a *baguada* is coming--*bagua* is the Taíno word for the sea, and a *baguada* is a storm that originates out at sea. Doña Angélica's daughter, Valerie Nanaturey, says that certain people can peel their skins" to achieve invisibility. She was taught that people who did this could also fly. Valerie told me a story about a sorceress named Doña Sisa who spent her time feuding with her grandmother, Doña Juana. The grandmother, having powers of her own, could ward off Doña Sisa, but had to contend with her flying over her house at night and making quite a racket.

Among my favorite stories as a child were those of *ciguapas*, creatures with long hair down to their ankles, who live deep in the forest or under the rivers. They have inverted feet, which is why even the best hunters can't track them. Some scholars believe that tales of these legendary creatures arose because of the Native runaways who so successfully avoided the Spanish patrols. The same creature exists in El Salvador, where it is known as *ciguanamá*, and in Venezuela where it is known as *currupia*. Other fantastic creatures whose tales still fascinate Dominican children include *galipotes*, dogs with huge, long ears that drag behind them when they walk, and *duendes* (little people), who tie your hair in knots while you sleep if you are bad or braid them if you are good.

Many of our stories have been passed down orally and not only have different meanings today than they did to the Classic Taínos, but have changed in substance. Customary traditions have undergone the same evolutionary processes. For example,

yuca and the casabe bread made from it were very important to our Taíno ancestors. Casabe bread, their preferred carbohydrate staple, was sacred and played an important role in many spiritual ceremonies. Perhaps that is why people back home still leave offerings of casabe in caves that they believe are inhabited by Indian spirits. Furthermore, yuca is always planted during a waning moon, which appears to have had a spiritual basis for the Classic Taínos, though we no longer know the associated beliefs. Many of the medicinal plants that we use today that are indigenous to the islands are also planted during specific lunar cycles and picked at specific times of the day, according to ancient custom.

In Puerto Rico, people say they can hear ancestral voices in the Yunque rainforest. People from mountain communities in Cuba and the Dominican Republic say they hear the voices of our Taíno ancestors at night, especially by the rivers--ritual bathing preceded most Classic Taíno ceremonies--or inside certain caves, where spiritual rituals and trainings took place long ago. Many go into the caves and touch the ancient petroglyphs and pictographs in the hope that our ancestors will cure them of illness. And people in the campo of the Dominican Republic and Haiti insist that there are wild Indians living in caves, whom they call *bien-bien*. Interestingly, my Taíno ancestors believed that "the people" originally emerged from caves on our island. In some places, today's Taínos keep *cemies* (sacred objects made by the ancient Taínos) on their home altars along with clay pots full of water. They find the *cemies* in caves or buried underground throughout the islands. The invading Spaniards recorded that Classic Taínos used these *cemies* to represent either ancestors or deities. Although we do not clearly remember the meanings of these objects, we still feel a sense of kinship

toward them. On all three of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands, neo-Taíno art, which includes the making of cemies, is very popular today, mostly due to the tourist trade, but a sense that this is "ours" is also taking place. I believe it's a spiritual connection.

Our most guarded Taíno traditions have been passed down only from mother to daughter, sister to sister, etc., thorough the maternal line, although I have heard that there are certain branches of power that only men possess. My mother explained that a person only shares their special knowledge when they are on their deathbed--this helps explain why so much traditional knowledge has been lost! I have spoken with *curanderos* (healers) from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, most of which happen to be women. Few *curanderos* will readily share their knowledge of how they heal, but when they occasionally do speak up, an immense new world is revealed, for they have retained a whole library of traditional medicine and spirituality in their memories that scholars are only now beginning to tap into.

My mother believes that any healers who are willing to speak about their knowledge of spiritual healing, or a person who brags about having certain powers, probably doesn't know anything at all. My friends Doña Angélica Vargas and Valerie Nanaturey have told me the same exact thing, but some information leaks out, little by little, to those of us who insisently seek it out. My mother explained to me that you can *sobar* (rub) a sickness away, and Doña Angélica says her mother used *sobos* (rubs) to heal as well. In fact, Natives throughout South America use this method of healing. There is a *bejuco* (vine) that can be used to mend broken bones, but Valerie tells me

that this vine can only be picked after the healer recites a specific chant. Doña Angélica has told me fascinating stories about the special powers of her family in Puerto Rico. Her mother, Doña Juana Medina, specialized in healing children. She had the ability to blow in the ears of sick children and blast out the "bad wind" that inhabited the child. It was not a spirit her mother was casting out, just a bad wind, notes Doña Angélica, and she always chewed tobacco before beginning her healing. Doña Angélica says that her mother's power derived from her eyes, and this helped her know the truth about all things. The eyes held a special magic for the Classic Taínos, too. They gilded the eyes of their sacred and decorative objects with gold or guanín, an alloy that shone more brilliantly than gold, and they forced the eyes of noble children to bulge out by compressing the infants foreheads. These prominent eyes were both physically and spiritually beautiful to the Taínos, though the Spaniards thought they were very peculiar.

When the Spaniards arrived in the Caribbean more than 500 years ago, they noticed that my ancestors had another peculiar habit--they bathed three and four times a day. To the Spaniards this was barbaric! They made laws prohibiting the Taínos from bathing, for they believed that it was harmful, that it washed away protective body oils and caused lustful thoughts. My Taíno ancestors, however, preceded most of their known ceremonies with ritual community bathing. They also believed that during the night bad spirits would brush up against a person and leave the recipient of these visitations with a bad body odor. The love of bathing--and an abhorrence of body odors--is still very much a part of our ways today. My friend Magda Martas reminded me of the various forms and intricacies of *baños* (baths). For us, baños are not only for

hygiene but also for spiritual cleansing, and they are often prepared with water mixed with colorful flowers and/or fruits.

Do you know about the *Misterios*? They are a diverse but interrelated series of Taíno spiritual practices in the Dominican Republic. Practicing the *Misterios* requires in-depth knowledge of medicinal plants and involves divination, so many people see the *Misterios* as a kind of sorcery. Recently my friend Pedro Ferbel, an anthropologist who has done extensive studies on Taínos in the Dominican Republic, told me he learned that in the teachings of the *Misterios* there are seven African powers that are prayed to, along with the 21st Indian division. *Botijas* (visions), however, always involve Indian spirits, and they can show you where hidden gold is.

Another Taíno practice that has survived in numerous forms is the tobacco ceremony. Disciples of Cuban and Puerto Rican *Santería*, of Dominican *Misterios*, and *Voodoo* priests in Haiti all use tobacco in their ceremonies for spiritual cleansing. Also, the smoke from tobacco can be blown over the body of a sick person to expel whatever is causing the illness. These practices come directly from our Taíno ancestors and are virtually identical to the way South American Indians use tobacco in their healing ceremonies. And dreams are very real for Taíno people, as they are for many other indigenous peoples. My mother tells me that if I have a bad dream or nightmare, I have to share this dream with as many people as possible in order to break its power. If I have a good dream, however, I must keep it to myself so that it may blossom.

One very good dream I have--but it's a waking, conscious dream--is to teach people all over the world the truth about my people, the Taínos. Most history books

teach that Taínos became extinct about 30-50 years after contact with the Europeans. No two historians, however, can agree exactly when this occurred. Upon closer inspection of the historical record, one finds that there is documented evidence of Taínos in every century since 1492 and on all three of the Spanish-speaking islands. The Taíno influence--biological, cultural, linguistic and spiritual--is felt everywhere today in the Spanish Caribbean and everywhere that Spanish Caribbean people have immigrated to. It is horribly wrong to say that the Taíno culture is extinct simply because it is not the same as it was in 1492. By that measure, the Spanish and African cultures would also be extinct, since people of Spanish and African descent do not live and speak the same way today as they did in 1492. Additionally, many people dismiss our beliefs because they are mixed with Christian and African beliefs. True, our modern beliefs are of mixed extraction--my mother, for example, considers herself a devout Catholic, yet practices curious things at night that would highly offend the average Catholic priest!--but that does not mean they are no longer Taíno beliefs. What would be strange, indeed, would be if Taíno culture and spirituality had *not* changed in more than 500 years!

Change and mixture are a natural part of cultural evolution everywhere, but especially in the Americas, where peoples of so many different continents came together. Sometimes errors of attribution are made because of the intermixture. For example, "zombies" and the practice of making them are not of African origin. The ingredients used for inducing a zombie-like state, such as the datura plant and the puffer fish that live off the coast of Haiti, are native to the Americas, not to Africa. In Maya Deren's book, *The Divine Horsemen, The Living Gods of Haiti*, there are many

references to Taíno practices found in Voodoo. Voodoo traditions are generally considered to be African, but are really a mixture of Taíno and African spiritual traditions. Recently I had the good fortune to be invited to a Festival of the Cross by Maitreyi and Amarilis Villaman, Taíno sisters and good friends of mine from the Dominican Republic. The festival comes from a mixture of Taíno, African and Christian traditions. When I entered the hall where the celebration was taking place, I saw a Christian cross on the stage with many colorful flowers around it. A band of *palo* (Afro-Dominican) musicians were playing a song with a heavy African beat but with an Indian theme, and Maitreyi, her sister, and the rest of the guests were dancing with Taíno *cemis* in their hands.

Slowly but surely, Taíno peoples, their traditions and beliefs are changing again. Here in the United States, there is another fusion of customs going on. For longer than most people realize, and especially since the early 1970s, Taíno peoples from the Caribbean have been involved with our Native brothers & sisters of the North. During the Native takeover of Alcatraz Island, for example, Marie Helen Laraque, a Taíno woman from the Republic of Haiti (she passed away last year, but was a great friend of mine), was involved in the relief effort, assisting the North American Natives who took over the island. She often described to me how she learned the way Natives in North America do their tobacco ceremony, and how she showed the Native peoples she met about our similar ceremonies in Haiti. As more and more people from the Caribbean learn of our Native traditions, they find they have a strong connection with both North and South American Indian peoples.

Just as our Taíno ancestors learned and accepted Spanish and African customs, integrating them with their own, a similar thing is happening in North America, where the Caribbean Diaspora has been the largest. In the United States, Taínos have had the opportunity to meet and share with other Native people. Many of us gradually began going to Powwows and other Native gatherings. We noticed that many of our customs were similar to those of the Natives here, especially our spirituality. Tobacco ceremonies, growing plants according to the cycles of the moon, herbal medicines, and a deep-rooted love for the land are just a few of the things we have in common with the North American Natives. Today, Taínos go to sun dances and sweat lodges; some have become pipe carriers; others explore all forms of Native spirituality. This began in part because many of our people had not been back home for years, and many more were born here--both have felt the need to connect with other Native people. Another important factor is that, for many of us, classifications such as “Hispanic” or “Latino” never made sense. They don't accurately describe who we are. We are Native Americans, we are Taínos. More and more our cultural and spiritual affinity lies with other Native Americans as we become more Americanized.”

Make no mistake. Our Taíno customs are still very much alive. As a people and as a cultural group we have changed, and continue to change, but change does not equal extinction. Just the opposite is true. It means our people and our culture not only survived the arrival of the Spaniards, but have also continued to evolve, as only a living people and living culture can do.

Today's Taíno revival movement is growing rapidly. Taíno groups and

organizations are flourishing all over the Americas. We are well aware that non-Taíno peoples have been negligent in the telling of our story and in their investigations of our customs, traditions, language and, above all, our spirituality. Until recently we were not actively involved in the process of recording our history, but now we are. Too many questions have gone unanswered for too long. We have now taken it upon ourselves to investigate and to explain--in our own ways and with our own words--our own stories, beliefs, traditions and language. We must pass our Taíno culture on to our children. It is up to us to challenge all the myths that have been written about us by others, to investigate our customs and traditions, our culture and language. Most importantly, it is our responsibility to explore our spirituality. This is the vehicle that we must use to reunite with our ancestors who now reside on that other plane, in that other existence. It is from there that they send us glimpses of who we once were. They send us songs that echo in the caves and mountains, rivers and valleys of our islands, reminding us to be proud of who we are, and above all, of whom we can become.

As I sit here writing these lines, I realize that there is so much more I can write, so much more to share about today's Taíno spirituality. I could write on and on if I but had the space and time, but I feel this sudden strong urge to go home---and I know why.

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