

MANKATO STATE UNIVERSITY

**ARAWAK BORIQUEN: THE ROOTS
OF THE PUERTO RICAN NATION**

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A Juanita,
gracias por todo.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore the contributions that the original inhabitants of Puerto Rico, the *Taino Arawak* Indians, made to the formation of the national identity of the present population of the island. Realizing the rather limited awareness that is displayed among Puerto Ricans of the significant Native American heritage they share, we believe that it is important to point this fact out.

It is crucial to understand the totality of the cultural and ethnic background, not only at the national but also at the individual level. To know who you are and what made you what you are, are vital prerequisites to determine where you are going to.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ANTILLEAN ARAWAKS BEFORE THE CONQUEST

The geographical context of Puerto Rico is important to understand the historical development of the island. The everpresent factor is the Caribbean Sea, a branch of the Atlantic Ocean that provided the ideal highway to and from the islands. There are two main groups of islands on the Caribbean: the Greater Antilles and the Lesser Antilles (*Antillas Mayores y Antillas Menores*), that stretch in an arc from the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico to the Gulf of Paria in Venezuela. Most of the islands are of volcanic origin, resulting in a hilly topography and fertile soils. Also, due to favorable winds around the year, rainfall is plentiful.

The Greater Antilles, center of the Taino Arawak culture, comprise the islands of Cuba, the largest; Hispaniola (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Jamaica, and Puerto Rico. The smallest of this group, Puerto Rico formed, at the time of the arrival of the Europeans, the frontier between the Arawaks and the *Caribs*¹, of the Lesser Antilles. Then, and now, the island not only provided the ideal link for trade among the northern Caribbean Sea, but also for the movement of peoples.

In 1492, a people known as Taino Arawak inhabited *Boriquén* (their name for the island of Puerto Rico; it means "Land of the Proud Lord"²). They were closely related to the Arawakan family of tribes of northern Amazonia, in South America, and had entered the Antilles by way of Trinidad and up the chain of islands³, until they reached Cuba. However, by this time, the Lesser Antilles were occupied by another group also original from South America, the Caribs. This late arriving people had displaced the Taino Arawaks from the smaller islands and were starting to make inroads in Boriquén itself.⁴ These Taino Arawaks of the islands were the first Native Americans contacted by the Europeans.

It is on early Spanish sources that we find most of what is known about

these peoples. Christopher Columbus described the Arawaks he met on his first landfall at *Guanahani* (modern San Salvador, in the Bahamas) in the following terms;

...of beautiful bodies and handsome faces, with thick manes of hair, like the strands on the tail of a horse; close-cropped, they cut their hair above their eyebrows, except for some at the back that they keep long, and never cut. They paint themselves in dark colors, and their color is like that of the Canarians [from the Canary Islands, off the African coast], not white nor black, some paint themselves white, others red, and of many other colors...Most of them *are* fairly tall and of fine features, well proportioned.⁵

They used very little clothing, being limited to a short skirt for married women called *nagua*⁶, and also colored feathers in their hair on special occasions.

Their society was divided into three classes: the *naborias* or commoners; the *nytainos* or nobility; and the *bohique* or shamans. The position of chief, or *cacique* was an elective one, and he would rule over the *yucayeque* or village. The *nytainos* oversaw the cultivation of the land, the training of young men for warfare, and keeping order in the community. The *cacique* was in charge of supervising all the activities in the village, and with dealing with the other *yucayeques*. There was a main *cacique*, usually the most respected chief on the island, that functioned as a mediator between individual *caciques*, and organized efforts of common benefit, like repulsing Carib raids.⁷ At the time of the conquest, the main *cacique* of Boriquén was *Agüeybaná*, and he ruled over the twenty or so other *yucayeques* on the island.⁸

The religion of the Taino was similar to that of the other peoples that originated in Amazonia. They believed in a supreme god, *Yocahú*, creator of the Universe. This god had two distinct manifestations: *Yukiyú*, that

represented good, and *Juracán*, that represented evil and destruction (thus the Taino identified the tropical storms that periodically ravaged the island with it, eventually becoming our word "hurricane"). More important for the everyday activities of the people were the *cemís*, or spirits that could influence the tribe. A *cemi* could be the spirit of a deceased ancestor, or a representation of the power of the Sun, the Moon, the sky, plants or animals.⁹ The Taino carved many images of *cemis* in stone, mostly in a triangular shape that had become the hallmark of Taino Arawak civilization.

Also an integral part of Taino religious ceremonies was the use of the *cohoba*, a narcotic that was inhaled through the nose and that introduced a trance-like state. Another practice of the Native American peoples, that was first observed by the Europeans, among the Taino was the smoking of tobacco (*tabaco*, also an Arawak word) both in religious occasions and for secular pleasure.¹⁰

The main economic activity of these early inhabitants of Puerto Rico was agriculture. Utilizing a fire-hardened pointed stick, the *coa*, they cultivated *yuca*, or manioc, a root crop. With it they prepared their main food, *casabe*, a kind of bread made of mashed *yuca*. Another edible root was the *batata* or sweet potato, and they also grew *maís* (maize or corn). Other food plants were the *lerenes*, a kind of bean, and many types of tropical fruits still found on the island, like *anón* (pineapple), *guayaba* (guava), *guanábana*, *mamey* and *jobo*.¹¹ Hunting was of lesser significance, as there were no large animals on Boriquén. The prey was limited to flocks of ducks and other birds, parrots, *iguanas* (a specie of lizard), and a small mammal, now extinct, called *jutía*. More important than hunting was fishing. The sea around the island provided a wide variety of fish, mollusks, sea turtles and some marine mammals like the *manatí* (manatee).

The religion, social/political organization and economic activities of the Taino Arawaks were similar to that of their South American relatives, but it is in their material culture that they developed a particular civilization that diverges from their Amazonian heritage. Their architecture was starkly

simple but functional. They lived in palm-thatched *bohios*, or huts, with the cacique occupying a larger house called *caney*. More spectacular were their ball-courts, or *bateys*, where the *areyto* (ceremonies) took place and the game of *batú* was conducted. The batey was a rectangular area lined with engraved stones, and the batu consisted in bouncing a rubber ball between two teams, without using the hand, (just like the Maya or Aztec games of *pok-ta-pok* and *tlachli*, respectively). As the ball game was not practiced among the Arawaks of South America, it has raised the question of possible contacts between the civilizations of Mexico and Central America, and the Antillean Arawaks.

However, there is no definite evidence yet to ascertain these claims.¹²

Pottery and stone carving were also highly developed, as witnessed by the expertise displayed on the granite *cemis* found on the island, and the ritual vessels that accompanied deceased caciques. Metalworking was basically limited to the production of jewelry and ornaments. The caciques customarily wore a golden disk hung from their necks as a symbol of rank called the *guanín*. Made of, mostly, a copper-gold alloy, this raised the interest of the early Spanish settlers, always avid for gold.¹³ The Taino also utilized diverse natural fibers to produce the *hamaca*, or hammock, the net-like bed that formed most of their furniture; as well as to make fish-nets.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ENCOUNTER OF 1492

The placid and quiet world of the Taino Arawaks, previously disturbed only by the seasonal danger of tropical storms and an occasional raid by the neighboring Caribs, was completely changed in 1492. On October 12 of that year, a Spanish expedition consisting of three ships under the command of an able Italian navigator, Christopher Columbus¹⁴, arrived at *Guanahani*, on the Bahama Islands. Here, the first encounter between the Arawaks and the Europeans took place. Columbus moved on, visiting Cuba and Haiti (Hispaniola). On this latter island he gathered some gold, befriended the local Taino, and left a small garrison in a fort before departing back to Spain.

On Hispaniola, the demands and depredations of the Spaniards provoked a reaction by the formerly friendly Taino. The fort, La Navidad, was burned down and the garrison annihilated. The first encounter had already produced a first clash.

Late in 1493, Columbus returned to the Western Hemisphere, now bringing a far larger fleet with hundreds of soldiers, sailors and settlers. Choosing a more southern route than on his first voyage, Columbus explored several of the Lesser Antilles before arriving at Boriquén on November 19, 1493. He renamed the island *Sanct Joan* ("San Juan Bautista" in Spanish), and inspected a Taino yucayeque that appeared to be abandoned by the inhabitants; then moved on to Hispaniola.¹⁵

There the newly-arrived Spaniards managed to alienate the still friendly Tainos of the *Higüey* region, where the colony was established. The people resisted the invaders, and the process of conquest of the island by force of arms started. Although the Taino resistance continued for almost fifty years, the European presence in Hispaniola was firmly entrenched by the year 1498. The Arawaks were decimated, not only by the fighting against the better armed Spaniards, but also by the introduction of European diseases.

Overwork, hunger and maltreatment under the forced labor system of *encomiendas* introduced by the conquerors, and the disruption of their traditional culture resulted in many deaths and in the wholesale migration of people to the mountains of the interior or to the neighboring islands.

The pattern already established in Hispaniola, on which the Spanish colonists claimed the land; forced the inhabitants to, first, pay tribute and then work for the settlers on *encomiendas*; and the inevitable confrontation resulting in armed resistance; all was to be repeated in Boriquén.

In 1508, Juan Ponce de León, a Spanish soldier that had participated in the conquest of Hispaniola, was awarded the title of *Capitán General* of the island of San Juan by the King of Spain. This authorized Ponce de León to settle and administer the island in the name of the Crown. Arawak Boriquén was at a crossroads, and the process that transformed the island into Spanish Puerto Rico was underway.

Ponce de León, relying on his experience in Hispaniola, decided to first establish a link of friendship with the main cacique of Boriquén, *Agüeybaná* of *Guainía*. The Taino, were at first overawed by the Spaniards, believing them to be supernatural beings. *Agüeybaná* and Ponce de León became *guaitiaos*, or blood-brothers, after a traditional ceremony of friendship between chiefs. The Spaniards then proceeded to build their settlement *Caparra*, near the present site of San Juan. The Taino supplied them with food and workers voluntarily but, as the demands for more labor and the imposition of work on the gold deposits, plus the constant abuse of their women, all began to wear their goodwill toward the Europeans. After the death of *Agüeybaná* in 1510, the new main cacique, a nephew also named *Agüeybaná* decided that the Taino must rise and recover their independence.

The only obstacle that they perceived was the widespread belief that the Spaniards were immortal. Several caciques from western Boriquén had received refugees from Hispaniola and knew that during the fighting their many enemies had been killed by the Taino warriors. One of those caciques, *Urayoán*, decided to demonstrate this fact by drowning a Spanish settler, named *Salcedo*, in his realm. After this event, the doubts in most of the

Arawaks were dissipated and the caciques of the island prepared to eject the invaders.¹⁶

The Taino scored total surprise and achieved a stunning success during the first few days of the uprising. The settlement of *Villa de Sotomayor*, on the west part of the island, was assaulted and destroyed by forces under the cacique *Guarionex*. All the Spanish settlers were killed, including the founder Cristóbal de Sotomayor, a Castilian nobleman, that was struck down in hand-to-hand combat by Guarionex himself. Another settlement was also destroyed, and then the Taino warriors regrouped at the hills of the interior before moving on to destroy the last remaining Spanish outpost, the main town of Caparra.

At this juncture, Ponce de León reinforced his troops and decided to take the offensive, advancing to meet the Taino. The Spanish and Arawak forces clashed at the region of *Yagüeca*, and the Arawak superiority in numbers began to tell on the Spaniards. The turning point of the battle occurred when *Agüeybaná* was shot and killed by a Spanish arquebusier.¹⁷ With his sudden death, the warriors lost heart and the rebellion collapsed. The Taino continued to resist for many more years. Now in cooperation with their former enemies the Caribs, they mounted attacks against the Spanish settlements in Boriquén and Hispaniola, from their bases on the Lesser Antilles. But the Spaniards were too firmly established to be dislodged. In Puerto Rico (as it was, increasingly, no longer Boriquén) the Taino were suffering from the transition of lifestyles imposed on them by their conquerors. They had to work on farms and mines; their land was now occupied by foreigners; their culture, religion and language under attack by the Christian missionaries that tried to make them forsake their old ways. Most disastrously, the Taino Arawaks were ravaged by smallpox and other diseases introduced by the Europeans and their African slaves.¹⁸ islands. The Taino Arawak civilization of Boriquén was, in effect, dying.

CHAPTER FOUR

A LEGACY THAT WOULD NOT VANISH

The Taino were rapidly incorporated into the life of the colony established by Spain. The gold deposits in Puerto Rico were soon exhausted, and many settlers moved to the newest and richest additions to the Spanish colonial empire; Mexico and Peru. The island languished for years, and it was only the recognition of the strategic location of Puerto Rico, and the increased threat of attack by other European powers now moving into the Western Hemisphere, that prompted Spain to fortify and maintain a presence on the island.

This backwardness made possible the formation, in semi-isolation, of the character of the modern Puerto Rican. The fusion of Spanish, Taino and African elements over the next three centuries resulted, as in the rest of Latin America, in the creation of the *criollo*, or local inhabitant that was no longer European, Native American or African, but something else. The Puerto Rican *jíbaro*, the local form of the *criollo*, maintain many physical and cultural traits derived from the Taino Arawak. As was pointed out before, many Taino fled to the interior, where they kept their identity and ways. The *jíbaro* that developed in these areas, then, retained many such characteristics.

The population records compiled by the Spanish authorities continued to list "Indians" as a distinguishable part of the inhabitants up until the early part of the 19th century.¹⁹ Later on, the ethnologist Jesse W. Fewkes noted the presence of strong Taino features among the local people in western Puerto Rico during his visit in 1899:

Many of the inhabitants of a mountainous section called Indiera, at the western end of the island, also have pronounced Indian features, and we may expect to find many legends, curious customs (sic), and words directly traceable to the aborigines...The

name *Indiera*, Indian land, is significant, and many archeological objects have been found in this region. Several contractors who have employed large numbers of laborers in building roads have noticed the predominance of Indian features in the mountains near *Utado* and *Comerío*, where careful investigation may reveal individuals with comparatively pure Indian blood.²⁰

One last example of the survival of the Taino heritage in Puerto Rico can be observed in the following description of their influence and the remarks of a *jíbaro* as presented by Stan Steiner in 1974:

Of all the islands in the Caribbean the influence of the Indians has been the strongest and most lasting in Borinquen (sic). In the traditional words and music, dishes and dances. And some say the ways of the Indians are visible in the easygoing way people look at the earth, the life of the family, and the life of the spirits of the dead.

"The way I look at it is this," said the storyteller [a *jíbaro*]: "Yes, we are Latins, and we are more Indian than we are Spanish."

EPILOGUE
THE LIVING TAINO HERITAGE

The fact that many Taino Arawak works, customs, traditions and products are part of the everyday life of the modern Puerto Ricans is seldom realized by those of us that are part of that community. We have been told, it is true, that the Taino were one of the three ethnic and cultural groups, together with the Spanish and the Africans that combined to create our national character. But it is mostly the Spanish-European heritage that receives the greatest emphasis, followed by the African, with the Arawak last. To try to address this imbalance, we present the following compilations of cultural traits derived from our Taino ancestors. They are only partial, of course, and, besides the data gathered throughout this research, we had included many other terms that are of common usage among our people:

The most obvious remain of the Taino culture is the language. This translation of the Lord's Prayer ("Padre Nuestro" in Spanish) is from Vives, p. 63. The text is in Arawak and Spanish:

Taino	Spanish
GUAKIA BABA	Nuestro padre
TUREY TOCA	cielo estar
GUAMI-KE-NI	señor (de) tierra (y) agua
GUAMI-CARAYA-GUEY	señor (de) luna (y) sol
GUARICO	ven (a)
GUAKIA	nosotros
TAYNO-TI	bueno, alto
BO-MATUN	grande, generoso
BUSICA	da (a)
GUAKIA	nosotros
PARA YUCUBIA	lluvia, planta
AJE-CAZABI	boniato, pan
JURACAN-NA	espíritu malo, no;
YUKIYU-JAU	espíritu bueno, sí;

DIOSA	de Dios
NABORI-DACA	siervo soy
JAN-JAN-CATU	Así sea. ^{2 1}

Some geographical terms, including place names that are of Arawak origin:

Towns - *Arecibo, Bayamón, Caguas, Coamo, Guaynabo, Guánica, Humacao, Jayuya, Maricao, Mayagüez, Toa Alta, Utuado, Yauco*
Rivers - *Gurabo, Loiza*
Islands - *Cuba, Haiti, Boriquén, Jamaica, Vieques, Mona (Amona)*

Plants and animals native to the island, with Arawak names:

Plants and plant products

Trees - *yagrumo, caoba, tabonuco, yagua*
Food roots - *batata, yucca, casabe*
Crops - *maís (corn), tabaco, lerén, maní (peanuts)*
Fruits - *ananá, jobos, guayaba, guanábana, mamey, papaya, mabí*

Animals

Birds - *guaragua, múcaro*
Reptiles - *iguana, carey (sea turtle)*
Mammals - *manatí, jutía*
Mollusks - *cobo, juey (crab)*
Fish - *cetí*
Insects - *guamá*

Utensils and domestic terms:

Places - *batey (yard); conuco (farm); sabana (savanna); cayo (key)*

Utensils - *hamaca* (hammock); *dita* (gourd); *guayo*
(grinder); *coa* (digging stick); *canoa* (canoe); *dujo/*
turey (stool)

Musical instruments - *maraca* (rattle); *güiro* (rasper);
fotuto (conch shell trumpet: refers to any wind
instrument)

fotuto (conch shell trumpet: refers to any wind instrument)

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER TWO

- Indians:
1. Steward, Julian H., ed., Handbook of South American vol.4 (New York, 1963), p. 540.
 2. Vivas, Jose Luis, Historia de Puerto Rico. (New York, 1962), p. 63. Translated by me from the Spanish "tierra del altivo senor".
 3. Steward, Julian H., p. 507.
 4. Fewkes, Jesse W., The Aborigines of Porto Rico and Neighboring Islands. (New York, 1970), pp. 27-28.
 5. Colon, Cristobal, Los cuarto viajes del Almirante y su testamento (Madrid, Spain, 1964), p. 30. Translated by me from the original Castilan.
 6. Vivas, Jose Luis, p. 65.
 7. These social and political divisions were common to all Taino Arawaks, but only in Boriquen (perhaps due to the smaller size) was a main cacique ruling over the whole island. See Fewkes, pp. 33-35; Steward, p. 541; Vivas, p. 65.

8. Figueroa, Loida, Breve historia de Puerto Rico (Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico), p. 37.

9. Fewkes, p. 54.

10. Ibid, pp. 63-64; and Steward, p. 534.

11. Steward, pp. 522-524.

12. The possibility of contacts between ancient Mesoamerica (Mexico/Central America) and the Arawaks of the Greater Antilles has become a divisive issue among scholars. Although it is acknowledged that their origin is South American, as demonstrated by most of their culture, the Taino Arawak's sophisticated stone carving, ball games, and other traits raise the question of trade links or, at least, the accidental arrival of visitors from Mesoamerica. Cuba, after all, is only 90 miles from the Yucatan Peninsula. See Miguel Covarrubias (1944), Ricardo Alegria (1965), Dr. Chaulatte-Baik (1977).

13. Crescioni, Gladys, Breve introduccion a la cultura puerto-riquena (Madrid, Spain; 1979), pp. 16-19.

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14. Christopher Columbus in the English form of the Italian Christophoro Colombo. In Spanish, the name changes to Cristobal Colon. In this paper, the English form is used in the text, although the Spanish spelling will appear on some of the sources.

15. Colon, Cristobal, pg. 45. In the original, Columbus remarks on the well-made houses, tidy gardens and straight roads of the village.

16. Figueroa, p. 57.

17. An arquebuss ("arcabuz" in Spanish) was an early firearm; slow and cumbersome, it nevertheless was terrifying to the Native Americans due to the loud noise and flash, and because it could cause harm at long distances.

Some sources indicate that it was Agueybana's golden necklace or guanin, symbol of office, that drew the attention of the Spanish marksman. See Figueroa, p. 59.

18. To replace the dwindling Arawak workforce, African slaves were introduced to Puerto Rico as early as 1513.

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19. Figueroa, pp. 69-71.

20. Fewkes, p. 25.

21. Steiner, Stan, The Islands: The Worlds of the Puerto Ricans (New York, 1974), p. 18.

22. Vives, p. 63. Translated by Dr. Cayetano Coll y Toste, one of Puerto Rico's foremost historians and archaeologists of the 19th century.

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