

## "Caribbean Archaeology and Taino Survival"

Pedro Ferbel-Azcarate and Adam X. Carpinelli

### Introduction

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 Taíno culture that survives may be considered the strongest and most deeply planted "roots" of contemporary Afro-Mestizo Criollo Caribbean identity. Ethnographic, ethno-archaeological, 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.

Most of the conclusions presented here on Taino survival are the product of the senior author's 5 years of research, living in the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic and work as co-editor on two websites that focus on the Indigenous Caribbean. When the senior author first came to the Dominican Republic to conduct dissertation research in 1992 he assumed that what he read in textbooks, journals and museums about the extinction of the Taíno was true. He found many romanticized representations of Native people used as decoration on buildings, hawking products like mascots, and generally presented in ways that suggested they were frozen with feather headdresses in a time before Columbus. For all intents and purposes, the Taíno were extinct. The senior author was therefore surprised to find many cultural forms of Taíno origin practiced in daily Dominican life, especially in the Cibao countryside, and was struck by their ironic and contradictory expression. How is it that Dominicans practice such strong indigenous cultural forms but do not identify with them? The answer seems to lie in the post-colonial reality that, when traditional cultural practices are seen as unprogressive, individuals are often ashamed by these cultural displays. At the same time, Taíno 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 Taíno heritage. In spite of this reality, it is still true, as Puerto Rican historian Jalil Sued Badillo (1992:605) suggests, "The Caribbean people are searching anxiously to extol symbols of identity as much as they are searching to prove the falsehood of colonial myths that have devalued their human worth as well as that of their lands." Sued Badillo used these words at a Society for American archaeology meeting in 1992.

Today, in 2003, it still behooves Caribbean archaeologists to understand the complexity of contemporary identity issues including the role of racism, nationalism and the politics of ethnicity. Archaeologists, then, may assist in opening the door for all Caribbean people to understand the complexities of their history, to identify with their ancestors, to celebrate their traditional culture, to protect their archaeological resources, and to use an informed perspective to find their collective path beyond Columbus's wake. This paper identifies Taino survival from several disciplinary perspectives and suggests how Caribbean archaeologists may play a greater role in this emerging dialogue. Taino survival identified between the lines of colonial history Early Spanish colonization in the Caribbean has been relatively well documented (see Deagen 1988; Keegan 1991; Sauer 1966; Wilson 1990). This is, in part, due to the nature of European-sponsored exploration into unknown lands, which demanded a legal description of "discovered" property. Accounts by Chanca, Pane, Las Casas, Oviedo, Martyr, Benzoni, and Columbus represent a wealth of information concerning the land, people, and events of the colonial Caribbean, and it is not surprising that textual evidence has driven interpretations about the Taino in academic literature (see Keegan 1991:xii-xiii; Wilson 1990:7-12). However, even with the wealth of textual sources, interpreting Spanish historical accounts is a difficult endeavor. Beyond issues of intentional misrepresentation, and selective or tendentious 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(s) and translation(s) (Galloway 1990). 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 a Taino social class hierarchy, about peaceful Tainos and warring Caribs, and about the supposed extinction of the Taino. Historically speaking, the impact of 15th century

European colonization on the Taíno was nothing short of devastating, and completely re-structured the trajectory of their native life ways.

Soon after the Taino were taken to work in gold mines as slaves, African people were brought to the Caribbean. The Taíno had to find radical ways to survive and resistance took many forms. Many Taíno fought against the intruders. Others hid in isolated Maroon communities, perhaps on their own or with runaway African slaves, far from the Spaniard towns and plantations. Others were forced into slave and serf positions and lived alongside Africans and Spaniards. Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons (1992) 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 (Moya Pons 1992:135). Interaction between Africans and Indians is documented in plantation records and in descriptions of runaway slave communities (García Arévalo 1990:275). Further ethnohistorian Lynne Guitar (1998) 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 (1998, 2003) 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. Taíno survival identified within the politics of race and ethnicity Anthropology teaches us that there is no such thing as a "pure" race or a "pure" culture-- with every generation, the composition of a population changes. Therefore, even though the physical appearance of a population may be mixed-- multi-biological-- they may still share a common cultural heritage simply by practicing traditional cultural forms. Like other populations of people in the Americas with Native American ancestry, just because Caribbean people look "African" or "European" or "Mixed" this does not mean they cannot legitimately celebrate their Native American identity. Just because they speak Spanish it does not mean their strongest cultural root comes from Spain. And just because a person with multiple ancestries wants to celebrate their Taíno roots this does not necessarily mean they want to negate their African or European or other heritages. For anthropologists, ethnicity is proving to be a

dynamic concept, influenced by national, class, and other sociopolitical boundaries, which are constantly changing through time (Anderson 1983; Brow 1990; Clifford 1988; Forte 2001; Radley 1990; Thompson 1989). The definition of an ethnic group often is not

so much about measures of blood quanta or a catalogue of cultural traits, but involves the intimate interrelations of a group's thoughts, feelings, and shared experiences. The question of ethnic authenticity, then, can become political, if such privileges as self-government and rights to land are at stake. Governments, thus, often discourage

marginal ethnic groups from strengthening their group identities so that they do not become political threats. In other words, ethnic authenticity has little to do with the ways people feel bounded together as a group, but how larger political bodies view them.

Anthropologist James Clifford (1988) 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." Caribbean people often base their identification with their Taíno roots from family experiences and traditions. Throughout the Cibao there are individuals and families who identify with their Taíno ancestry and cultural heritage. Their identity may include 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 an identification with the nation's particular history and with their heritage from African and European culture, many salient themes from their shared Taíno past can be said to constitute a distinctive Taíno identity.

### **Taino survival identified in DNA studies**

For most Native peoples of the Americas, there are few cases where blood quanta determines acceptance into a tribe (Blu 1980; Clifford 1988). However, the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs does have such definitions. Determining identity based only on percentage of biological ancestry is by its nature racist. Just as racist miscegenation laws in the United States took rights away from people with just

"one drop" of African blood, so too do laws that define inclusion in a Native American category by bloodlines alone. With all "mixed" populations, the concept of "race" is challenged by the offspring of parents who come from two different "racial" groups. What race are they? Many colonizing groups, 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 politicsought 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 Taino? Anthropologists struggle with this question. Perhaps archaeologists should as well. Physical anthropologists suggest that populations around the world have mixes of ancestries and cultures. So the idea that the Tainos of today must prove themselves to be comparable to the Tainos of 1492 ought to be as nonsensical as Spaniards today proving themselves to be comparable to Spaniards of 1492! While "race" is a social construct, biological and DNA studies do provide evidence of continuity between populations. Some anthropometric studies have been undertaken, notably by Rivero de la Calle in Eastern Cuba.

More recent DNA studies by Puerto Rican biologist Juan Martinez Cruzado (2002) and Dominican physical anthropologist Fernando Luna Calderon (2002) have proven to be even more provocative, suggesting high percentages of Indigenous bloodlines in both Puerto Rican and Dominican populations. Taino survival identified in contemporary cultural heritage Cultural heritage may be defined as the legacy of customs, beliefs and social practices that contemporary people have carried on from their ancestral past to create their communal identity in the present. Taino heritage can be found in the Dominican Republic in an extraordinary number of categories, including linguistic features; agricultural practices; the use of yuca and casabe; indigenous fruits, vegetables, and tobacco; medicinal knowledge; fishing techniques; architecture; crafts, tools, and technologies; folklore and religion; arts, poetry, and literature; popular identity; and popular culture (Ferbel 1995; Garcia Arévalo 1988, 1990; Vega 1980; Weeks and Ferbel 1994). The survival of Taino culture has been documented in the work of two important studies addressing Taino heritage in the Dominican Republic—Bernardo Vega's (1981) "La herencia indígena en la cultura dominicana de hoy" and Garcia Arévalo's (1988)

"Indigenismo, arqueología, e identidad nacional." Recent work in this area (Ferbel 2002) has expanded on these earlier studies. Proceedings from a conference on Taino survival which was presented at the Museo del Hombre Dominicano in 2002 have been published on the internet at [www.kacike.org](http://www.kacike.org). 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. We encourage everyone to go to the Cibao and see how casabe bread is still made today at the household level. And check out the kacike website. While Bernardo Vega (1981:12) conservatively suggests that "The Indigenous must not be exaggerated in [Dominican] culture... What is fair to point out, however, is the surprising persistence of certain Indigenous cultural legacies, given the very brief period of contact" (translated in Garcia Arevalo 1990:273). But, we may ask ourselves, why is the persistence of these Taino cultural traits necessarily surprising? As Reid (1992) points out, Dominicans living in traditional rural settings seem to have more in common with the Taino Indians who were conquered by the Spanish, than with the Spanish themselves. Perhaps the period of Spaniard-Indian contact was not so brief after all?!

Taino survival identified by individuals who identify as Taino 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 (Bousquet 1994; Gregoire and Kanem 1989; Layng 1983; Palacio 1989). There are also communities in eastern Cuba and in Puerto Rico with strong Taino identity (Barreiro 1989, 1990; Gonzalez 1990; Noguera Vidal 1990; Rivero de la Calle 1978). Trinidad is well known for their Carib community in Arima (Forte 2001). 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 (Gonzalez 1988). In other parts of the Caribbean, notably in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dutch Antilles islands of Bonaire and Curacao (Haviser 1991), 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. 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.

Conclusion: Taino Survival and Caribbean Archaeology As Garcia Arevalo (1990:275) notes, "The persistence of a Taino genetic component in contemporary Dominican life, along with the survival of certain undeniably indigenous beliefs and traditions (kept alive in rural areas and passed along through oral tradition) requires the recognition of a native substratum in our midst today."

Indeed, the tenacity of Taino cultural expression perhaps suggests that a re-examination and reclamation of the Taino past is imminent.

In terms of the protection of archaeological resources, and in terms of the identity which arises from knowledge of history and culture, archaeology can play a substantive role. Unfortunately, the colonial and neo-colonial status of the Caribbean, whereby people and places are seen as economic ventures, the accounts, scholarly research, and cultural artifacts are found principally in museums, archives, and universities of foreign countries of the "First World." In this way, 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 demeaned as 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. History and culture [in the Caribbean are] nobody's business" [Branford 1971:155]. 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. For poor countries, history and archaeology are simply not high priority endeavors. We agree with Sued Badillo when he suggests (1992:601) "... academic historiography (archaeology included), as practiced by both natives and non-natives, remains at the margins of the [Caribbean]'s cultural debates, and with the exception of Cuba, the dominant historiography is based on archaic text books, irrelevant news coverage, and official promotion of ideologized historical festivities..." U.S. Archaeologists Potter and Leone (1992) and Fuller (1992) demonstrate 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. Archaeologists should use their resources to help develop sites as community museums and monuments (Stone and MacKenzie 1990). Only when the local community is involved will they take pride in the results. Sued Badillo (1992:604) concludes 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..." Dominican educator Antonio de Moya (1993) assesses the need for critical thinking in Dominican history. He writes in an official educational publication that "the [Taino] genocide is the big lie of our history... the Dominican Tainos continue to live, 500 years after European contact" (1993:10). How should archaeologists respond? The authors 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.