

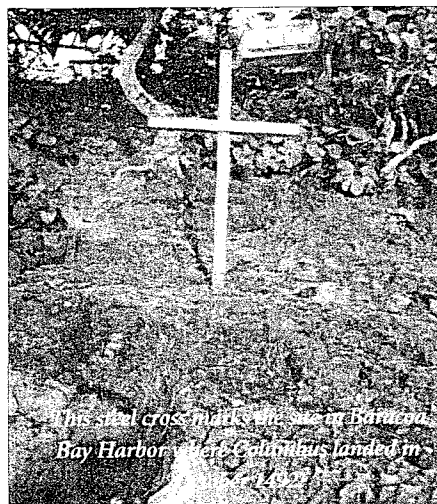
Panchito Ramirez (Taino), cacique (chief) of *Caridad de los Indios*, is descended from a family of traditional chiefs who have long struggled to maintain elements of their culture.



Defying the Myth of Extinction

High in the tropically lush mountains overlooking Guantanamo, Panchito Ramirez somehow missed the news bulletin that his people had become extinct. Although history books and literature tell us Taino Indians were completely wiped out by genocide and disease, Ramirez and some 350 members of his village are living proof that the myth of extinction is false.

Though their numbers dwindled dramatically through centuries of struggle following the Spanish conquest, Taino descendants here and elsewhere continue to live a simple lifestyle much as their ancestors did before Columbus arrived. Since the Cuban Revolution, they now



This steel cross marks the site at Baracoa Bay Harbor where Columbus landed in 1492.

have access to a doctor at a small clinic and free schooling for their children, but their spirituality and lifeways resonate with Taino traditions.

In the village of *Caridad de los Indios*, the traditional *bohios*, or thatched-roof huts, are interspersed with *conucos*, the old-style, permanent gardens that Ramirez calls their "grocery store." The raised-bed gardens are intercropped with a variety of vegetables and fruits that provide most of the food for the village. Literally hundreds of herbal medicines, still gathered and prepared today by ancient methods, grow throughout the fertile mountains and valleys of the region, Ramirez says. Clearly songs, ceremonies, and parts of the language of the Taino are still alive in these

Story and Photo by Robert Galois



mountain people, taught to them by their parents and grandparents, whose beliefs centered on thanking Mother Earth and what she gives to the people. Their ceremonies honor and pay tribute to the Creator and to the sun, moon, stars, water, winds, and the four directions. Traditional healing methods are a part of everyday life, and planting is timed by the phases of the moon.

In January, at a historic reunion in the new millennium, Taino descendants from the United States and Puerto Rico made the long voyage to Ramirez's village among a group of Native healers, writers, and scholars on a tour and conference organized by Indigenous World Tours and the Foundation for Nature and Humanity.

Daniel Wakonax Rivera, a Brooklyn native who spent the last eight years compiling a dictionary of the Taino language, had waited a lifetime to rediscover the roots of his ancestry. Six days into the trip, after a morning of grueling travel over rocky, mud-filled roads and a two-mile uphill hike in the rain, he found what he was longing for. "When we climbed over that last ridge in the mountains and I heard the drums and the songs of our people welcoming us, I was just overwhelmed with emotion," he said with tears in his eyes. "It was like coming home."

For Ramirez, who is cacique or chief of his village, it was no less than an answer to his prayers – an affirmation that those who had been stolen into slavery had survived and sent

their children back to join them. "It is so good to see all of you," Ramirez said to his Taino-American relatives. "Now we know we are not the last of our kind. We no longer feel alone."

There are perhaps thousands of Taino descendants living in seven or more small communities in Cuba as well as in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Florida, New York, California, Hawaii, and even Spain, where many of their ancestors were taken as slaves. It is only in the last few decades that the culture has been revitalized and Taino people have created a resurgence of their traditions. Saddled with the myth of extinction and written out of the history books, Taino descendants have nonetheless struggled to hold onto their language and traditions.

Rosa, a second grader at José Martí School in Santiago de Cuba, gave a presentation of common medicinal plants.

"Sometimes people laugh when I tell them I am Taino," said David Cintron, a University of Florida graduate student on the tour who is writing his thesis on the Taino revitalization movement. "Are there any left?" they ask. Perhaps there are no more pure-bloods, but there are plenty of Tainos. It's just that no one has been taught the true history of our people.

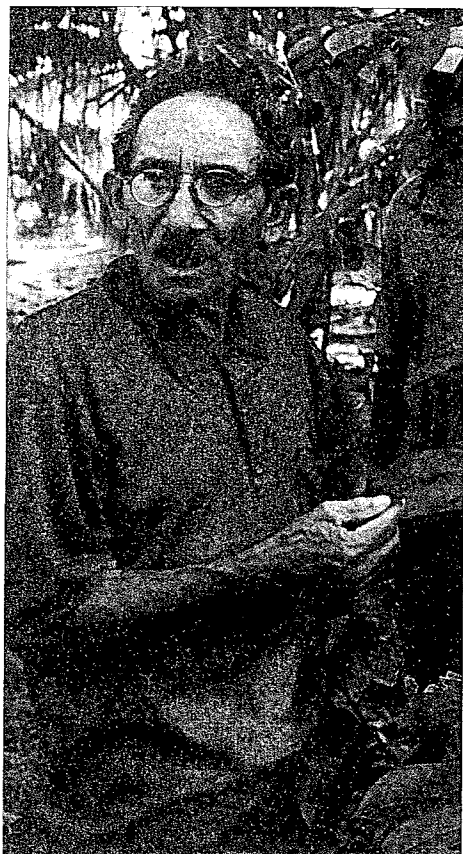
"It's surprising just how many Taino traditions, customs, and practices have been continued. We simply take for granted that these are Puerto Rican or Cuban practices and never realize that they are really Taino," he added. "[Our] survival is evidence of persistent indigenous resistance to invasion, conquest, colonization, and assimilation. It is evidence that assimilation cuts both ways – that our colonizers also learned much from us."

Rediscovering and celebrating these traditions was the theme of the fifth annual conference, *Indigenous Legacies of the Caribbean*, which brought the delegation on an eight-day tour of Cuba that included Santiago de Cuba, Caridad de los Indios, Guantanamo, and many small communities on Cuba's tropical eastern shore. The three-day conference was held in Baracoa Bay, the oldest colonial city in the Americas, where it is said Columbus landed during his first trip as he made his way up the Caribbean islands. Left behind by Columbus, the wooden cross still stands in the Catedral Nuestra Senora de la Asuncion, where it was moved years after Columbus had left it standing in the harbor entrance in October 1492, according to local historian Alejandro Hartmann Matos.

Throughout the conference, historians, anthropologists, doctors, educators, and indigenous herbalists shared their knowledge and documentation of Taino cultural practices inherent in Cuba's music, organic farming practices, and unique health care system, which relies heavily on herbal medicines.

José Barreiro, editor-in-chief of Cornell University's *Native Americas*, is coordinator for the annual conference. A scholar of the Taino legacies of his Guajiro ancestors in Cuba, Barreiro fulfilled a life-long dream of introducing Native Americans from the hemisphere to the Taino community of Cuba. "There is a lot at the heart of Cuban culture that is Taino, much more than people have realized," he said, pointing out the region from Baracoa to Guantanamo as the epicenter of that piece of Cuban culture. "You find it particularly in the use of the medicines and in the belief in spirits," he said.

The use of "green medicine" is widespread in Cuba, partly due to the strict trade embargo



Taino healer and herbalist, Panchito Ramirez, explains how one of hundreds of plants in the "healing forest" of the Tao River are prepared and used in traditional healing practices.

set in place by the United States in 1961 and compounded by the termination of subsidies from the Soviet Union in 1990. Free health care is available to all Cuban citizens, who enjoy one of the highest doctor-patient ratios in the world, with one doctor for every 170 inhabitants, according to Cuban Health Minister Carlos Dotres. In most neighborhoods, a doctor and nurse are on call 24 hours a day, and of the 65,000 doctors in the Cuban health care

system, more than half are women. But medicine and equipment are often difficult to obtain.

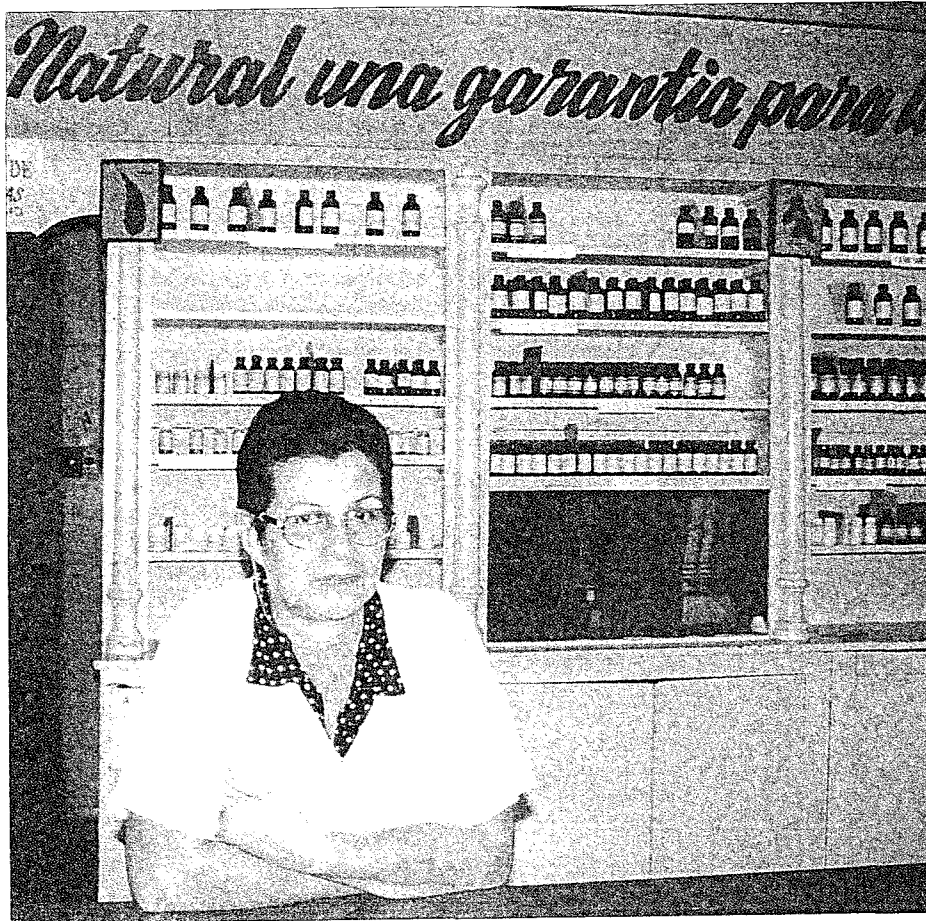
Consequently, indigenous knowledge of plant medicines is highly valued in Cuba, and green medicine is commonly used as an alternative to pharmaceuticals. Even children in elementary schools are trained in the use of herbal remedies that can be prepared at home as poultices, tinctures, salves, and teas. Local gardens, nearly all of which are organic, are grown in large plots even in the cities and stocked with natural medicines such as *salvia*, *aloe*, *manzanilla*, *oregano*, *calabaza*, and *tilo*.

Extracts from green medicines have produced an amazing array of natural remedies that are sold in local pharmacies, which also provide conversion charts depicting what herbal remedies can be substituted for pharmaceutical drugs.

In addition, for more than 20 years, Cuban doctors have focused much research on the use of alternative and innovative medical treatments, including cutting-edge research with animal toxins that has produced some promising results. Dr. José Rodríguez Alonzo, an Oxford-trained Cuban physician at Guantanamo Medical University, has specialized in the use of plant extracts and animal toxins for 18 years. Speaking to the group in Baracoa Bay, Rodríguez described the medical researchers' discovery of local people using scorpions to treat arthritis. "The sting of the scorpion is very painful, and yet we saw that traditional healers would use the scorpions to sting their knees or wrists," Rodríguez said. "We wondered why, and in our research we found that scorpion venom acts as an anti-inflammatory agent. It also stimulates the immune system and shrinks tumors, so we began further research and our findings have been very rewarding." Dr. Rodríguez said the venom of one of the 28 species of scorpions endemic to the region was especially successful in treating brain tumors, arthritis, and cancer of the liver, colon, and cervix. Researchers believe the toxic venom starves cancer cells of nutrients, thereby reducing and even eliminating tumors.

Renowned scientist Dr. Eloy Rodríguez, who holds the James A. Perkins Professor of Environmental Studies chair at Cornell University, also spoke at the conference and confirmed that new research with scorpion venom is being lauded in the United States as a possible cure for cancer. He said he had come to Cuba in part because he had heard about the work of Cuban researchers and wanted to

Continued on page 24



Continued from page 19

compare the research with his own Cornell project in the Dominican Republic, where he does field work studying how animals use plants as medicines.

Quecha traditional healer Roderico Teni of Guatemala added a new dimension to the discussion when he explained to the two doctors that his people also use scorpion venom in traditional healing practices. In Guatemala, they have long known that the antidote to the venom is contained in the waste sac of the scorpion, making it possible to treat scorpion bites easily.

Mohawk herbalist and elder Janice Longboat of Six Nations Reserve in Canada also addressed the conference, beginning with a traditional song and prayer. Longboat spoke about the traditional healing practices and medicinal knowledge of her people, including cancer remedies and the use of plant medicines and ceremony.

Dr. Eloy Rodriguez, who remembers growing up as "a poor Mexican kid" from Texas who overcame adversity with education, said, "Western science is just now beginning to vali-

date the tremendous knowledge base that indigenous healers have developed over hundreds of years. The main difference is that indigenous healers' knowledge of herbal medicines is far more complex, combining several medicines to treat an illness, while the emphasis in Western medicine is to find just one drug to treat an illness."

Ramirez and his daughter Reina, who is an apprentice to her father in healing ceremonies, offered a tour through the "healing forest" on an island in the Toa River abundant in natural medicines that are carefully protected and conserved. Tour participants also visited several schools and clinics, attended mountain dances and cultural presentations, and savored Native foods prepared by hospitable and welcoming women in every community visited.

Before returning to Santiago de Cuba, Ramirez held ceremonies on a mountain overlooking Baracoa Bay to honor the memory of Menominee activist Ingrid Washinawatok El-Issa and Native Hawaiian artist Lahe'ena'e Gay, who were kidnapped and killed in Colombia two years ago while organizing a school for Uwa children. Washinawatok's activism and

philanthropic work with indigenous peoples included the Taino of Cuba, who also want to establish culturally based schools.

At the ceremony, Ali El-Issa and John Livingstone remembered their wives as committed Native women who gave their lives in the struggle for peace and justice for indigenous peoples. Taino ceremonial songs were sung to mourn their deaths and celebrate their lives. El-Issa announced that he and Livingstone were continuing the work of their wives through the Flying Eagle Woman Fund, a foundation based in New York City devoted to helping indigenous communities strengthen sovereignty and maintain traditional lifeways.

On the final day of the tour, representatives from Cuba's Interior Ministry came to invite Ramirez to participate in the inaugural ceremonies of Cuba's International Tobacco Festival which was held in mid-February in Havana. They said Cuba recognizes that the Taino cultivated natural tobacco for use in ceremonies and later gave it to the world as a gift, and, therefore, felt it appropriate for cacique Ramirez to open the festival with tobacco ceremonies.

The journey to learn about the indigenous legacies of the Caribbean proved to be very rewarding for conference-tour participants, especially those who discovered a wealth of cultural and spiritual ties that continue to bind Native peoples of the North and South.

Reina Ramirez asked the group to carry a message home to Native women in the North, reminding us that we are all related. "From the women here, in Caridad, to our sister-mothers in the North and other lands, we send greetings," she said. "Keep your traditions. We wish you healthy children."

Inarunikia Pastrana, a Taino nurse and radio producer from New York City, quietly remembered that 500 years ago the Spaniards invaded her land and enslaved, tortured, and decimated her people. "But our ancestors fought for survival, and thanks to their tenacity, the resurgence and restoration of the Taino people are a reality," she said. "Our language is heard once more; our songs are sung once more. Against all odds, we have defeated extinction and continue to rescue our ancestral heritage and culture." ■

Valerie Taliman (Navajo) is associate producer of Native America Calling, a nationally syndicated talk radio show broadcast in the United States and Canada. She is based in Albuquerque, N.M.

Staff at this Baroco Bay pharmacy educate consumers about tinctures and salves made from plant medicines.