8

ıdians in Cuba

ȷose Barreiro

.ınta Maisí, Cuba

The old Indian woman, a descendant of Cuba's 'aino-Arawak people, bent over and touched the :aves of a small tree. Her open-palmed hand lifted he round, green leaves in a light handshake. "These are good for inflammations of the ovaries," she said. "I gave them to all my young women." "She knows a lot," her daughter, Marta, said. "She doesn't need a pharmacy. You have something wrong with your body, she can make you a tea—*un cocimiento*—and fix you up."

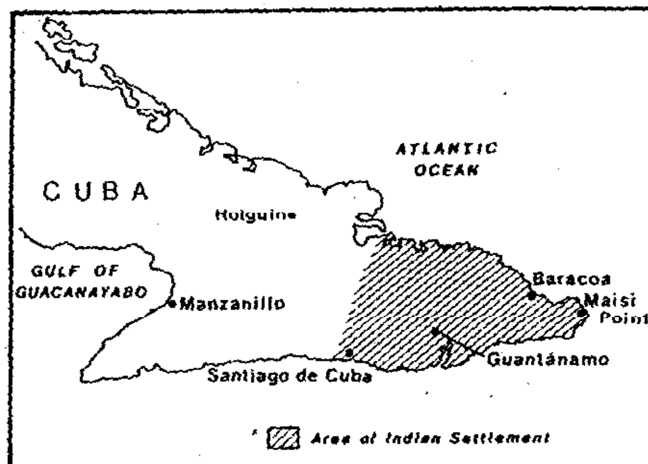
The mother and two sisters, part of a large extended family known in this town for its Indian ancestry, continued to show me their patio. Around an old well, where they wash their laundry, they pointed out more than a dozen herbs and other useful plants. The Cobas Hernandez clan, from which Maria and her several daughters, her son, Pedro, and his brothers spring, counts several living generations of families from here to the city of Baracoa, about 120 km west from Los Arados on Cuba's southern coast. They are not the only such extended family and they are not the only people of clear Indian ancestry in Cuba still living in their aboriginal areas.

It may surprise many social scientists that nestled in the mountains of the Oriente region (eastern Cuba), from Baracoa on the southern coast all the way to the Pico Turquino, the highest mountain in Cuba, there are numerous *caserios*, several *barrios*, and at least one community of more than a thousand Indian people. They were called *Cubeños* by Father Bartolome de Las Casas, who helped some of their communities to survive, and are ancestors of the original Tainos who met Columbus.

In March and April 1989, I traveled to Santiago de Cuba to attend a conference, "Seeds of Commerce," mutually sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and a Cuban research center, the Casa del Caribe. I took the opportunity to extend my visit for two weeks, first in the Baracoa-Punta Maisi region and then west to the plains country of Camaguey. I wanted to ascertain the veracity of testimonies that I had heard as a child and that have been recently published in Cuban academic journals, to the effect that Taino-Arawak descendants inhabit the eastern region of Cuba. I wanted to reacquaint myself with the people of *guajiro* background still prevalent in the Camaguey countryside.

I heard about the Indian families of Baracoa while I was growing up in the Camaguey region, some 300 km to the northeast of Baracoa, during the 1950s, before I migrated to the United States at age 12.

Among my elder relatives, don Joseito Veloz (born 1891) migrated to Camaguey from the vicinity of the oriental mountain city of Bayamo. Don Joseito told



stories about the old communities in and near Baracoa. He was himself what is called in Camaguey a "guajiro," and one who pointed out the Indian origins of many of his customs and lifeways: the thatch-roof *bohio* made out of the royal palm so abundant in Cuba; and his *yucca* field and his custom of eating the yucca bread, casabe, and the traditional Taino soup, called the *ajiaco*. Guajiro identity, customs, and lifestyle still prevail throughout the Camaguey region.[1]

More recently, after writing for some years on diverse Indian cultures, indigenous development, agriculture, and human rights issues, I noticed several articles in the Cuban press detailing studies carried out among the Indian descendants in the Baracoa region. The studies were carried out by investigators from the University of Havana, in cooperation with scientists from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union.

Rivero de la Calle Study

At the University of Havana, I met the chief investigator of those studies, Manuel Rivero de la Calle, a gentle, soft-spoken scholar who is dean of Cuban anthropology. He started work in the Oriente area in the mid-1960s, leading a team that for several years conducted studies in physical and biological anthropology with an extended "base" population in the Yateras municipality of the new province of Guantánamo, not far from Baracoa.

Rivero's biological study, conducted in two stages—1964 and 1972-1973—focused exclusively or certifying racial composition on a sample of 300 people of Indian origin in the Yateras municipality. His methodology included anthropometric measuremen and somastopic observations (following the Interna tional Biologic Program), serulogic characteristics, and family genealogies.

The methodology of "physical anthropology,"

Guajiro homestead, Baracoa. ©J. Barreiro

which uses anthropometric measurements, is considered antiquated by North American scholars and insulting by many Indians. Nevertheless, it proves fruitful in initially identifying the effusive Cuban indigenous population.

Rivero's conclusions challenged official academic and sociological positions in Cuba – positions accepted by the international academy – that the Indian population of Cuba was totally extinguished by 1550. Indeed, the scientists found that at least 1,000 people conforming to physical characteristics associated with the Arawak branch of Amazonian Indian peoples live in Yateras alone. The studies assert what oral and written historical sources have also attested: the Yateras Indians are a core group in a larger pattern of extended families and communities of similar Indian origin, now increasingly intermarried with other Cubans of Iberian and African ancestry.

Historical References

The existence of an Indian population and identity in Cuba was vehemently denied for most of the twentieth century, primarily by the Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz. A liberal professor of Hispanic ancestry, Ortiz saw the question of Indian identity as a ploy by the right wing to obfuscate black issues. Deeply conversant in all the social sciences, Ortiz was limited by a Havana base and by a purist, "bell jar" anthropological perspective of Indian-ness. This perspective maintains that American Indians cease to be "real" Indians as they adapt Western tools and methods. Indian "cultures" are assumed frozen at the moment of contact with "the West." Although he framed the theme of "transculturation" in Cuban letters, Ortiz provided the tree of Cuban multiethnicity with a strictly Ibero-African trunk. The assertion became that all Cuban Indians, purportedly a weak and timid people, were exterminated by 1550.

Nevertheless, the historic and ethnographic record supports the Indian presence in eastern Cuba – the existence of its actual population of descendants and its cultural extensions. Both Rivero and Antonio Nunez Jimenez, a prominent Cuban naturalist – and other historical references – confirm the existence of dozens of Indian family nuclei (caserios) in the extended region of Oriente, from Baracoa to Punta Maisi, to the Sierra Maestra and the Pico Turquino. In the absence of a proper census, it is hard to hazard a guess as to the total population of Indian descendants in the general Oriente area, but it probably comes to several thousand people.

Miguel Rodriguez Ferrer, a Spanish scientist who visited the area in 1847, wrote in the 1870s about finding Indian communities at El Caney, in Jiguani, and on the banks of the Yumuri River (Baracoa). He wrote that the people lived in bohios, and "gifted me with a dance" – possibly an *Areito*, the round dance of the Tainos – during which they recited cosmologies.

Jose Martí, the poet and revolutionary apostle of Cuban independence, traveled in the area in his final days, camping with Indian families. His diary entries just prior to his death in a Spanish ambush in May 1895 describe the "*indios de Garrido*," direct ancestors of the Yateras families. Marti wondered at reports that some Indians were scouting for the Spanish troops against the insurrectionists. In a letter of 23 June 1895, possibly in answer to Martí's inquiry, another major historical figure, General Antonio Maceo, who commanded troops in the area, commented that the "Indians of Yateras" had now passed into the Cuban insurrectionary ranks (Martí 1964).

A French doctor and anthropologist, Henri Dumont, who for decades lived in the eastern sugar plantations and provided care for black slaves, wrote in 1922 about the existence of Indians in the interior provinces of Cuba – "but where they abound with most frequency is in the eastern department" (Dumont 1922).

The Cuban historian Felipe Pichardo Moya wrote in 1945 that during the 1840s Indians in El Caney, near Santiago, could muster "several hundred pure-blood warriors." In March 1845, Remigio Torres, a "pure-blood Indian" clerk of the municipality, claimed lands for the Indian population of the "many Indians in the extended semi-circle from the Paso de la Virgen to the foothills of the Sierra de Limones." As proof of cultural continuity, the Indian clerk asserted that every Sunday Indian people held their original dances. In 1849, the same clerk, still arguing Indian land rights, told a meeting of the Cabildo: "You know that it is very rare for a natural of the People to mix his Indian blood with that of the Spanish, and insofar as marriage with the people of color, this was never permitted to them as per arrangement with the sovereign dispositions." As late as 1936, an official Cuban map of Oriente Province showed Indian reservations at Tiguabos (between Baracoa and Santiago) and at Palenque (Moya 1945).

Oral history of Yateras Indians corroborates court records indicating that the Indian caserios at Tiguabos and Palenque and Indian settlements in the San Andres valley were dispossessed, farm by farm, during the nineteenth century. Those Indian populations, many with the family names of Rojas and Ramirez, resettled in the more remote valley of Yateras and formed a community called Caridad de los Indios. All along that valley of the Rio Toa and down to Baracoa and Yumuri, and along the coast to

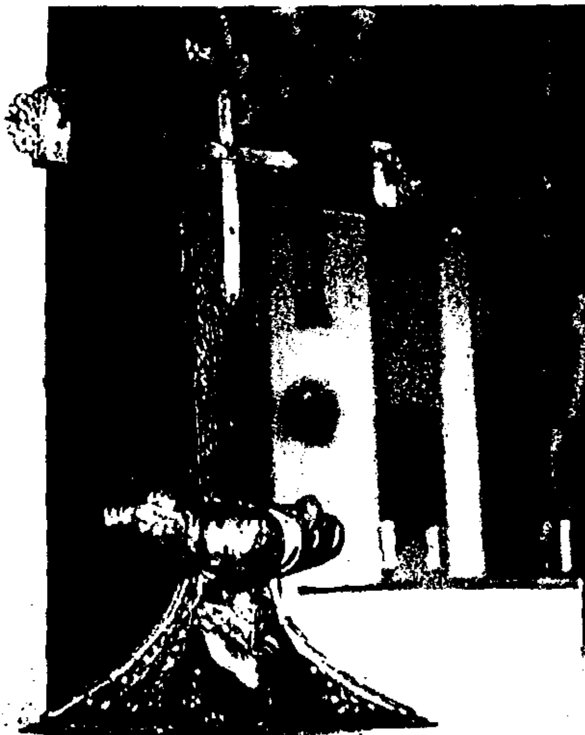
Los Arados, in Punta Maisi, the families of Rojas and Ramirez, as well as the Romeros, the Cobas, the Riveros, many of the Jimenez, Hernandez, Veloz, and Cabrera, retain history, identity, and customs rooted in the Cuban Arawak traditions, the old Taino homeland.[2]

Among the People.

Alejandro Hartmann, the *criollo* historian of Baracoa, accompanied me in my initial rounds in the area. A good citizen and a critical thinker, Hartmann heads the restoration of Baracoa, the first colonial village founded in Cuba (1511). He pointed out that as late as 1561, Baracoa's actual population was made up of three Spanish and more than fifty Taino homesteads. A native Baracoan of German ancestry, Hartmann marveled at the fuss about the Indian presence in the area. He pointed out that until the 1900s the region was relatively unpopulated by Europeans and Africans. "Of course, the Indian presence is all around us," he said. "I know many families who are clearly Indian."

Hartmann pointed out that "from Baracoa to Punta Maisi, the people use more Taino words than anywhere else in Cuba."[3] He introduced me to several households in Baracoa, Cuirito, and Yumuri, where I conducted interviews. One early morning we took the coastal road to Punta Maisi (*maisi* is the Taino word for "maize"), where we met Pedro Hernandez's family at Los Arados.

"Here I can say, our Indian people, we have been like a fish in a cooler, our eyes wide open but not seeing," Pedro Hernandez Cobas said. His sisters and mother had brought us into the living room of the family's wood-frame, thatch-roofed house. His



Cruz de Parra, Baracoa, set by Columbus in 1492.
©J. Barreiro

mother and sisters nodded when he said, "We have always been Indians. Our family, and there are many other families just here in Los Arados, this is our ancestry. But I must tell you, it is only in recent years that we discuss it openly with other people."

Hernandez, curator of a small museum at Los Arados, is in his thirties and is a militant of the Cuban Communist Party. He greatly admires Fidel Castro and particularly the late revolutionary commander, Camilo Cienfuegos. However, his professed passion is learning about his Indian past. Hernandez worked with Rivero's team during their study at Yateras. "There are a lot of Indian families there," he said. "But for a long time, we have been isolated from each other. It has been good for us that other people pay attention now."

I took a ride with Hernandez to the lighthouse at Punta Maisi, easternmost point in Cuba, 50 miles across the Windward Channel from Haiti. Along the way we stopped several times to visit with other Indians walking along the road. Two young women, from another Indian family, were walking to town to get milk. They agreed to be photographed and told us that their father had been a guide to Cuban explorer Nunez Jimenez during his expeditions in the area in the 1950s. Their grandfather, they said, guided the North American archaeologist Mark Harrington at the turn of the century.

The women's features had been measured for a study in 1964, and they joked about having high cheekbones when I went to photograph them. One mimicked how the investigators had marveled at their straight, black hair. As we drove away, Hernandez apologized for their grandfather guide, whom he "respected" but whose knowledgeable eye had led Harrington to valuable Indian pieces hidden and carved in caves. "That Harrington took many Indian pieces from here to New York. He even sawed off a stalagmite statue and carted it away," he said.

Over several days, often with Hartmann, I visited and interviewed 14 members of five extended families claiming a Cuban Indian ethnicity. Besides Punta Maisi and Los Arados, people received me along the Rio Toa valley north of Baracoa, along the banks of the Yumuri, east of the city, and in a barrio of Baracoa itself. To the unpracticed eye, but for their looks, many of my interviewees appeared much like other Cuban campesinos. Among all of them I found a casual sense of Indian identity, and most retained important aspects of physical and spiritual culture.

On the way from Baracoa to Punta Maisi, we stopped at a guajiro cemetery near the coast. An indigenous touch: many of the simple graves were covered by small, thatch "houses" and surrounded by large sea shells. The shells (*Strombus gigas Linneo*), known in the area by their Taino name, *guamo*, are believed to protect the deceased from bothersome spirits; guajiro families still use them to call one another across remote valleys.

One evening in Baracoa, I witnessed a communal dance, kept alive by only one Indian caserio at Guirito. The dance, called *quiriba*, has been passed down the generations by several related families. The

quiriba certainly has French elements to it (many French people settled in the general region of Oriente after the black revolution in Haiti in the mid-1800s), but is significantly unique in that it has survived within an Indian community.

All the agriculturalists confirmed, with great certainty, the practice of planting root crops by the waning moon (*luna menguante*). The assertion is that both yucca and *boniato* (a native sweet potato) will "rot early" (*se pica temprano*) if not planted by the waning moon. In cutting wood, too, local guajiros argue that it will rot faster if cut in the full or ascending moons. One old man near the banks of the Rio Toa spoke of fishing by the moon for a fish called the *teti*, which is scarce at other times.

At Los Arados, I also visited an elementary school; the principal asked the Indian children to gather, and about 25 students quickly surrounded us. Some were more reticent than others, but all affirmed their Indian background. Many of their names corresponded to the family names identified with Indian-ness.

My questions concentrated on a person's basis or rationale for claiming an Indian identity. All pointed to family history: "We are an Indian family. It has been always that way." "We do Indian things, like my mother, she drinks from a *jicara*, nothing else, she won't use a glass or a cup." "We know the wilderness [*manigua*]."

Going toward the Punta Maisi lighthouse, I asked Hartmann about the reluctance of some Cuban academics to accept the Indian identity in this area of Cuba. He responded, "Well, even Rivero, he refuses to say the people here are Indians – he defines them as 'descendants' of Indians. It is common to say that there are no Indians left in Cuba."

"But I am here," Pedro Hernandez said from the back seat. "Indians or descendants, it's the same thing. They, the old Tainos, were here. Now, we, my generation, we are here. We don't live exactly like they did, but we are still here."

Not only Hernandez, but everyone interviewed expressed interest in a conference or congress of Indian families. The idea that people with Indian backgrounds and identity could meet and exchange oral histories and natural knowledge was appealing to everyone I interviewed. Several people had heard about the Columbus Quincentenary, coming up in 1992, and expressed interest in some kind of event to observe the occasion. Since the aboriginal ancestors of this region, the Taino, were the first American Indians to greet Columbus, the idea seemed pertinent.

The Legend of Yumuri

At Guirito, I talked with Dora Romero Palmero, 78; her son, Pedro Cobas Romero, 53; and her daughter, Mirta, 48. Grandmother Dora, as with Maria Cobas Hernandez in Los Arados, had been a midwife and was still a well-known herbalist. Dora Romero, from an Indian family, had earlier married a Cobas. Her son, Pedro Cobas Romero, was a cousin to Pedro Hernandez Cobas from Los Arados – yet the two had never met.

Pedro Cobas said, "Our people have suffered a lot. I myself went to work as a boy of six, picking cof-

Pedro and Maria Cobas Romero, Guirito. © J. Barreiro

fee. That was the time you started work then. The adults in our families recognized each other as Indian, but we children were directed not to talk about it."

He retold a legend about the promontory at the mouth of the Yumuri, a river that flows into the Atlantic not far from Guirito. It is said that during the Spanish conquest the Indian families who could not escape enslavement by the *conquistadors* climbed the mountain and cursed their pursuers. Entire families committed suicide by jumping. "How horrible that was," Hartmann commented. "But it is understandable, a proper thing," Cobas responded. "The conquistadors treated them so bad in the mines and the fields. After they had lost in combat, this was their only way left to defeat the Spanish, by killing themselves. That way they could not be humiliated. And they died with their dignity."

Cobas also retold the stories of Hatuey and Guama, two Taino *caciques* who led the wars against the early Spanish conquest. "Hatuey was from what is now Haiti, but Guama was a cacique here. Hatuey crossed over to warn Guama and other chiefs about the evil of the Spanish, what they had done to the Tainos on that island. They say Hatuey brought a basket of gold in his canoe and told our people this gold was the only god the Spanish adored."

Both Hatuey and Guama were killed, but not before leading a 10-year resistance to the conquest. Other uprisings occurred in the area into the late 1500s. "They say a Spanish friar wanted to baptize Hatuey as the soldiers got ready to burn him at the stake," Cobas said. "He informed Hatuey that if baptized as a Christian, he would go to Heaven; but Hatuey, who despised the Christians, refused the baptism. He preferred to go to hell, he said."

The Way of the Yerbas

Three older women, all grandmothers of extended families, discussed herbal traditions with me. "Green medicine," as their traditional knowledge is now called in Cuba, is of great interest to the government, which is presently testing herbal substances in medical laboratories in Santiago and Havana.

The tropical fecundity of the region generates a

lush plant life, much of which is named with Indian words. The grandmothers were slow at first to reveal their knowledge, but warmed to the subject as we established mutual respect. Walking with Dora Romero around her bohio in Guirito, I noted what I could as she pointed out small herbs and specific trees with medicinal properties. With each plant, she explained when and how to pick it, and what part of the plant to use and how to use it. No longer an active midwife (government doctors, who provide free medical care even in these remote parts, have pushed aside the traditional midwifery), Romero claims to have delivered more than 200 infants in her time, mostly cousins, daughters, and granddaughters of her extended family. I asked both Romero and Aleida Hernandez about the source of their herbal traditions. "From my mother," Romero said. "From the grandmothers," Hernandez responded. It was Hernandez, too, in Los Arados, who first pointed out the wild tobacco plant growing on a trail behind her house.

The tobacco was most important to me, in that it is a peculiarly American plant, used by many Indian people in spiritual ceremonies. I asked her if she used the tobacco in any way.

She looked away. "My father smoked tobacco," she said. "He liked the cigar" (*el tabaco*).

I said, "Not just to smoke, like anybody does. Many people smoke tabacos in Cuba. But the tobacco plant itself, do you use it as a connection?"

"For the collection of the little leaves from the plants," she said quickly.

"Yes?"

"An offering," she said (*una ofrenda*). "To the mother plant. We give her the little seeds of the tabaco."

"So, you offer it to the plant or herb you are going to pick?"

"Yes, that is to ask the permission," she said. "So the *cocimiento* does you good."

These responses indicated the perpetuation of a rather ancient indigenous practice of the Western Hemisphere: the use of tobacco, leaf, seed, as a communication to spirit beings or the Creator. Often the tobacco is burnt or is left, wrapped in small bundles, in designated places. In Aleida Cobas' case, it was a "leaving" of small tobacco seeds to the "mother" plant. The grandmother asserted that the "plants know" and can "help you or hurt you," depending on how you approach them.

Later, with Dora Romero at Guirito, and in yet another instance, with the old couple by the Rio Toa, both Hartmann and I would hear of a similar use of tobacco as a spiritual gift to the medicinal plants.

Future Work

A relatively short visit yielded good preliminary information for the continuing study of Cuban aboriginal customs still vital among a widespread, genealogically continuous population of Taino-Arawak ancestry. A contemporary people, counting many small agriculturalists among them and with valuable knowledge of tropical flora and fauna, the Indo-Cuban families of eastern Oriente are descendants of the first American indigenous people to greet Columbus.□

Jose Barreiro is editor-in-chief of Northeast Indian Quarterly *at Cornell University.*

Notes

[1]Joseito Veloz, interviews with the author, 1983, 1989. Camaguey is an agricultural region. Many of the traditions of the guajiro country culture in Camaguey are quite similar to those found in the Baracoa area. The term *guajiro* is synonymous in Cuba with *campesino*, or countryman-peasant. There are contending schools of thought on the etymology of the word, but everyone agrees it is deeply rooted. Caribbean scholar Jose Juan Arrom gives it a Taino etymology, meaning "one of us." It would have been the term applied to the new mestizo generation by the Taino elders. Some scholars, including Fernando Ortiz, point to a Yucatec, Carib, or Colombian coastal origin for the term, though all concur that *guajiro* describes what is most autochthonous in the increasingly transculturated Cuban identity.

[2]As recently as 18 June 1989 ("Indians of Cuba," *Granma Newspaper*), a Cuban historian, Marta Rey, asserted that the Indian families are limited to two families, the Rojas and the Ramirez. She is in error. Rey proclaims the Indian families are too racially mixed to be called Indians, and states, with unwarranted rigidity, "There are no absolutely legitimate Indians left in our country."

[3]Havana linguistics professor Sergio Valdes Bernal later pointed out about 200 active words of Arawak origin in the fauna, flora, and topography of the region. Arrom, in conversation with the author, thought Valdes' estimate conservative. See "Indoamericanismos no aruacos en el espanol de Cuba," by Sergio Valdes Bernal, in *Ciencias Sociales* (Havana, 1978), and "Aportes antillanos al espanol de America," by Jose J. Arrom, in *Areito* 7 (27).

References

Dumont H.
1922 *Antropologia y patologia comparadas de los negros esclavos*. I. Castellanos, trans. Colleccion Cubana de libros y documentos ineditos o raros. Vol. 2. Havana.

Dunn, O. and J.E. Kelley, Jr.
1989 *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492–1493*. Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press.

Marti, J.
1964 *Obras completas. Viajes, diarios, cronicas, juicios, notas*. Tomo 19. Havana: Editorial Nacional de Cuba.

Moya, F.P.
1945 *Los Indios de Cuba en sus tiempos historicos*. Havana: Imprenta "Editorial Siglo XX."

Nunez Jimenez, A.
1963 *Geografia de Cuba*. 3d ed. Havana: Editora Pedagogica.

Rivero de la Calle, M.
1966 *Las culturas aborigenes de Cuba*. Havana: Editora Universitaria.
1978 *Cuba arqueologica*. Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente.

Rodriguez Ferrer, M.
1876 *Naturaleza y civilizacion de la grandiosa isla de Cuba*. Tomo 1. Madrid: Imprenta de J. Noguera.

Tejedor, O.
1987 Have Cuban Aborigines Really Disappeared? *Granma*. 24 May.

MOVING?
Please send the label from this issue and your new address to: Address Update, Cultural Survival
11 Divinity Ave.
Cambridge, MA 02138