

14

Dr. Lynne Guitar
Apartado Postal Z-111
Zona Colonial
Santo Domingo, República Dominicana

Attn: Jorge ESTEVEZ

(809) 685-8381, beeper (809) 475-7279
Fax (809) 221-4167

E-mail: 110271.707@compuserve.com

Myth Management

An historian examines how and why the myth of Taino extinction began

"The Tainos of the Caribbean islands are extinct," begins Cave of the Jagua, Antonio M. Stevens-Arroyo's otherwise excellent book on Classic Taino mythology. For the better part of 500 years, that's what all the chroniclers, historians, archaeologists, sociologists, etc., have reported. Estimations of just when the Taino extinction took place, however, vary from late 1518 to the 18th century.

In 1989, I began studying the Classic Tainos of Quisqueya. At first, I accepted Taino extinction as historical fact. As I progressed through a dual B.A., an M.A. and a Ph.D., reading not just secondary sources but thousands of documents from the era--reports to and from the Spanish Crown, royal laws and decrees, trial testimony, censuses, petitions, wills--I discovered that Taino extinction was a myth. In a few cases, the European myth-makers had a humanistic excuse for what they did. In most cases, however, the myth of Taino extinction was a cover-up to conceal greed or incompetence, and to fuel international religious,

economic and political competition.

Those statements sound cold and calculating, like premeditated myth making. No group of Spaniards got together, however, and said, "Hey, guys. We can really pull a fast one on future generations. Here's what we'll do...." The myth management began with individual acts.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus wrote in his diario that the Tainos were a pacific people. During the same voyage, at the "Gulf of Arrows," however, he discovered that the Tainos could be fierce warriors. Nonetheless, Columbus wanted to convince King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel that the Tainos were a people ripe for conversion to Catholicism so that he could get permission for a return voyage, so he emphasized the peaceful and profitable parts of his adventures. That set the stage. Chroniclers of the "conquest" of Hispaniola would also focus on how "willingly" the "peaceful" Tainos negotiated with the Christians, accepted their tributary status, and even adopted Spaniards into their noble families. The battle successes of caciques like Caonabó were underemphasized in the chronicles of the era, their gullibility overemphasized. And the chronicles hardly mention all the Tainos who fled Spanish domination: They fled "so that they never have to speak to Spaniards," testified one resident. "They flee to the mountains and forests," testified another, "hiding themselves so as not to suffer from that work" assigned them by their Spanish encomenderos--mining gold, growing food and, by the 1520s, working in the sugar cane fields and mills. Hundreds of

documents report Indians fleeing to remote regions or other islands.

Even today, with the population of the island more than ten times higher than it most likely was in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, there are many isolated areas of Hispaniola that one can only approach on foot or muleback. And the Spaniards never controlled the whole island, only the gold-bearing areas, a few scattered villages, and the region around Santo Domingo. Indian flight was not the kind of information the Spaniards on Hispaniola liked to reveal, however, for doing so was blunt admission that the island not totally under their control.

In 1514 there was a major redivision of the Tainos who had not fled. The accompanying census is always cited as evidence that the Tainos of Hispaniola were on the verge of extinction, for only 23,000 are listed. But it is clear that many children and old people, too young or too old to work, were not counted. And Tainos who had fled, of course, were not included. A 1515 letter from the crown provides evidence that even Tainos under Spanish control were hidden from the census takers so that they could not be redistributed.

The myth of Taíno extinction really took hold, however, with the New World's first smallpox epidemic in late 1518/early 1519. No doubt it did kill a great number of those Indians who had survived the wars, labor exploitation, the earlier epidemics and the accompanying famines, for they lacked the immunity that Europeans and Africans had. The effects, however, would have

been less severe among Indians living in remote regions of the island. The epidemic gave the Spanish colonists a justified excuse to appeal to the crown for African slaves, whom they believed to be more suitable than Indians for raising and producing sugar cane; sugar was the island's new economic focus, for the gold deposits proved to be shallow. Document after document reveals that Spaniards exaggerated the death rates among their commended Indians so that they could get permission to bring in more Africans.

In 1519, the Cacique Enriquillo rebelled, fleeing to the mountains of Bahoruco, where he successfully hid out, attacking Spanish settlements, for fourteen years. The Spaniards couldn't catch him, nor most of the other Indians and Africans who ran away to join him. They were called cimarrones. Bartolomé de las Casas, who clearly exaggerated mistreatment and deaths among the Tainos to gain protection for Indians in newly discovered lands, wrote that the only natives of Hispaniola who survived past 1530 were those with Enriquillo. Documents prove him wrong. Numerous Indian cimarrones were still being reported as late as 1549.

Moreover, Alonso de Fuenmayor's census of 1545 provides evidence that African laborers only outnumbered Indians on nine of Hispaniola's twenty-nine sugar ingenios. Out of a total of 9,210+ workers, 59% were Indians. Most censuses, however, hid Indians, listing them as "Spaniards," vaguely referring to "some Indians," or including them among uncounted "others." In part, this was to prevent discovery by the church or crown. By the

1530s, Indian labor, whether forced or "voluntary" was strictly regulated. But if you didn't admit to having any Indians.... Another reason censuses were vague and misleading is that the categories of Indian, African and Spaniard were not "racial" designations as they are today. They were socio-economic markers and could shift, especially the category of "mestizo," which didn't even appear in censuses until the 1580s.

Francisco de Barrionuevo, the captain who negotiated peace with Enriquillo in 1533, observed that in the rural regions of the island, "there are many mestizos, sons of Spaniards and indias, who generally are born on the small farms and depopulated towns." Continuing, he made the seemingly paradoxical statement that: "Outside of this city, you could say that everything is depopulated." He meant that outside of Santo Domingo there were few Spaniards in residence and that the mestizos he had seen lived like Indians, thus were politically and economically powerless. They were not worth counting. Barrionuevo's contemporaries would not have found his statements paradoxical.

In 1556, four "pueblos of Indians about which no one [previously] knew" were discovered. Two were near Puerto Plata, one on the Samaná Peninsula, and one on Cabo San Nicolás. Indications are, as the reduced population of Spaniards concentrated in and around the capital, the cimarrones began moving back into the abandoned river valleys. Taíno society had evolved to include Africans, other Indians and mixed peoples. These Taínos wore clothes, smelted steel, and spoke mostly

Spanish, but otherwise they lived much as their ancestors always had--much as many Dominican campesinos still live today. The same patterns of myth making, Taino survival and socio-cultural evolution no doubt occurred on the other Antillean islands.

Photos included (color transparencies available on request):

- 1) Tainos were forced to mine gold for Spaniards under the encomienda system, similar to slavery except that, at first, they could return to their own villages and crops for a few months per year. It severely disrupted their traditional planting, harvesting, fishing and hunting cycles. --Illustration by an anonymous artist who accompanied Sir Francis Drake's 1580s expedition, from Pierpont Morgan Library's Histoire Naturelle des Indes.
- 2) The Spaniards' gold foundries brought large numbers of Europeans and Africans--and their germs and viruses--into the once populous Cibao, the fertile heartland of Hispaniola. --Illustration by an anonymous artist who accompanied Sir Francis Drake's 1580s expedition, from Pierpont Morgan Library's Histoire Naturelle des Indes.
- 3) Spaniards reported that Tainos committed en masse suicide rather than submit to domination. It is more likely that native populations were devastated by germs and viruses, but no one in the pre-Enlightenment Era knew about these invisible enemies. --16th-century woodcut by Theodore DeBry.
- 4) As late as 1545, there were considerably more Indian laborers on Hispaniola's sugar ingenios than Africans, though they were "hidden" in the censuses and reports. --16th-century woodcut by Theodore DeBry.

(Optional sidebar on Caonabó's capture--I can provide a color slide of the bronze statue of Caonabó in chains that is exhibited in Santo Domingo's Museo del Hombre Dominicano.)

The Capture of Caonabó

Caonabó was one of the first Taíno caciques to rebel against the Spanish invasion. Briefly, the "historical" version of Caonabó's capture is that Captain Alonso de Ojeda announced to him that Admiral Christopher Columbus wanted to negotiate peace and had sent along a present--shiny "bracelets" that were actually handcuffs. The implication of this mythical tale has always been that Caonabó was so gullible (i.e., "stupid") that he fell for the trick. What the chronicles leave out of the story, however, is that it was standard procedure for caciques to send underlings to arrange peace talks with other caciques, exchanging prestige gifts to smooth the way. What was not standard procedure among Indian peoples was to be dishonorable, as the Spaniards were with Caonabó. When he arrived at La Isabela, instead of negotiating peace with him, Columbus had him jailed and then shipped in chains to Spain. He died before the ship reached Iberia.
