

The Taino-African Connection

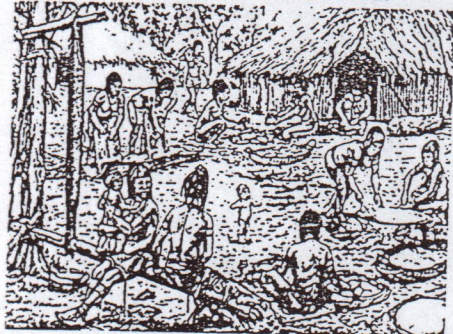
by Bobby Gonzalez

Many Native Americans are of mixed heritage. The process of racial mixing may have begun in America as early as a thousand years ago when the Native People of northern Canada encountered the Horsemen of Scandinavia. Cree elders still pass on the stories of how their warriors defeated the Vikings in battle.

Among the ranks of prominent Native leaders, past and present, are found many mixed-bloods. The list includes Quannah Parker (Comanche), Louis Riel (Cree), Janet McCloud (Tulalip), Peter Pitchlyn (Choctaw) and Wilma Mankiller (Cherokee).

A sizable segment of the present generation's Taino population is of dual heritage. We are aware and proud of our African genealogy. We acknowledge and respect our African ancestral spirits.

Documents indicate that the first Africans were forcibly transported to Borikèn (Puerto Rico) in the year 1510. They were sent into forced labor in the sugar cane fields to work alongside Tainos and Caribs who had also been enslaved.



There was a natural affinity between the Native Americans and the Africans. The Spaniards soon perceived this affinity and were wary of a mingling of the two races. Their suspicions were justified when many enslaved Africans fled to the mountainous interior of the land and found refuge in unconquered native American hamlets.

The Africans brought to Borikèn included the Yorubas, Mandigo, Congo, Ibos, Fantes, the Ashantis and the Jelofes. The Jelofes, especially, had much in common with the Taino. Their indigenous diets and animistic spiritual beliefs were similar. They understood and respected each other.

The Natives took in and absorbed the African fugitives. There was an exchange of cultures; an alliance of resistance also ensued. Taino, Carib and African warriors joined in a war of resistance against the Spaniards. The enslaved population of Borikèn revolted in the year 1527. This uprising accelerated the depopulation of whites on the island.

An obvious example of the Taino/African exchange today is Santeria, the African based religion which is practiced by many Caribbean people. The use of tobacco in santeria rituals is the most striking illustration of cultural exchange. Tobacco is a Taino Native American plant that has been integrated into sacred ceremonies throughout the world. Guayaba is a fruit which the Taino have always given as

an offering to the dead. Santeros have placed guayaba in the province of the spirit Elegua. Crushed bones of the utia, a rabbit sized rodent, are sometimes used by santeros in baths; the utia is an animal indigenous to the Taino islands. Guayacan (palo santo), also sacred to santeros, was an important ingredient in pre-Columbian healing rituals in Borikèn. One more Taino contribution to santeria is manteca de corajo (palm oil) - the corajo is a palm nut commonly found in Taino country.

Natives from North America know about santeria. The author knows an Iroquois medicine person who has been to Loiza Aldea in Borikèn. This medicine person is a well known and powerful spiritual leader. At Loiza Aldea, this Iroquois healer attended santeria ceremonies and was impressed by the spiritual potency of the santeria rites.

We who follow the traditional

ways of our Native American ancestors are predominantly Taino in our blood and spirit. However, many of us proudly admit that African blood flows through our veins. This is the blood of Jelofe, Ashanti and other brave female and male warriors who shed their blood in defense of Borikèn in the 1500's. Courage, generosity, respect for Mother Earth, respect for all creatures as our equals and respect for all Peoples as our equals. These are Taino values. These are African values. The fusion of the Red and Black races is a blessing to be grateful for.

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Latino Village Press - March 16, 1995 to April 15, 1995